

LUISS



Department of Political Science

Chair of Security Policies (MA in International Relations)

Understanding the Erosion of French Influence in the Sahel through Local Perspectives

Supervisor: Lt. Gen. Carlo Magrassi

Co-Supervisor: Pr. Rosario Forlenza

Candidate: Zoé Caillard, Matr. 654062

Academic Year 2024/2025

« La France ne peut être la France sans grandeur ».

Charles De Gaulle

Bayeux speech, 16 June 1946

Acknowledgements

To Luiss University, where I grew and learned that no goal is beyond reach.

To my colleagues at L'Osservatore Romano for their support over the summer.

To all the friends I made in Italy who shared this journey with me.

To my brothers, who inspire me to be the best version of myself.

To Angelo, my love, my best friend, my teammate.

And to my parents, my strength, who believe in me even when I don't and without whom none of this would have been possible.

Abstract

This thesis analyses how the Sahelian populations perceive French security policies by examining local media narratives from the start of Operation Barkhane to France's military withdrawal from the region.

This research uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse 544 media articles published from 2012 to 2025 in six Sahelian countries: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal, Chad, and Mauritania. To better understand these perceptions, the study compares how France is portrayed in local media with the coverage of other major foreign actors: the European Union, China, and Russia.

The quantitative analysis shows that local attitudes toward France have shifted from mostly positive to more negative, with growing criticism of its military actions, interference, and neocolonialism. Russia, on the other hand, is seen more positively, thanks to strong communication and expressions of solidarity. China is generally viewed in a positive but cautious way, as people weigh its investments against worries about exploitation. The European Union is considered important but often seems distant.

The qualitative analysis highlights several key narratives, including claims that France supports separatist movements, terrorism, and keeps a paternalistic attitude tied to its colonial past. The research also looks at how Russian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese influence is spreading, as well as debates about EU development policies.

This thesis mainly contributes by putting the voices and perspectives of Sahelian people at the centre of the security policy debate. By closely analysing local media, it helps explain how people in the region see the legitimacy and roles of outside security actors, adding to our understanding of international involvement and competition in the Sahel.

This research is situated within security studies, as the Sahel represents a significant security hotspot characterized by jihadist insurgencies, porous borders, political instability, and frequent coups. These factors have transformed the region into a testing ground for external interventions and a site of geopolitical competition. The findings indicate that, in addition to military capacity, security outcomes are increasingly influenced by perceptions of legitimacy and sovereignty. Public opinion has emerged as a critical determinant in shaping alliances and the sustainability of interventions.

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Introduction

This research investigates how French security policies are perceived and represented in Sahelian media from the Barkhane era to the post-withdrawal period, in comparison with both traditional and emerging foreign actors. It analyses the legitimacy and contestation of foreign military interventions in the Sahel, a region recognized as one of the world's most fragile security environments. The Sahel faces interconnected threats such as jihadist insurgencies, porous borders, political instability, recurrent coups, and humanitarian crises intensified by climate change. These challenges have positioned the region as a testing ground for external interventions and a site of geopolitical competition involving notably France, the European Union, China, and Russia. Sahelian media framing indicates that security is influenced not only by military capacity but also by perceptions of legitimacy, sovereignty, and partnership. The decline of French influence, the effects of expulsions and treaty ruptures, and the rise of alternative partners illustrate that security outcomes increasingly depend on political narratives and public acceptance. As a result, public opinion has become a critical factor shaping the durability of alliances, the effectiveness of interventions, and the regional balance of power.

The Sahel is a vast transition zone between the Sahara Desert and the Sudanian zone, extending 5,500 kilometres across Africa. While the region is often defined as spanning ten countries, this study focuses on six central states: Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. The Sahel has significant potential due to its youthful and rapidly growing population, abundant natural and mineral resources, and rich cultural heritage. However, it faces acute structural challenges, including desertification, extreme poverty, low human development indicators, and recurring humanitarian crises. These challenges are exacerbated by violent insurgencies, political instability, and demographic pressures, making the Sahel one of the most fragile security environments globally. Since 2012, the region has attracted international military engagement, particularly through French-led operations such as Serval and Barkhane, and the G5 Sahel framework. The ongoing deterioration of security, coupled with widespread public dissatisfaction and declining legitimacy of foreign interventions, underscores the limitations of external responses and reinforces the Sahel's role as a strategic crossroads and a site of geopolitical competition.¹

¹ Jarry, C. (10 mai 2022 ; mise à jour le 26 juillet 2024). À la découverte du Sahel, la porte entre deux Afriques. Oxfam France.

Focusing on Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania ensure both conceptual coherence and empirical relevance. These six states constitute the political and geographical core of the Sahel, where security, governance, and development challenges converge. Five of these countries (Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania) formalized their cooperation through the G5 Sahel framework, established in 2014 to coordinate counterterrorism and development strategies, underscoring their shared security agenda. Senegal, although not a G5 member, serves as a stable democracy on the western edge of the Sahel, a logistical centre for international interventions, and a model for regional political systems. Collectively, these countries exemplify both the shared features of the Sahelian security crisis, including terrorist expansion, military coups, and foreign interventions, as well as the diversity of their political trajectories and external alignments. Therefore, they represent the most relevant sample for analysing how external actors such as France, the EU, China, and Russia are perceived and contested in the region.

This thesis provides both theoretical grounding and empirical analysis of the representation of French security policies in Sahelian media, compared with other international actors. The study begins with a literature review and methodology section, which situates the research within current academic debates and outlines the theoretical framework and hypotheses. The analysis comprises two quantitative studies: an emotion analysis that tracks the evolving perceptions of France, the European Union, China, and Russia in Sahelian media, and a text focus analysis that examines the narratives associated with each actor, including themes of rejection, conditional partnerships, development rhetoric, and security cooperation. The thesis then presents a qualitative analysis of the decline of French influence through military rejection, the contestation of neocolonial practices, and the erosion of soft power, followed by a comparison with the roles of the EU, China, and Russia as alternative partners. The study concludes with a policy section that assesses how France can credibly adjust its approach in the Sahel by learning from other actors and adapting to a multipolar regional environment.

Niger Timeline (authors elaboration)

- 
- 1960: French decolonisation
 - 1961: Signing of military, technical, and cultural cooperation agreements with France

 - 2000: Cotonou agreements with the EU (development)

 - 2011: Democratic election of Mahamadou Issoufou

 - 2013: Start of French operation Serval
 - 2014: Start of French operation Barkhane replacing Serval operation
 - Founding member of the G5 Sahel with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Mauritania
 - 2015: Signing of migration agreements with the EU

 - 2018: Adhesion to the Chinese Belt and Road initiative

 - 2021: Democratic election of Mohamud Bazoum
 - Signing of security cooperation agreements with China
 - Signing of the Samoa agreements with the EU (development)
 - 2022: End of Barkhane Operation with French troops remaining
 - 26/07/2023: Overthrow of President Bazoum by a military coup, General Abdourahamane Tiani creates the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland
 - Suspension of the military cooperation by the EU
 - Exit of the G5 Sahel
 - 16/09/2023: Creation of the Alliance of Sahel States with Mali and Burkina Faso
 - 24/09/2023: rupture of the defence agreements with France, end of military cooperation
 - 12/2023: Defence Memorandum of Understanding with Russia
 - 28/01/2024: Exit of the ECOWAS
 - 04/2024: Arrival of Russian military instructors and delivery of anti-aircraft defence systems
 - 3/04/2024: Creation of a joint ESA and Moscow force
 - 07/2024: The ESA becomes a confederation

 - 07/2025: Expansion of the strategic partnership with Moscow
 - 14/08/2025: Russia and the ESA signing of defence memoranda

Mali Timeline (authors elaboration)

1960: Decolonisation

1961: Signing of military, technical, and cultural cooperation agreements with France

2000: Cotonou agreements with the EU (development)

03/2012: Military coup by Amadou Haya Sanogo overthrows President Amadou Toumani Touré after Tuareg rebellion and jihadist offensive in the north

01/2013: Start of French Operation Serval to stop jihadist advance and secure Bamako

08/2013: Democratic election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta

2014: Launch of French Operation Barkhane (replacing Serval), with Mali as a central theatre of operations

Founding member of the G5 Sahel with Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, and Mauritania

2015: Algiers Peace Agreement between the Malian government and northern armed groups

2019: Mali joins the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative

03/2020: Launch of the EU Takuba forces to support the Barkhane operation

08/2020: Military coup by Colonel Assimi Goïta removes President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, creation of the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP)

05/2021: Second coup consolidates power under Colonel Assimi Goïta, who becomes transitional president

Suspension of EU security cooperation

Signing of new defence and security agreements with Russia

Arrival of Wagner forces

02/2022: France and European partners announce withdrawal of Barkhane and Takuba forces from Mali

05/2023: Exit from the G5 Sahel

16/09/2023: Creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) with Burkina Faso and Niger

28/01/2024: Exit of ECOWAS, together with Burkina Faso and Niger

04/2024: Announcement of a joint AES-Russia force

07/2024: AES becomes a confederation at the Niamey summit

08/2025: Russia and the AES sign memoranda of defence cooperation in Moscow

Burkina Faso Timeline (authors elaboration)

1960: Decolonisation

1961: Signing of military, technical, and cultural cooperation agreements with France

2000: Cotonou agreements with the EU (development)

2009: Launch of French Operation Sabre in Burkina Faso (discreet counter-terrorism force)

2014: Population forces President Blaise Compaoré (in power since 1987) to resign

Start of the Barkhane operation

09/2015: Failed coup by the Régiment de sécurité présidentielle

11/2015: Democratic election of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré

2015: EU migration partnership agreements under the EU Emergency Trust Fund

2020: re-election of President Kaboré

2021: Burkina Faso adheres to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) China signs MoUs for infrastructure and mining projects

24/01/2022: First coup, President Kaboré overthrown by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba

30/09/2022: Second coup, Damiba overthrown by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who becomes head of state

2022: Suspension of EU and French military cooperation

Departure of French special forces and dismantling of Operation Sabre in Burkina Faso

05/2023: Exit from the G5 Sahel

09/2023: Creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) with Mali and Niger

12/2023: Defence Memorandum of Understanding with Russia

Arrival of Russian advisors and first deliveries of military equipment.

01/2024: Exit from ECOWAS with Mali and Niger

04/2024: Creation of a joint AES-Russia force

07/2024: AES becomes a confederation at the Niamey Summit

14/08/2025: Russia and the AES sign memoranda of defence cooperation in Moscow

Senegal Timeline (authors elaboration)

1960: Decolonisation

1961: Agreements on military, technical, and cultural cooperation with France

1975: Senegal is a founding member of ECOWAS

2000: signing of the Cotonou agreements with the EU (development)

2011: Closing of French military base, the country keeps a small effective

2014: Launch of the Barkhane operation in Mali, Niger; Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania, Senegal is a key partner in logistical support

2015: EU migration partnership agreements under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF-Africa)

2018: Senegal formally adheres to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signing MoUs with China on infrastructure, ports, and energy

2019: Macky-Sall re-elected as president

Renewal of the Fisheries Partnership Agreement with the EU for a 5-year period

2021: Signing of the Samoa Agreement with the EU

2022: Senegal chairs the African Union

Negotiations with Frontex on reinforced cooperation for border management

07/2023: Political crisis around Macky Sall's third-term debate, he renounces the presidency

03/2024: Democratic election of Bassirou Diomaye Faye

11/2024: President Bassirou Diomaye Faye asks for full exit of French forces from the country

07/2025: French troops officially leave permanent bases in Senegal

Chad Timeline (authors elaboration)

1960: Decolonisation

1961: Signing of Franco–Chadian military, technical, and cultural cooperation agreements

1965-1979: Series of rebellions and civil wars; France intervenes several times to support governments in N'Djamena

1982: Hissène Habré seizes power with French and U.S. backing

1986: Launch of French Operation Épervier, to counter Libyan forces in northern Chad

1990: Idriss Déby overthrows Habré and seizes power

2000: Cotonou agreements with the EU (development)

2014: Launch of Operation Barkhane, Chad is the headquarter with most of French forces based, end of Operation Épervier

Chad joins the G5 Sahel

2015: EU migration and development funding through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa

2018: Chad joins the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative through an MoU with Beijing

04/2021: President Idriss Déby is killed on the frontline, his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby takes power as head of the Transitional Military Council supported by France

2021: Signing of the Samoa agreements with the EU (development)

2022: End of Barkhane operation in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, but France maintains its military presence in the country

2023: Chad and Mauritania remain the only members of the G5 Sahel

01/2024: President Mahamat Idriss Déby visits Moscow

06/2024: Signing of non-public defence and security agreements with Russia, but no Russian official military presence on the country

12/2024: Chad announces the end of its military cooperation agreements with France

01/2025: Withdrawal of French troops

Mauritania Timeline (authors elaboration)

1960: Decolonisation

1961: Signing of Franco–Mauritanian military, technical, and cultural cooperation agreements however Mauritania deliberately distances itself from heavy French presence, Mauritania never welcomed French military bases on its territory

1975: Founding member of ECOWAS

1987: EU and Mauritania sign a Fisheries Partnership Agreement, renewed regularly

2000: Mauritania joins the Cotonou agreement with the EU

Exit from ECOWAS to focus on the Arab Maghreb Union

2005: Coup d'Etat removes President Ould Taya

2008: Another coup led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz who later wins elections in 2009 and 2014

2014: Mauritania becomes a founding member of the G5 Sahel with Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad

2015: EU migration partnership funding through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa

2017: Signing of an Association Agreement with ECOWAS granting the country the status of observer

2018: Mauritania joins the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative through a Memorandum of Understanding

2019: Democratic alternation, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani succeeds to Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz

2021: Signing of the Samoa Agreement with the EU

2022: France ends Operation Barkhane in Mali and Burkina Faso, Mauritania remains outside the conflict and serves as a diplomatic mediator in the Sahel

2023: Creation of the AES, Mauritania remains in the G5 Sahel with Chad

2024: President Ould Ghazouani re-elected, consolidating Mauritania's stability compared to its neighbours

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1. Literature Review

This analysis is based on the observation that, despite the extensive literature on French and foreign intervention in the Sahel region, the perspective of the local population is largely absent. Academic opinions often diverge, frequently reflecting the authors' geographic and geopolitical contexts. Incorporating the viewpoint of the local population provides a clearer understanding of the factors contributing to France's loss of influence in the region.

The first reason identified in the literature review for insecurity is the underestimation of the multidimensional crisis facing the region, not only by France but by most of the international community. Indeed, the focus of security policies was too much on terrorism. Ultimately, according to most authors, a military focus is not the solution. As stated by Boas, “the crisis in the Sahel is serious and multidimensional [...] current international approaches are more in line with short-term external priorities [...] it must be part of a much broader agenda of humanitarian assistance and development support.”² For Bagayoko, “the Sahel crisis, which today primarily affects civilian populations, goes far beyond the scourge of terrorism. It reveals a profound crisis of governance in the states of the region, which it is essential to resolve in order to address its multidimensional causes.”³ Overall, “the Sahel and sub-Saharan area leads to a vicious circle where underdevelopment generates instability, which in turn re-generates underdevelopment, and the big question remains, how can this trend be reversed?”⁴ Focusing on military is not the solution and “the French assessment, increasingly shared by international actors, is that there can be no solution in the Sahel without development [...] Armed forces can certainly pacify a region, but they cannot defuse tensions that stem from internal weaknesses.”⁵ “Providing training and equipment to security forces, as well as financial resources for African countries, to address security threats is not a long-term goal. Terrorism is fuelled by structural problems

² Bøås, M. (2019). *The Sahel Crisis and the Need for International Support* (Policy Dialogue No. 15). Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.

³ Bagayoko, N. (2021, January–February). *Sahel : contours et enjeux d'une crise multidimensionnelle*. *Diplomatie*, (107), 32–36.

⁴ Bassou, A. (2017). *Development and/or security: Issues concerning the relationship between the European Union, the Maghreb, and the Sahel* (Policy Brief No. PB-17/25). OCP Policy Center.

⁵ Châtaigner, J.-M. (2019). *Sahel et France, enjeux d'une relation particulière*. *Hérodote*, 172(1), 123–136. La Découverte

such as poverty, inequality, injustice, and lack of democracy. These problems have no immediate or short-term solutions”⁶

Most experts agree that French and international military policies in the Sahel have not worked as planned. Van Sorgen points out that even though France calls the Serval, Barkhane, and Takuba missions’ military successes, they did not stop the spread of jihadist groups or reduce the terrorist threat. Van Sorgen also says that joint efforts through groups like the G5 Sahel Alliance, MINUSMA, EUTM, EUCAP Sahel, and EUMPM did not stop the growth of extremist Islamism and terrorism. Relying too heavily on military solutions did not create the stability and safety necessary for effective government reforms and better leadership.⁷ Montclos also criticizes French policy in the Sahel, saying it has mostly stayed the same and focused too much on military solutions, often turning local problems into global ones and blaming them on the radicalization of Islam, which may exaggerate the role of religion in the uprisings.⁸ Dieng points out that capacity-building programs often focus on security rather than addressing the deeper problems that lead to terrorism, and they can even encourage misconduct by security forces and governments.⁹ Bagayoko says France failed in the Sahel because it did not understand the region's social and cultural realities. Stating that its mistakes in the Sahel “are undeniably due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the societal, social and anthropological dynamics that characterise the region”¹⁰. Chena also questions why there is more militarization, arguing that it mostly serves the interests of outside countries and local leaders, without benefiting ordinary people.¹¹

However, Chena highlights that the persistent presence of jihadism demonstrates the challenges Saharo-Sahelian states face in exercising sovereignty and maintaining security, as well as the limitations of external military interventions.¹² Pérouse de Montclos asserts that “In any case,

⁶ Dieng, M. (2019). The Multi-National Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force: The limits of military capacity-building efforts. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 40(4), 481–501

⁷ Van Sorgen, P. (2024). *Le désengagement des forces armées françaises au Sahel : un échec français ou européen ?* *Revue Défense Nationale*, (860), 341–356.

⁸ Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2019). *La politique de la France au Sahel : une vision militaire*. In G. Emmanuel, Géopolitique du Sahel et du Sahara (*Hérodote*, no 172, pp. 137–152). Hérodote.

⁹ Dieng, M. (2019). The Multi-National Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force: The limits of military capacity-building efforts. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 40(4), 481–501.

¹⁰ Bagayoko, N. (2022, April 7). *What Went Wrong in Mali? The Future of France’s Presence in the Sahel*. ISPI Commentaries. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI).

¹¹ Chena, S. (2020). Un Sahel couleur kaki. Multiplication des acteurs, complexification des enjeux. *Recherches Internationales*, 117, 75–93.

¹² Chena, S. (2020). Un Sahel couleur kaki. Multiplication des acteurs, complexification des enjeux. *Recherches Internationales*, 117, 75–93.

aid is never more than a temporary fix... The solution to the Sahel crisis is above all political. It will largely come from improving the governance of regimes that are corrupt and often authoritarian.”¹³ Scholars further argue that the recurrence of coups in the Sahel is linked to weak state institutions, chronic insecurity, and poor governance. Afriye further affirms that foreign intervention exacerbates these problems, as international actors often support authoritarian regimes for security cooperation, which undermines their credibility and increases local resentment.¹⁴ The European Union, for example, is criticized for its security decisions in the Sahel region. According to Dia, the EU has been unable to deploy a large military force to the area, so it has chosen to focus on providing development aid to help stabilize the region. The author argues that this plan is based on a dubious idea: that simply reducing poverty and improving life will be sufficient to prevent armed groups from forming. Dia also notes that the EU's approach to working often does not meet the real needs of the Sahel, as it employs complex and slow programs, whereas people in the region require prompt and flexible assistance due to the pressing security issues. She concludes that “the Sahel crisis is above all a political and governance crisis; yet the EU tends to treat it as a simple problem of underdevelopment, which greatly limits the effectiveness of its action.”¹⁵

France faces criticism not only for its security policy choices but also for alleged neocolonial practices. According to Colomba-Petteng, “France’s military policy, in the Sahel as elsewhere in Francophone Africa, is less the product of a well-oiled and coherent strategy than the result of compromises, hesitations, and contingent decisions. French dilemma relates to the profound ambivalence between the strategic autonomy of African armies and the projection of French influence, in addition to the diplomatic framework, torn between a multilateral aspiration and a privileged relationship with African actors.” Moreover, according to the author, “contesting discourses against the French armies have gradually gained media visibility by cultivating suspicions of France’s hidden interests.”¹⁶ Some scholars identify France’s relationship with Chad as an example of neocolonialism. For instance, Umate argues that the Franco-Chadian defense agreements represent asymmetrical cooperation, enabling France to leverage Chad’s

¹³ Pérouse de Montclos, M.-A. (2019). *La politique de la France au Sahel : une vision militaire*. In G. Emmanuel (Éd.), *Géopolitique du Sahel et du Sahara (Hérodote, no 172)*, pp. 137–152). Hérodote.

¹⁴ Afriye, F. A. (2023). Demystifying the season of putsch in Africa’s Sahel: Gaining insight into Niger’s dynamics. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 10(2), 93–118.

¹⁵ Dia, F. (2019). *Stabilisation du Sahel: pourquoi l’Union européenne focalise-t-elle sa politique sécuritaire sur le volet aide au développement? IRSEM Études*, 62, 1–36. Paris: Institut de recherche stratégique de l’École militaire (IRSEM).

¹⁶ Colomba-Petteng, L. (2021). *Les dilemmes des armées françaises au Sahel: Une mise en perspective des débats sur la transformation de l’opération Barkhane*. *Afrique contemporaine*, (271-272), 169–186.

geostrategic position to protect its security interests in Central Africa and the Sahel. This defence cooperation is viewed as a stabilizing factor for the Chadian regime, yet it raises concerns regarding Chad's sovereignty and perceptions of neocolonialism.¹⁷ Balmond similarly contends that France's intervention in Chad was motivated by concerns over a potential coup d'état and the resulting destabilization, leading France to prioritize its political interests over adherence to international law.¹⁸

Many experts talk about what France might do next in the region. According to Vitot, "the 'Serval' and 'Barkhane' operations achieved undeniable military successes, but they failed in halting the deterioration of the security situation in the region." So, Paris should set smaller goals that focus on protecting French interests, like stopping terrorism, keeping its influence against new rivals, or making France look better to African people.¹⁹ For Garcia, France will work closely with local governments and organizations in Africa, especially in the Sahel.²⁰ Wilen says that after France leaves Mali, it will still be involved in the Sahel, but less openly. France plans to work more with other countries, like Niger and those near the Gulf of Guinea, to keep fighting jihadism, but with fewer troops. However, "the French withdrawal from Mali raises fears of a possible 'security vacuum,' with potential repercussions on the whole North African region" which might cause more problems in North Africa and could lead to more people from Mali moving to other countries or heading north.²¹ Chataigner says that France, along with other countries, has a significant role to play in addressing the security challenges in the Sahel. Now, France is seeking more equitable talks with the G5 countries to find solutions that will help bring lasting peace to the Sahel.²²

Another significant factor is the increasing anti-French sentiment reported by several scholars. "The inability, real or perceived, of France and more generally of the international community to curb violence in the sub-region has produced growing contestation from local populations."

¹⁷ Umate, M. D., & Aloua, A., 2023). *La coopération en matière de défense en relations internationales: le cas des accords de défense franco-tchadiens*. *ESCAE Journal of Management and Security Studies*, 3(3), 18–32.

¹⁸ Balmond, L. (2019). L'intervention militaire de la France au Tchad en février 2019. *Paix et sécurité européenne et internationale*, 13, 243–256.

¹⁹ Vittot, A. (2022). Le dispositif militaire français en Afrique. *Diplomatie*, (116), 45–49. Areion Group.

²⁰ Garcia, I. (2021). *S'allier pour durer: Nouvel axiome de la stratégie française au Sahel*. *Défense & Sécurité Internationale*, 146, 46–51.

²¹ ISPI. (2022, February 18). *The end of Barkhane in Mali: What's next for the Sahel?* ISPI MED This Week. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale.

²² Châtaigner, J.-M. (2019). *Sahel et France, enjeux d'une relation particulière*. *Hérodote*, 172(1), 123–136. La Découverte.

Garcia notes that France faces a major challenge in overcoming the stigma of 'Françafrique,' whose neo-colonial associations are currently used to further undermine the legitimacy of the French presence on the continent.²³ Van Sorgen attributes this sentiment to insufficient diplomatic and developmental efforts, as well as the failure of France, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN) to control the prevailing narratives. Military juntas have fostered an environment in which rejecting France as a neo-colonial and imperialist actor, and the EU and UN as instruments of Western interests, appears logical to many.²⁴ Engels argues that, although Russian influence is sometimes cited, “the recent coups are not a result of anti-French sentiment or orientation towards Russia” but are primarily driven by internal frustrations, divisions, and power struggles within national security forces, rather than by anti-French sentiment or alignment with Russia. Regardless of the extent of Russian involvement, Vittot emphasizes that France must now address both the redefinition of its strategic priorities and the political and societal acceptability of its military presence in Africa, as demonstrated by recent protests in Bamako, Niamey, and Ouagadougou.²⁵

Some experts, however, have a positive view of the French operation. Garcia, for example, says that the changes to the Barkhane mission are meant to shift from working outside the local armies to working more closely with them, by updating the strategy and reducing the French presence.²⁶ Chataigner shares this view, saying that “this reinforced French presence is based on historically strong ties with the countries of this zone, but it should not be misunderstood: France’s current strategy is indeed aimed at supporting these countries in the implementation of their public policies and not at substituting itself for them in a tutelary posture.”²⁷

It is clear that how people see French involvement depends on how they see other countries getting involved in the region, especially as new countries start to take different actions. For Vittot, “the renewal of power competition in Africa, reflected in the growing influence of Russia, Turkey, and China, further increases the risk of a strategic downgrading of Western

²³ Garcia, I. (2021). *S’allier pour durer: Nouvel axiome de la stratégie française au Sahel*. *Défense & Sécurité Internationale*, 146, 46–51.

²⁴ Van Sorgen, P. (2024). *Le désengagement des forces armées françaises au Sahel : un échec français ou européen ?* *Revue Défense Nationale*, (860), 341–356.

²⁵ Vittot, A. (2022). Le dispositif militaire français en Afrique. *Diplomatie*, (116), 45–49. Areion Group.

²⁶ Garcia, I. (2021). *S’allier pour durer: Nouvel axiome de la stratégie française au Sahel*. *Défense & Sécurité Internationale*, 146, 46–51.

²⁷ Châtaigner, J.-M. (2019). *Sahel et France, enjeux d’une relation particulière*. *Hérodote*, 172(1), 123–136. La Découverte.

powers.”²⁸ The relationship between France and Russia is a major focus of the discussion. According to Nadzharov, “the Franco-Russian great power rivalry has a direct impact on the region, creating a powerful security dynamic,” and Moscow is “the primary threat to French foreign policy in the region.”²⁹ Foreign efforts are often praised, but while the United States and its European partners have spent a lot on fighting terrorism and trying to bring stability to the Sahel, the results have not been good. At the same time, Russia and China have steadily increased their presence and taken advantage of African frustrations with Western methods. Russia has used cheap but effective ways to gain influence, especially through the Wagner Group, to get involved in weak countries and present itself as an alternative to Western partners. This helps keep some governments in power for a short time but makes things less stable in the long run. China, on the other hand, “has focused on economic statecraft, particularly infrastructure financing, trade, and resource extraction, to strengthen its role as an indispensable partner”. Unlike Russia, China stays out of deep security issues, but its strong economic role still affects how countries are run and their independence. If they do not change, Western countries will lose trust and leave room for more controlling competitors. In the end, competition in the Sahel and West Africa will depend on whether outside countries can match their actions to what the African people want and need.³⁰

The European Union is also criticized for focusing more on migration security than on real development. “So far, the European migration program has largely ignored the links forged between migration and local economies, and it has had major repercussions on regional stability and development.”³¹ Several experts argue that the EU’s efforts in the Sahel have mostly been about stopping migration and fighting terrorism, while not paying enough attention to problems like weak government and poverty. For Plank, “EU foreign policy in the Sahel has been primarily guided by security concerns, focusing on counter-terrorism and migration containment. Structural causes of instability, such as weak governance and poverty, have received comparatively less attention.”³² Scholars also argue that the EU’s work in the region is not well-coordinated and has had a limited impact. “This technical approach to governance

²⁸ Vittot, A. (2022). Le dispositif militaire français en Afrique. *Diplomatie*, (116), 45–49. Areion Group.

²⁹ Nadzharov, A. M., & Entina, E. G. (2023). *Franco-Russian Great Power Rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel Region*. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21(3), 181–204.

³⁰ Rajosefa, L. (2023). *The future of strategic competition in the Sahel region: Placing partnership first* (Wright Flyer Paper No. 93). Air University Press.

³¹ Molenaar, F. (2018). La politique migratoire de l’UE, facteur d’instabilité au Sahel ? *Confrontations Europe, La Revue*, (121), 28–29.

³² Plank, F., & Bergmann, J., (2021). The European Union as a security actor in the Sahel: Policy entrapment in EU foreign policy. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 26(2), 187–206.

has proven ineffective; it has by no means prevented the embezzlement of funds, corruption, and the misuse of resources by recipients.” Without a political approach that takes local situations into account, the EU will not be able to bring lasting stability to the Sahel. Another criticism is that the EU sees good government as a separate issue, mostly offering technical help, instead of making it part of all its actions. This way of working has not stopped problems like corruption or the misuse of resources. The EU’s goals have become more limited, mainly trying to stop migration, which has hurt local government needs in places like northern Niger. Some also criticize the idea of making EU aid conditional, meaning help is only given if something is received in return.³³

Several scholars argue that the European Union should revise its policies in the Sahel to prioritize locally oriented solutions. Kaufmann highlights the role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), noting that although ECOWAS is regarded as one of the EU’s preferred partners in the Sahel, it has not been sufficiently integrated into the implementation of the EU’s strategy for the region. Kaufmann further alleges that the EU’s approach “to operate successfully in the future, would be essential to have much greater operational flexibility,” as its current strategy has adapted slowly to the region’s complexities and has not effectively countered destabilizing trends.³⁴

The coordination between member states is also criticized as “unequal spending [...] could also be observed in the case of Operation Serval and Barkhane in the Sahel, where France spent billions of euros on a military mission to mitigate the symptoms, whereas development assistance to Mali to cope with the social and economic challenges that fuelled the armed violence was very limited.” Moreover, according to Marsai, “local ownership was applied only as a sugar-coating for foreign interventions. In most cases, the ‘local’ politicians selected to lead the state-building efforts had good relations with international institutions but lacked the support of indigenous groups, leading to their lack of ownership.” In the end, “all of these failures could be avoided by detailed planning, clear strategies, and long-term thinking.

³³ Schmauder, A., Soto-Mayor, G., & Goxho, D., 2020, December 16). *La question de la gouvernance dans la stratégie de l’UE pour le Sahel*. The Conversation.

³⁴ Kaufmann, T. (2016). L’engagement de l’UE au Sahel : stratégie cohérente ou rafistolage politique ? *Revue Défense Nationale*, (793), 85–89.

However, this is unimaginable without the reform of the structural-institutional weaknesses of the EU and its member states.”³⁵

Academic analyses of China frequently focus on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). According to Chen, the BRI represents a transition in China’s economic engagement with Africa, moving from resource-based trade prevalent in the 2000s to prioritizing infrastructure, industrial cooperation, and connectivity. Chen further asserts that the internationalization of Chinese construction firms and finance under the BRI aligns with African regional objectives, particularly those outlined in the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa. This alignment enables African leaders to utilize Chinese capital and technical expertise to address infrastructure requirements. Nevertheless, Chen cautions that “the accompanying expansion in infrastructure credit also brings significant risks.” The reliance on debt-based financing for large-scale projects raises concerns about the sustainability of increasing debt levels in African economies. Additionally, projects that exacerbate local grievances or intensify existing conflicts are less likely to achieve sustainable development.³⁶

The case of Russia is especially interesting to look at in this thesis because very few experts have a positive view of its actions in Africa. Droin, as one of these few, says that “Russia’s influence in Africa is here to stay. In fact, the Kremlin’s playbook on the continent will most likely be recalibrated rather than overturned.” He adds that “the Kremlin’s remarkable advances on the continent throughout the last decade result from twin contemporary efforts: adept diplomatic reengagement with key regional players and opportunistic predation in areas where Western powers are either absent or in trouble.” According to him, “Russia also invests little in Africa, representing less than 1 percent of total foreign direct investment going to the continent. Moscow’s main competitive advantage... is its ability to render relatively cheap security and military services, including arms transfers, as well as anti-insurgency training and consultancy services.”³⁷

³⁵ Marsai, V. (2018, February 9). *Fragile states and the issue of foreign interventions in the Sahel* (No. 79). EuroMeSCo.

³⁶ Chen, Y. (2018). *Silk Road to the Sahel: African ambitions in China’s Belt and Road Initiative* (Policy Brief No. 23/2018). China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University.

³⁷ Droin, M., & Dolbaia, T. (2023). *Russia is still progressing in Africa: What’s the limit?* Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Smirnova analyses Russian engagement in Africa, emphasizing that “Russia’s main method of engaging in Africa remains security cooperation, supported by communication campaigns.” Russian involvement in the Sahel has increased amid regional political instability and the withdrawal of French and European security forces from Mali. According to Smirnova, the deployment of Russian private military companies in Mali did not significantly alter counterterrorism strategies. Russian information campaigns leverage specific incidents to criticize Western policies and promote Russia as a more effective security partner. Furthermore, Russia is unlikely to match the scale of development or humanitarian assistance provided by other actors, despite rhetoric highlighting its importance in Africa. The continued isolation of countries like Mali does not contribute to resolving complex political and security challenges and instead exacerbates hardships for civilian populations. Ultimately, Smirnova questions “whether Russia, in its current institutional form, will be able to execute promises of socio-economic development.” Russia is perceived as an alternative to Western influence in the Sahel, which may be explained by its growing presence, but this has resulted in negative consequences for local communities.³⁸

Russia’s actions in the region are strongly criticized by Mensah, who says Russia has been forcefully working toward its goals in Africa in recent years. Africa is seen more as a place for Russia to push its interests than as a goal in itself. Russia uses a range of unusual and sometimes illegal methods to gain influence, including “mercenaries, arms-for-resource deals, opaque contracts, election interference, and disinformation.”³⁹ According to Kohnert, Moscow’s approach has included selling weapons, giving political support, especially to strict governments, and working together on security in exchange for mining rights, access to markets, and support for its foreign policy. Russia is now the biggest supplier of weapons to Africa. It has also tried more and more to affect elections in unstable countries, helping powerful leaders stay in control in return for special access to resources. Moscow has supported countries that are cut off politically and economically because of Western sanctions and has even sent private military companies, like the Wagner Group, to help win local conflicts for its own benefit. In return, Moscow can rely on African leaders to support it in international matters. For example, Eritrea voted against a United Nations resolution that strongly criticized Russia’s war

³⁸ Smirnova, T. (2022, December 22). *Russia challenges France in the Sahel*. ISPI MED This Week. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI).

³⁹ Mensah, A. N. A., & Aning, K. (2022). *Russia resurgent? Untangling the role and meaning of Moscow’s proxies in West Africa and the Sahel*. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 44(1), 47–62.

in Ukraine, and eighteen other African countries, including Mali, Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa, did not vote either way.⁴⁰

Academic opinions on Wagner are mixed, according to Kumar's analysis. He explains that after French forces left, the Wagner Group tried to take over their role, using anti-colonial language to justify their actions. Since Wagner arrived in Mali in 2021, they have changed the situation on the ground, making the fight against rebels less about protecting people and more about their own interests. Wagner has become deeply involved but has often made things worse. The group "has been accused of indiscriminately massacring civilians, committing countless crimes against humanity, and propping up the respective juntas of Burkina Faso, Mali, and most recently, Niger." Kumar says Wagner is not helping to bring stability to Mali. Even though they promised quick security improvements, they have not shown they can stop violent groups. Instead, Wagner and its partners have made the problem worse. Wagner has joined with the Sahel region to help Russia become more powerful, which makes the area less dependent on Western countries and international organizations. The central Sahel is also rich in resources, and Wagner wants to control these without anyone stopping them. Kumar strongly says that "Wagner's activities have essentially made Africans less free as the ruling juntas, with the confirmed and suspected protection of Wagner, are attempting to make their governments coup-proof." This makes it much harder for democracy to take hold.⁴¹

According to Menyengue's analysis of the Wagner group however, "the Russian paramilitary group Wagner contributes to security governance in Africa, thereby downgrading the traditionally influential European powers on the continent and incidentally contributing to the projection of Russian power." For the author, "the indignation of European and Western powers traditionally influential in Africa is nothing more than the continuation of geostrategic and geopolitical power projection rivalries opposing them to Russia." In short, "the involvement of the Russian private military group Wagner in the fight against terrorism and other forms of

⁴⁰ Kohnert, D. (2022). *L'impact de la présence russe en Afrique*. MPRA Paper No. 113188. Munich Personal RePEc Archive.

⁴¹ Kumar, R. (2023). *The Wagner Group in the Central Sahel: Decolonization or destabilization?* Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

asymmetric threats has proven to be a successful experiment to mark ‘the Great Return of Russia’ in security governance in Africa.’⁴²

Overall, according to Horak, Russia has regained its influence in areas of North and West Africa that used to be controlled by Western countries, using different political and information tactics. This approach “has proven effective in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where the West was unable to react to such a competition and challenge.” The use of these tactics by Russia in the Sahel has two main goals. First, they aim to change the policies of Sahel countries to support Russia. Second, they try to create situations that will make Western countries change their own policies in the Sahel, so that Russia gains more power in the region. Russia also spread the idea that France still controls Mali, showing France as a country that takes advantage of Mali for its own benefit. “Russia’s propaganda thus exploited old tensions and wounds of colonialism and paternalism, proving highly efficient.” In the end, the author says that Russia has used every possible method to reach its political goals in the Sahel and to compete with Western countries. In recent years, Russia has used both open and secret political tactics to challenge the power of Western countries, especially France, in the region.⁴³

Audinet discusses how Russia attempts to influence public opinion. He says that there is a new wave of false information online, which is mostly against the French presence, but it is often hard or impossible to tell who is behind it. According to the author, “the first, dominant, narrative consists in highlighting the positive role of Russian actors in the Sahel and the benefits of increased cooperation between Moscow and Bamako.” The Russian flag is shown as a symbol of Africa’s freedom, and working together with Mali is described as a different choice from Western control. Even though business and cultural exchanges have not grown much since the Sochi summit in October 2019, Russia’s return to sub-Saharan Africa is mainly seen in the growing presence of the Wagner Group. This unofficial growth is accompanied by a range of methods to disseminate information, designed to enhance Russia’s image, support its local partners, and discredit its rivals.⁴⁴

⁴² Menyengue, A. M. M. (2023). *Wagner et la gouvernance sécuritaire en Afrique: Entre instrument de (re)conquête de l’influence russe, déclassement des puissances occidentales et stigmatisation*. Hybrides - Revue Africaine de Lutte contre les Sécurités Hybrides, 1(1), 327–346.

⁴³ Horak, L., Drmotova, K., Stodola, P., & Kutej, L. (2024). Building the ‘Russieafrique’: Russian influence operations changing the geopolitics in the Sahel. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 46(1), 13–31.

⁴⁴ Audinet, M., & Gérard, C. (2022, February 15). *Les « libérateurs » : comment la « galaxie Prigojine » raconte la chevauchée du groupe Wagner au Sahel*. Le Rubicon.

This point of view is shared by Narbone, who explains that Russia sees soft power very differently from the West. Instead of using it to make its culture or ideas more attractive, Russia uses soft power to try to gain influence in a tough, winner-takes-all situation, especially against the West. According to the professor, “these developments have been often accompanied or preceded by intense social (and) media campaigns, bashing the West for its alleged neocolonialism and moral corruption, and advocating to turn to Russia for security partnerships.” Interestingly, these efforts seem to have helped Russian groups become active in Sub-Saharan Africa, where they surprisingly have a lot of public support. The professor says that overall, Russia has grown its presence and influence in many parts of the MENA and Sahel regions over the last ten years. However, a closer look shows that Russia's influence is not as strong as it might seem, and local views of Russia are more complicated.⁴⁵

However, Bagayoko reminds that “an increasingly essential parameter is public opinion in the Sahel itself. It would be a mistake to regard the animosity of the populations as essentially manipulated. Sahelian populations now oscillate between democratic disillusionment and security exasperation.”⁴⁶ Therefore, only an analysis of the Sahelian public opinion seem to be able to provide the answers to our questions.

1.2. Contribution to Academic Debate

This thesis adds to academic discussions by focusing on how people in the Sahel view and respond to foreign involvement, rather than just analysing the actions of outside powers. While much research has looked at France’s security policies and the influence of other countries, less has explored how Sahelian communities interpret and challenge these interventions. By studying local media, this research highlights Sahelian perspectives, showing both the decline of French influence and the varied ways Russia, China, and the European Union are seen. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study offers clear patterns and a deeper understanding of ideas like sovereignty, partnership, and neocolonialism. This

⁴⁵ Narbone, L. (2023). *Russia's soft power tactics in the MENA region and Africa*. In C. Merlen & B. Vandecasteele (Eds.), *Russia's soft power strategies: Building influence in the MENA and Sahel regions* (pp. 6–13). Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

⁴⁶ Bagayoko, N. (2022, April 7). *What Went Wrong in Mali? The Future of France's Presence in the Sahel*. ISPI Commentaries. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI).

approach shows that to understand the role of foreign actors in the Sahel; it is essential to consider how local people discuss and shape these relationships.

1.3. Methodology

This thesis uses both quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis to examine how Sahelian media have portrayed French security policy from the time of Operation Barkhane through the period after France's withdrawal. It also compares these portrayals with those of other major foreign actors in the region, namely the European Union, Russia, and China, to better understand and contrast changing views of external security roles in the Sahel.

The European Union, China, and Russia were selected as comparative actors due to their significant or increasingly influential roles in the Sahel region, their distinct strategic narratives, and their direct interactions or competition with France, enabling a meaningful analysis of regional security dynamics. Although the United States and Turkey, for example, also play relevant roles in African geopolitics, particularly in terms of security cooperation and diplomatic presence, they were excluded from this analysis to maintain a focused scope and because their engagement in the Sahel has been comparatively less direct and less central to local media discourse regarding French security policy and its legitimacy in the region.

The analysed corpus consists of 544 media articles, covering the period from 2012 to 2025, sourced from a diverse sample of 3 to 4 nationally representative media outlets per Sahelian country (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal, Chad, and Mauritania, according to the OXFAM definition⁴⁷). These media were selected based on criteria such as national prominence, editorial diversity, and linguistic accessibility (all in the French language), thereby providing a representative and balanced dataset for analysis.

The quantitative part of the research included two main steps. First, it analysed the frequency and changes over time of positive, neutral, and negative sentiments associated with each external actor (France, the European Union, Russia, and China) from 2012 to 2025. Second, it examined the use of key political and strategic terms in the texts from 2022 to 2025, during and

⁴⁷ Jarry, C. (10 mai 2022 ; mise à jour le 26 juillet 2024). À la découverte du Sahel, la porte entre deux Afriques. Oxfam France.

after the French withdrawal. This approach enabled the clear comparison of discursive patterns across different actors and time periods.

The qualitative analysis employed Critical Discourse Analysis methodologies. The objective of this in-depth analysis conducted mostly from 2022 to 2025, with some earlier articles that served as comparison, was to understand the recurrent themes regarding the four different actors and, therefore, understand the real motives for French departure and loss of influence according to the Sahelian population.

By combining these methods, the thesis brings together discursive narratives, emotional tone, and geopolitical framing. This approach offers an in-depth look at how media coverage reflects changing views of the legitimacy and security roles of external actors in the Sahel.

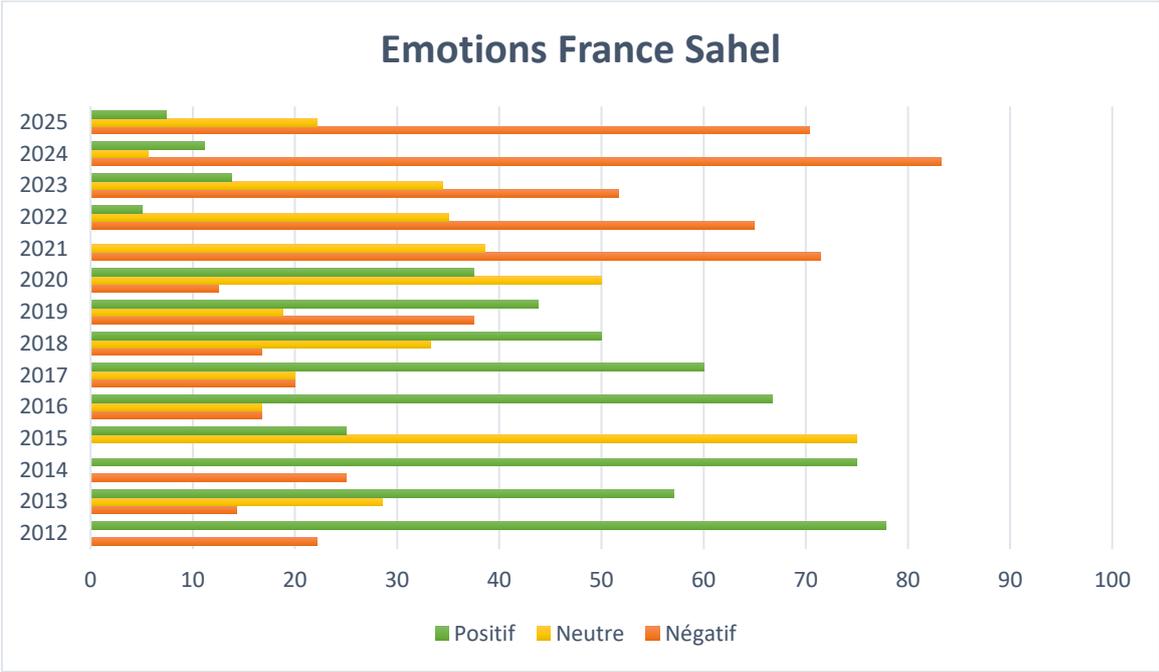
1.4. Hypothesis

This thesis argues that French influence in the Sahel declined due to poorly adapted policies, local challenges, and narratives that exaggerated these issues. France relied too much on military solutions and struggled to respond to the region's complex mix of security, development, and social problems. This gap led to frustration, which local and international voices quickly turned into criticism, often painting France as just another neocolonial power. The shift happened quickly: in only a few years, France went from a key security partner to being rejected in public discussions. A key part of this change was the frequent comparison with Russia, which was seen as a more independent alternative to the West. This shows that the loss of French legitimacy was less about specific policies and more about a battle for influence and reputation, played out through public narratives. Russia and China were better than France at using propaganda and symbols, while France's colonial history made it hard to change its image or connect with younger people who wanted a new kind of relationship. In this environment, every mistake stood out, and none were overlooked, accelerating the loss of legitimacy in ways that current research, which often focuses on failures within Sahelian governments or, more broadly, on poor policy, has not fully explained.

2. Emotion Analysis (Quantitative Analysis)

2.1. France: Sharp Decline in Perception and Influence

Figure 1. Emotions in the Sahelian Media regarding France, retrieved from 177 articles in 17 media from 6 countries (2012-2025)



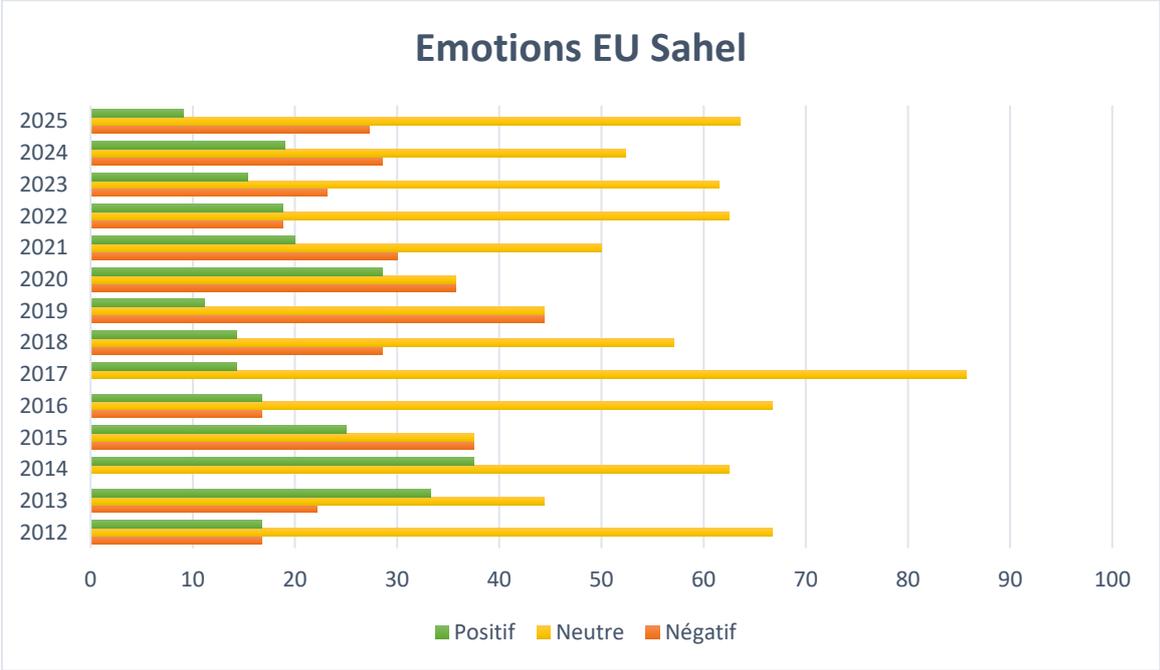
(Source: Author’s elaboration – see chap. 1, par. 1.3.)

Figure 1 shows how Sahelian media coverage of France changed between 2012 and 2025. The analysis looks at three emotional tones: positive (green), neutral (yellow), and negative (red). Reviewing 177 articles over 13 years, the data reveals a clear shift in how France was perceived. Early on, from 2012 to 2017, most coverage was positive, reflecting support for France’s military involvement, especially during Opération Serval in 2013 and the start of Opération Barkhane in 2014. At that time, French actions were often seen as stabilizing, and neutral reporting focused on security operations. Negative views stayed below 30%, showing that doubts about France’s role were limited. Starting in 2018, positive coverage began to decline. By 2019 and 2020, positive, neutral, and negative tones were about equal, each ranging from 30% to 40%. This suggests the media became more ambivalent. France was still seen as a security partner, but criticism of its long-term presence and questions about its counterterrorism efforts became more common. The biggest change happened from 2021 to 2025, when negative coverage became dominant. During these years, negative tones made up

about 70% of the discourse, while positive and neutral mentions dropped below 15% and 20%, respectively. This period also saw political and diplomatic changes, such as military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, the removal of French troops, and the arrival of new partners like Russia. The media began to describe France less as a security provider and more as a neocolonial actor facing strategic setbacks. By 2024, negative coverage peaked, and France’s image was widely challenged in the region. The data shows that France started with a very positive image (over 70% in 2012 and 2014), but this changed sharply over the next decade. From 2021 on, negative coverage stayed high, while positive and neutral mentions remained low. Overall, the figure highlights a shift from early approval and support for France’s actions (2012–2016) to growing criticism and rejection (2021–2025).

2.2. European Union: Stable but Conditional Image

Figure 2. Emotions in the Sahelian media regarding the European Union, retrieved from 133 articles in 17 media from 6 countries (2012-2025)



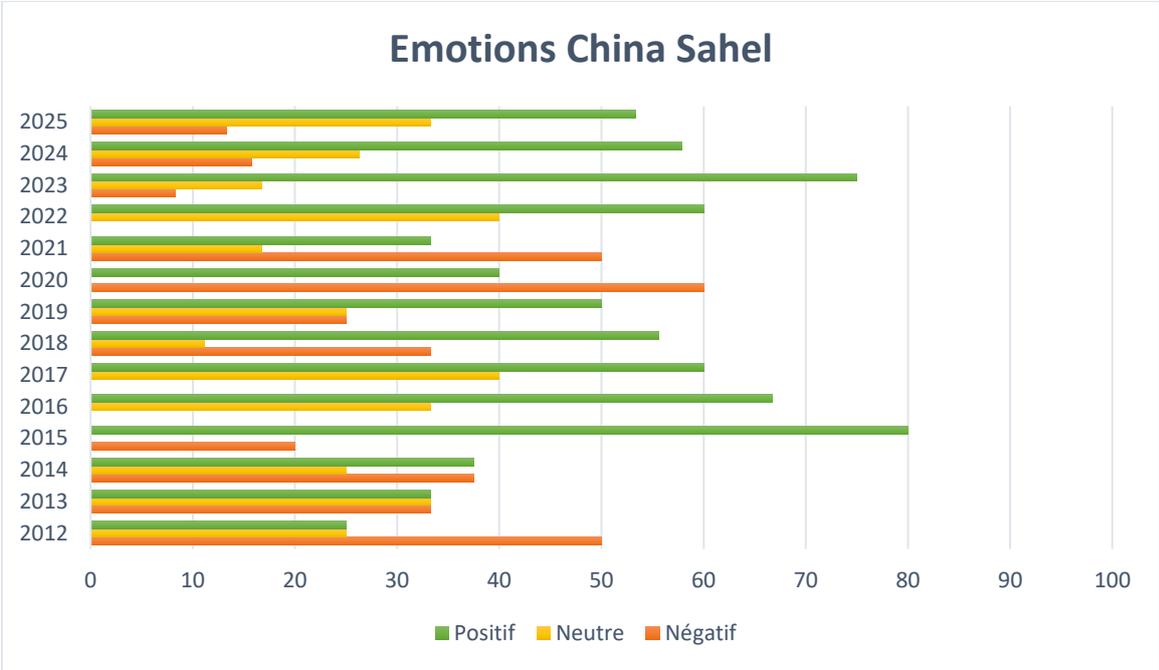
(Source: Author’s elaboration)

Figure 2 shows how Sahelian media coverage of the European Union (EU) changed from 2012 to 2025. Analyzing 133 articles over these years, the EU was usually seen in a more neutral and less polarized way than France. Early on, coverage was balanced, with positive

mentions about development aid, training, and cooperation. Most references were neutral, presenting the EU as relevant but distant, focused on institutional support and civilian missions. Negative views were rare, suggesting the EU was not a main target of criticism. Neutral coverage peaked in 2017, framing the EU as a technical partner rather than a key strategic player. From 2018 and 2019, negative views became more noticeable, as media expressed frustration with limited progress in security and governance. Positive mentions stayed steady but were less common, likely due to the EU's financial and humanitarian support. Between 2021 and 2025, coverage became more polarized. Neutral and negative views both stayed high, reflecting doubts about the EU's effectiveness and its ties to France. Positive mentions remained low, showing that the EU's efforts did not build strong legitimacy. By 2025, negative coverage was at its highest, and positive mentions dropped, pointing to a decline in the EU's credibility. Overall, the EU was seen neutrally in 60% to 70% of articles. Since 2022, fewer than 20% of articles were clearly positive, and negative ones were rare. The EU was viewed as a technical and bureaucratic actor, neither strongly liked nor disliked. This may be due to its humanitarian work, though its aid is often seen as tied to Western standards. In summary, the EU has struggled to build a clear and positive image in Sahelian media. Unlike France, which went from approval to rejection, the EU stayed in a neutral position, facing criticism for being ineffective and closely linked to France's policies. This pattern highlights the limits of the EU's influence and the fragility of its reputation in the region.

2.3. China: Positive Image with Underlying Scepticism

Figure 3. Emotions in the Sahelian media regarding China, retrieved from 111 articles in 17 media from 6 countries (2012-2025)



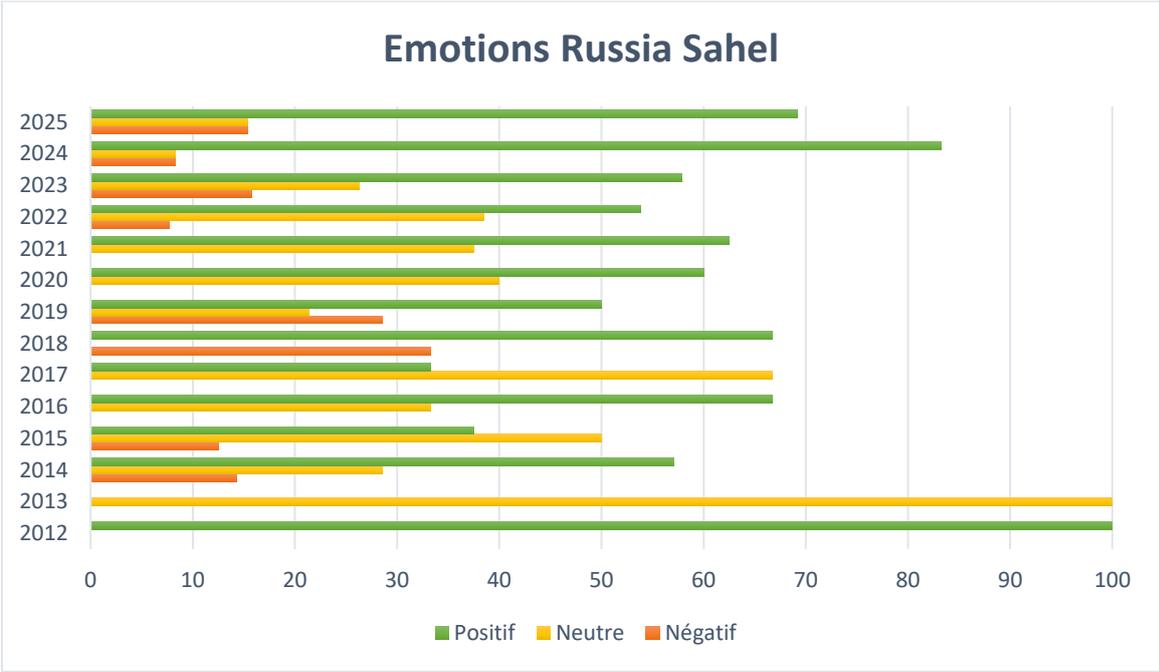
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 3 shows how Sahelian media coverage of China changed from 2012 to 2025. Analyzing 111 articles over 13 years, the data reveals a rise in positive views of China, though some criticism remained. Early on, from 2012 to 2014, coverage was mixed. In 2012, negative mentions made up about half of the discourse, while positive ones were under 30%. By 2014, positive and negative mentions were both around 40%, reflecting mixed opinions about China as both a development opportunity and a possible source of economic dependency. After 2015, positive coverage increased sharply. In 2015, positive mentions reached nearly 80%, showing growing recognition of China as a development partner and investor. Some criticism persisted, especially between 2018 and 2021, when negative mentions rose to 40-50%, but overall, positive coverage remained stronger. The biggest change came in 2022-2025, when positive mentions dominated again. In 2022 and 2023, positive and neutral coverage outweighed negative stories, even as concerns about exploitation and dependency resurfaced. In 2023, positive mentions climbed to nearly 80%, one of the highest points in the period. This trend continued in 2024 and 2025, with positive coverage making up more than half of the stories and negative mentions dropping below 20%. Overall, the data shows that China is viewed more positively in Sahelian media over time. While criticism never disappeared, it became less

prominent. This reflects a view of China as both a reliable development partner and a possible economic risk. Compared to France and the European Union, the trend is different. France went from being seen positively to being widely criticized, and the EU stayed mostly neutral. China, on the other hand, built a more positive and stable image, despite some ongoing concerns. This suggests China has become an important part of the Sahelian development story, even as debates about dependency and human rights continue.

2.4. Russia: Rapid Rise in Perception and Strategic Presence

Figure 4. Emotions in the Sahelian media regarding Russia, retrieved from 123 articles in 17 media from 6 countries (2012-2025)



(Source: Author’s elaboration)

Figure 4 shows how Sahelian media coverage of Russia changed between 2012 and 2025. Analysing 123 articles over 13 years, the data reveals a major shift in Russia’s image. Early on, from 2012 to 2017, Russia was rarely mentioned, and most references were neutral or occasionally positive, reflecting its limited role in the region. This changed in 2018 and 2019, when mentions of Russia increased, especially as private military contractors like Wagner arrived and formal cooperation with Sahelian states began. By 2019, half of the mentions were positive, with most of the rest being neutral and few negative. From 2020, positive coverage

kept growing. In 2021 and 2022, over 60% of mentions were positive, as Russia was seen as a valuable military partner and a way for the region to diversify away from France and Western countries. Neutral mentions stayed around 30-40%, and negative ones remained below 20%. The peak came in 2024, when 83% of articles were positive, even though Russia faced international criticism over the war in Ukraine. In Sahelian media, negative coverage did not increase, suggesting that global controversies had little effect on Russia's local image. Instead, Russia was more often described as a reliable military partner and an alternative to the West. By 2025, positive views stayed high, near 70%, showing that Russia's favourable image had become well established. Neutral and negative mentions were rare, highlighting the strength of Russia's position despite global challenges. Overall, the data shows that Russia, once barely mentioned, quickly became one of the most positively viewed foreign actors in Sahelian media. This reflects both its military involvement and its role as a counterbalance to Western influence. Unlike France, which faced rejection, and the EU, which was seen as neutral, Russia managed to build a strong alternative partnership narrative in the Sahel.

3. Text Focus Analysis (Quantitative Analysis)

3.1. France: Rejection Narratives

This section presents a quantitative, text-focused analysis of the vocabulary used to describe France in six Sahelian countries: Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Niger, Mali, and Chad, between 2022 and 2025. Over the four-year period, the most frequently used terms were “colonial” (86), “military cooperation agreements” (62), “sovereignty” (54), “terrorism” (52), “French forces” (35), “coups d'état” (33), “youth” (29), “security” (28), “military” (27), and “independence” (25).

The data show that three main themes have shaped how France is represented in the Sahel. First, historical framing is central, as post-colonial and neo-colonial ideas still influence political debate and public opinion, often linking current policies to the legacy of independence. Second, security framing is important, with frequent mentions of counterterrorism, military actions, and the presence of French forces, highlighting France's ongoing role as a security partner. Third, sovereignty and legitimacy have become more prominent, seen in repeated references to

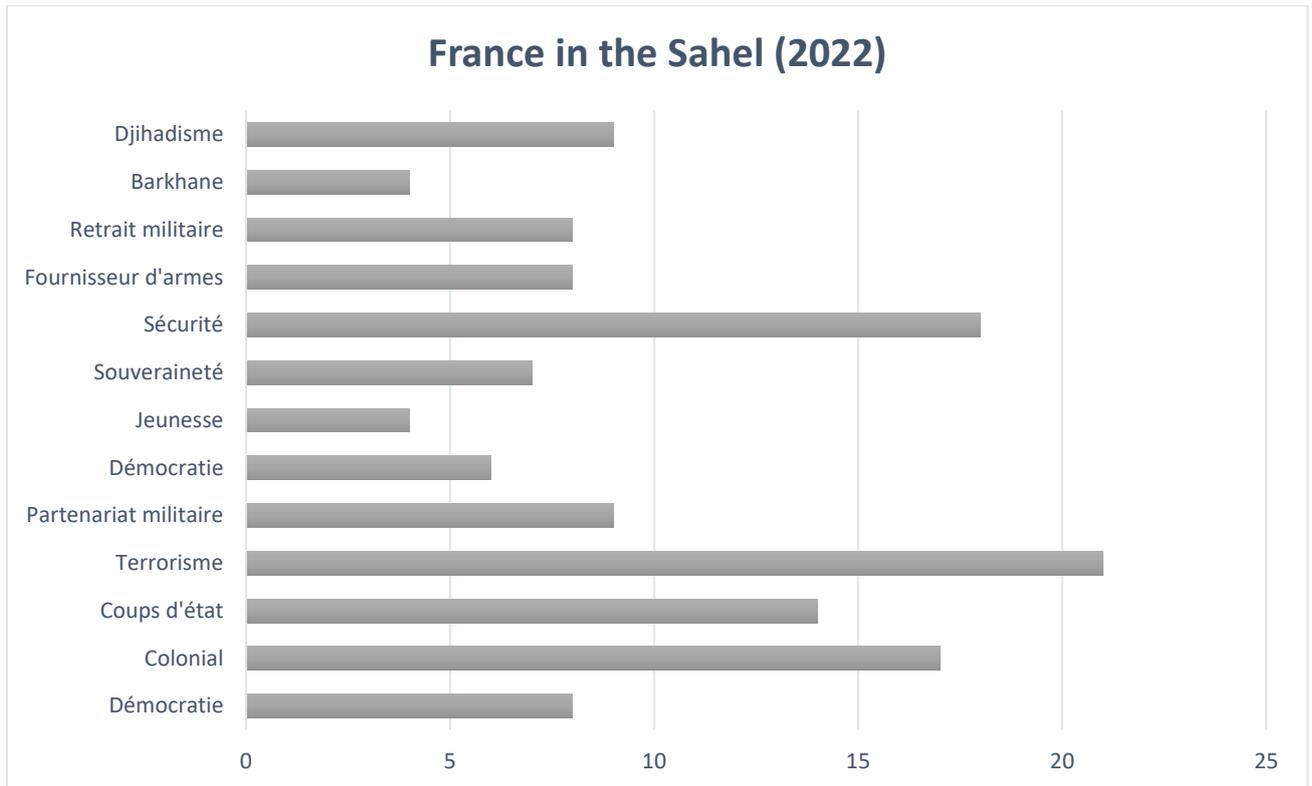
defence agreements, national control, and political events like coups d'état that have changed diplomatic ties.

From 2022 to 2025, the way France was discussed in the Sahel changed. Early on, the focus was mostly on security, such as counterterrorism and military partnerships. By 2025, the conversation had shifted to issues of sovereignty, legitimacy, and looking for new partners. This change was marked by military withdrawals, changes to agreements, and more alliances beyond France. The frequent mention of 'youth' shows that younger leaders and activists are playing a bigger role in shaping these views. Over these four years, France's image moved from being seen as a key security partner to a more debated presence, judged by ideas of independence, history, and new strategies.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing France in the Sahel in 2022

Lexical data from six Sahelian countries in 2022 highlights how security, political legitimacy, and post-colonial themes shape regional discourse. The most common terms, such as “terrorism,” “security,” “colonial,” “coups d'état,” and “military partnership,” show that France is mainly seen as a security actor, though its role is questioned due to past dominance and changing political situations. The focus on “military withdrawal” and “Barkhane” points to a year of operational changes, with France consolidating its presence in some partner states like Niger and leaving others like Mali and Burkina Faso. “Sovereignty” and “democracy” are used both by governments working with France to justify cooperation and by those distancing themselves to explain their decisions. References to “arms supplier” often come from opposition groups accusing France of double standards, while mentions of “youth” highlight the role of younger generations in spreading anti-French views. In summary, the region's discourse in 2022 presents France as a country balancing its counterterrorism efforts with a significant crisis of legitimacy in the Sahel.

Figure 5. Vocabulary describing France in the Sahel region (2022)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

Looking more closely, this research looked at the words used in each studied Sahelian country. In 2022, the words used to talk about France in the six Sahelian countries showed both different national situations and common topics like security, political trust, and memories of colonial times. In Mauritania (figure 21, see appendix page 178), people talked about “coups d’état”, “democracy”, and “colonisation”, showing how Nouakchott’s steady democracy was different from the unrest in nearby Mali and Burkina Faso during changes to France’s Operation Barkhane. This made Mauritania seem like a steady partner, but still seen through the history of colonialism. Mauritania’s ongoing role in the G5 Sahel, even after Mali left in May 2022, made Nouakchott an important partner for France’s new approach to fighting terrorism.

In Burkina Faso (figure 22), the main words used were “terrorism”, “military”, and words about “anti-French feeling”. This showed a year with two coups, protests, and violent attacks, which led to Burkina Faso officially asking French troops to leave and ending defence deals. This happened while Russia, especially through the Wagner Group, was becoming more involved in the region, and people were starting to doubt how well international forces were working.

Senegal’s discussion (figure 23) included words like “military”, “democracy”, and “terrorism”, showing strong security teamwork and stable institutions. It also included “colonial reflexes,”

and “anger,” showing ongoing criticism of colonial history, even as the partnership with France becomes more focused on Senegal’s independence. Senegal is one of the few Sahel countries that still has a French military base, and its 2022 leadership of the African Union made Dakar more important in handling political changes in the region.

In Niger (figure 24), where France strengthened its presence after breaking ties with Mali and Burkina Faso, the main words were “security”, “terrorism”, “defence agreements”, and “sovereignty”, along with “colonisation” and “double standard”. This showed a careful balance between working together and people’s feelings about past and current unfairness. Niger’s important location near the troubled Lake Chad area and Libya made Niamey a centre for French and allied activities.

Mali’s discussion (figure 25), with words like “military withdrawal”, “Barkhane”, and “jihadism”, showed that defence cooperation had completely broken down after the French ambassador was expelled and France was accused (but denied it) of helping terrorist groups. This break was part of a bigger story about “colonisation,” “paternalism,” and Mali moving closer to Russia. At the same time, Bamako slowly left regional security groups, which changed the alliances in the Sahel.

In Chad (figure 26), words like “cooperation” and “partnership” showed the strong military and security ties with France that go back to Operation Serval. Words like “rupture”, “anger”, and “repression” showed that more people in Chad were criticizing France’s support for the temporary government. There were also mentions of “Russia”, “espionage”, and “resources”, putting the relationship in the context of bigger global competition. Even with these problems, Chad remained an important support and operations partner for France in the Sahel and Central Africa, showing its lasting importance.

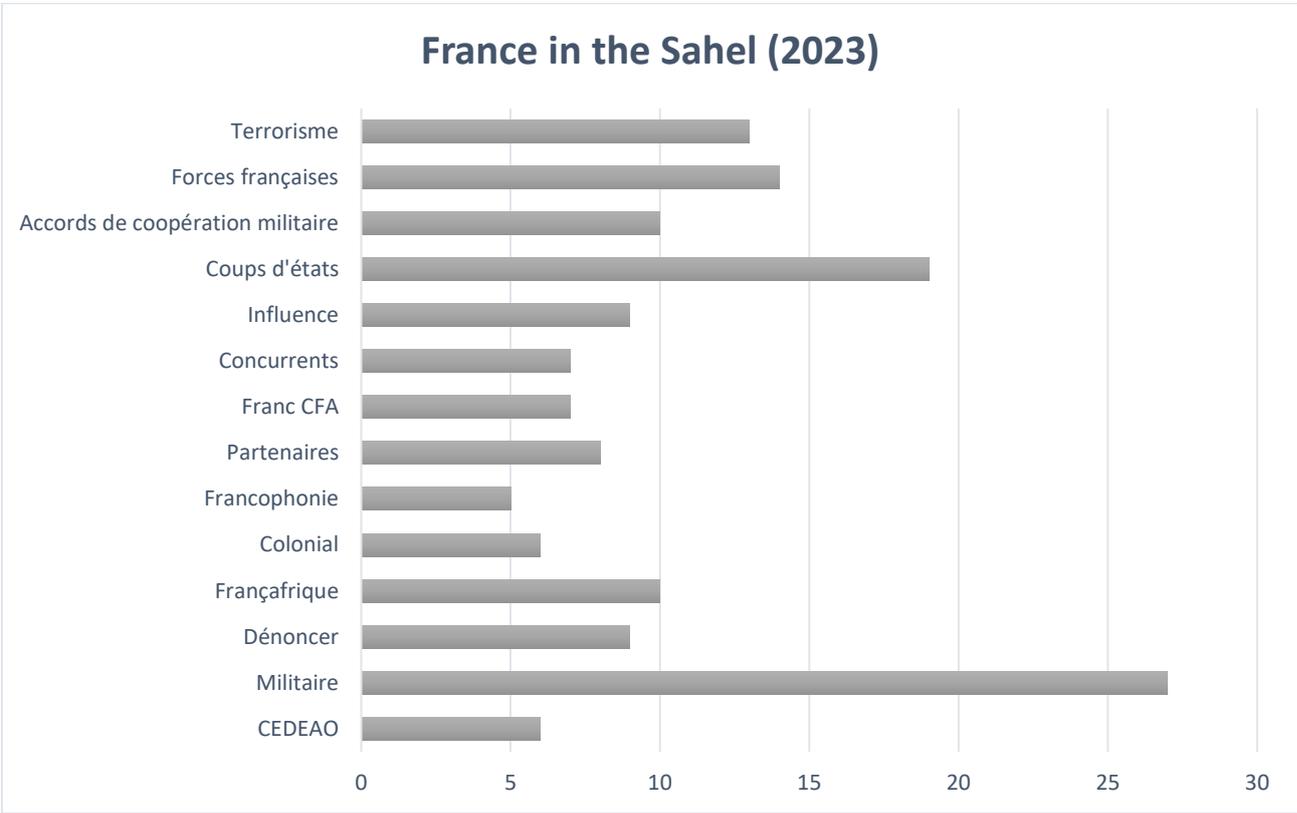
Overall, the words used in 2022 showed that France was seen as both an important security partner and a debated political presence. Each country saw France differently, depending on its own mix of stability, problems, history, and changing strategies.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing France in the Sahel in 2023

In 2023, the analysis of language from six Sahelian countries reveals that security remains a central topic, but there is a clear shift toward political debate and competition for influence. The most common words, such as “military,” “coups d’état,” “forces françaises,”

“terrorism,” and “military cooperation agreements”, suggest that France is still seen mainly in a security role, but now also linked to political instability and diplomatic tensions. Words like “Francafrique” and “colonial” show that historical views of France’s involvement persist, while terms like “influence,” “competitors,” and “Franc CFA” point to rising competition from other countries and ongoing discussions about economic independence. The mention of “ECOWAS” highlights how political crises are becoming more regional, with France’s role now part of a wider West African context. Compared to 2022, the focus has shifted from security as a technical goal to questions about the political and economic impact of France’s actions, showing a move from a counterterrorism narrative to a more contested geopolitical presence.

Figure 6. Vocabulary describing France in the Sahel region (2023)



(Source: Author’s elaboration)

In 2023, the words used to talk about France in the six Sahelian countries showed a time of change. Earlier stories focused on security, but now people talk more about politics and national independence, often because of real changes in relationships between countries.

In Mauritania (figure 27), talk was mostly about the military, showing that France still helps with fighting terrorism in the G5 Sahel group, even though this group is getting weaker. Words like “Francafrique,” “ancienne puissance coloniale,” and “sentiment antifrçais” showed that

people still mention the colonial past, but not as strongly as in other countries. Mentions of “ECOWAS,” “francophonie,” and positive words like “respect,” “friends,” and “mutually beneficial” showed that Mauritania is seen as both a trusted security partner and an active part of West African and language-based cooperation.

In Burkina Faso (figure 28), the words used showed a time after France was asked to leave, with terms like “Franc CFA”, “partners”, and “clarification”. People talked more about controlling their own economy and changing their relationship with France instead of working together on the ground. Words like “bases”, “military”, and “past” reminded people of France’s earlier presence.

Senegal’s words (figure 29) included “coups d’état”, “democracy”, “influence”, and “cooperation”, showing its role as a stable, democratic partner and a country that comments on problems in the region. Words like “colonial”, “competitors”, and “vision” showed that people remember the past and notice new rivals, as Dakar keeps working with France but also thinks about the future of their partnership.

In Niger (figure 30), talk became much more critical after the July coup and the call for French troops to leave. Words like “military intervention”, “Francafrique”, “colonialism”, “paternalism”, and “destabilisation” described France as making Niger less independent. “Natural resources” and “sovereignty” showed the political struggle over important resources.

Mali’s words (figure 31) stayed very negative, focusing on “French forces”, “terrorism”, and “sovereignty”. The talk also included breaking economic ties with phrases like “end of tax cooperation” and “development aid”, showing the change from close partner to open opponent, with claims of interference and unfair partnership.

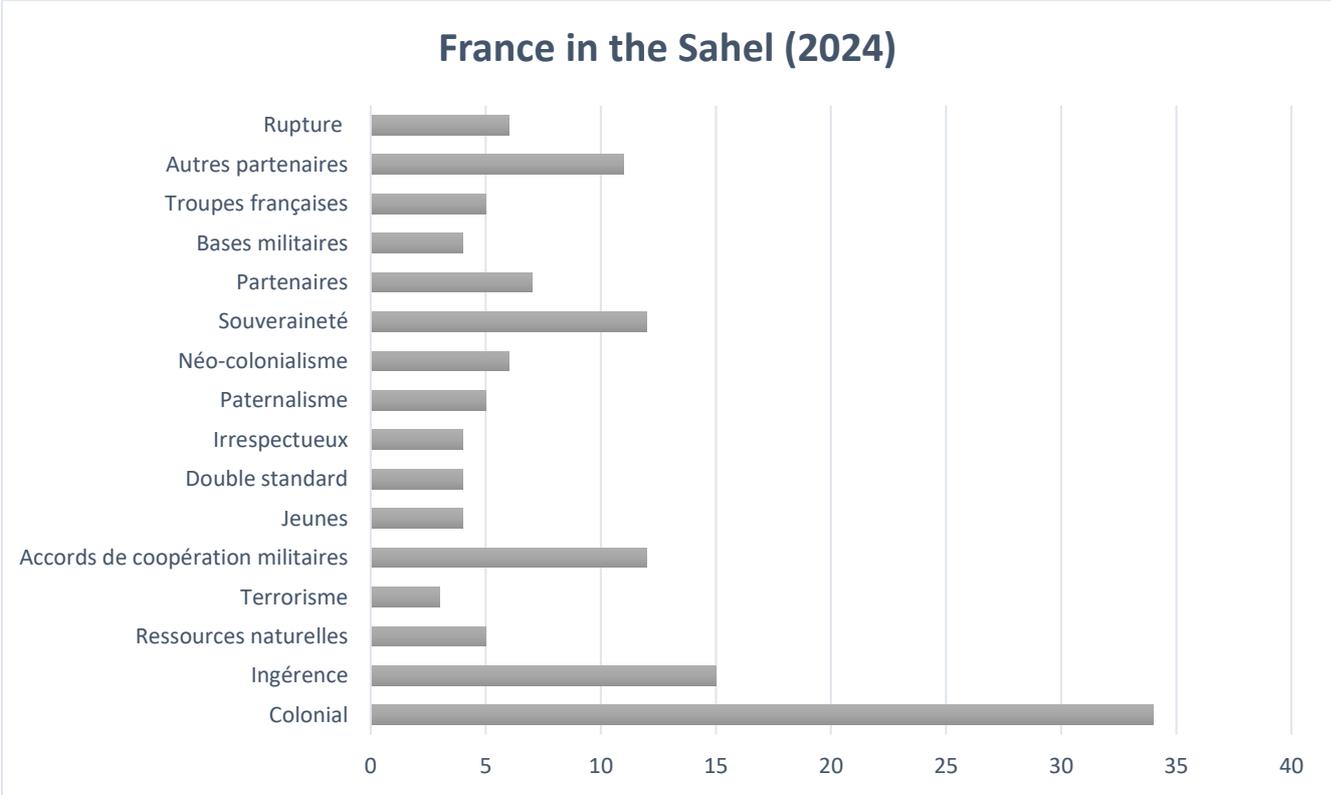
Chad’s talk (figure 32) mixed words about action and helping people, using terms like “humanitarian aid” and “military partnership” along with “French forces” and “terrorism”. Words like “legitimate authorities” and “putschists” showed Chad’s role as both a mediator in regional problems and a country in transition. “Russia” was mentioned to show that other countries are becoming more involved.

Across the region, the words used in 2023 showed a clear change: in some places, countries kept working with France in practical ways, while in others, political breaks happened faster. France’s role was more and more seen in terms of national independence, responsibility for the past, and changing strategies.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing France in the Sahel in 2024

In 2024, analysis of language from six Sahelian countries shows that political interference, sovereignty, and post-colonial themes are now central to regional discussions, while security issues have become less prominent. The most common terms, such as “colonial,” “interference,” “sovereignty,” “military cooperation agreements,” and “other partners”, suggest that France is seen less as a security partner and more as a political presence under scrutiny. Words like “paternalism,” “neo-colonialism,” and “double standard” point to stronger post-colonial criticism, while “rupture” and “partners” indicate both a break from old ties and a search for new alliances. References to “natural resources” and “youth” connect economic concerns to these political changes. The low frequency of “terrorism” shows a move away from counterterrorism toward issues of sovereignty and legitimacy. Overall, France in 2024 is portrayed as a country adjusting to a reduced military role and facing more challenges to its political and economic influence in the Sahel.

Figure 7. Vocabulary describing France in the Sahel region (2024)



(Source: Author’s elaboration)

In 2024, the words used to describe France showed a shift away from focusing on security and toward changes in politics and strategy.

In Mauritania (figure 33), the words used were full of meaning, led by “massacre”, with “colonial”, “memory”, and “dark” showing the strong impact of history, and joined by “predation”, “occupation force”, “eviction”, “model over”, “interference”, and “discreet”. Together, these words portrayed France as a lingering, sometimes interfering presence that mostly remained in the background. This showed a steady partnership, but one still affected by ongoing stories about colonial times and a focus on independence, as Nouakchott worked with France on security but was careful not to get too close in an unstable region.

In Burkina Faso (figure 34), the words used showed a complete break that started in early 2023, when the temporary leaders sent French forces away and ended defence deals, choosing new partners, especially Russia. The main focus was on “colonialism”, with words like “sovereignty”, “failure”, “burdensome”, “preserving influence”, “neo-colonialism”, “paternalism”, “interference”, “intrusive”, “disrespectful”, “double standard”, “youth”, and “Pan-Africanism”, showing France as outdated and no longer respected. Less common words like “obsolete”, “anti-French sentiment”, “complicity with terrorism”, “natural resources”, “slave-trade history”, and “military cooperation agreements” added to stories of past injustice, putting the political break in a bigger criticism of France’s role.

In Senegal (figure 35), the main words were “colonisation”, followed by “commercial partners”, “development aid”, and “military agreements”. This showed that, while official partnerships continued, people were increasingly discussing independence and personal responsibility in the past. Words like “neo-colonialism”, “domination”, “collective memory”, “barbaric repression”, “françafrique”, and “rupture” showed that people were rethinking the basis of the partnership, even as Dakar kept working with Paris in an organized way.

In Niger (figure 36), the words used showed the results of the July 2023 coup and the French troops leaving at the end of the year. The main words were “colonisation” and “sovereignty”, with “military bases” and “redefining partnerships” showing that security deals were being changed. Other words like “security situation”, “partners”, “historic ally”, “Francafrique”, “destabilisation”, “security ties”, “eviction of leaders”, and “suffering” showed France moving from a trusted partner to a country acting on its own and changing its foreign relationships while dealing with ongoing problems.

In Mali (Figure 37), the way people talked about France remained very negative, led by terms such as “other partners” and “colonial”, with “terrorism” and “recolonisation” connecting security problems to past grievances, and “unequal cooperation” and “paternalism” supporting claims of unfairness and control. This showed a firm position after the break, where France was left out of both security and diplomatic areas as Bamako built closer ties with Russia.

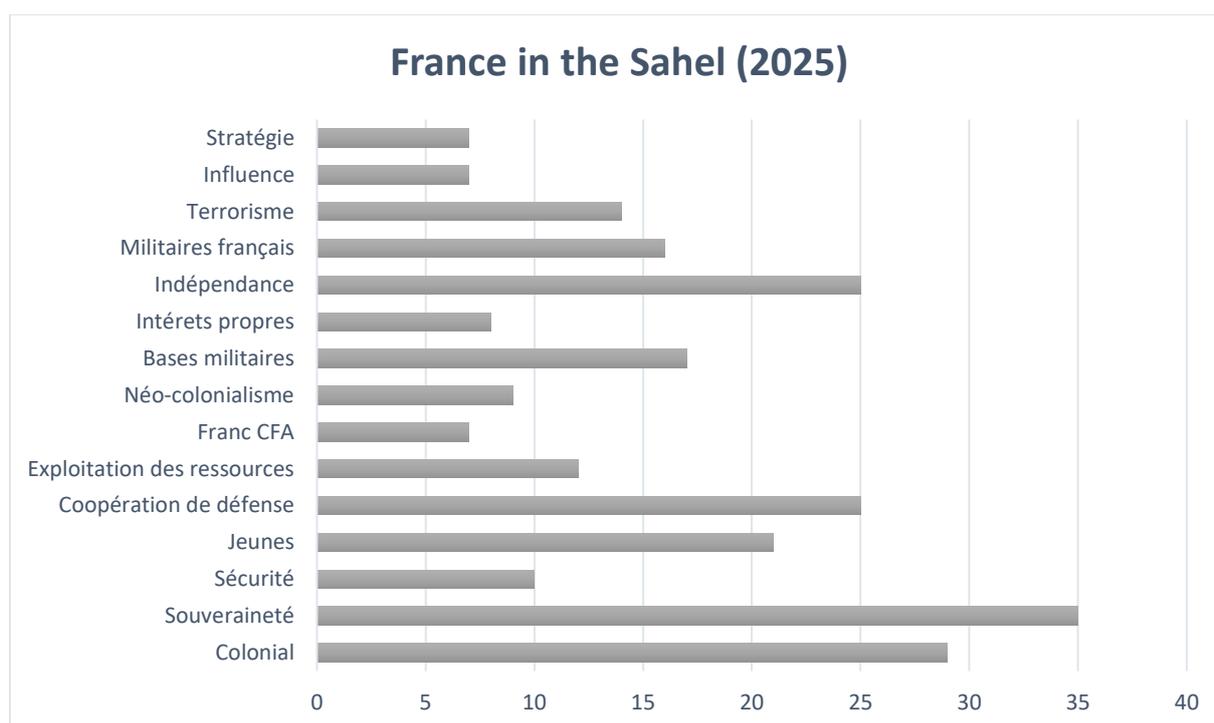
In Chad (figure 38), the words used mixed military terms with signs of a big change: “military agreement” and “French troops” showed many years of working together on defence, but ending the defence deal in November 2024 and words like “withdrawal” and “rupture” showed a clear change. Words like “mutual benefit”, “partnership”, “old relations”, “cooperation”, “reciprocity”, and “sovereignty” showed an effort to make the relationship more equal, while “development”, “friendship”, “own interests”, and “strategic priorities” showed that Chad was working with more countries, including Russia and China.

Overall, the words used in 2024 showed that people in the Sahel saw France less as the main security protector and more as a country with a historical and political role that was being changed, reduced, or replaced as alliances in the region shifted and countries wanted more independence.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing France in the Sahel in 2025

Lexical data from six Sahelian countries in 2025 highlights that discussions about France often centre on sovereignty and historical legacies. Common terms like “sovereignty,” “colonial,” “independence,” “defence cooperation,” and “French troops” suggest the focus is more on political autonomy and historical responsibility than on current security operations. Frequent mentions of “neo-colonialism,” “resource exploitation,” “own interests,” and “youth” point to ongoing debates about post-colonial issues, economic justice, and generational views. While security terms such as “terrorism” and “bases” are still present, they are now part of a wider conversation about the legitimacy and future of France’s involvement.

Figure 8. Vocabulary describing France in the Sahel region (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In 2025, the words used to describe France in the six Sahelian countries revealed that ideas such as national control, exploring new partnerships, and past relationships were the primary focus, while security was still mentioned but mostly discussed in the context of politics and economy.

In Mauritania (Figure 39), the words used included practical terms such as “security”, “sovereignty”, “independence”, “military agreements”, and “partnerships”, along with more critical terms like “colonialism”, “outdated cooperation agreements”, and “doubtful”. This showed that, while military cooperation and development projects continued, concerns persisted about outside influence and control over resources. Words like “economic development,” “strategic,” and “opportunity” showed efforts to make the relationship look good for both sides, while “manipulate” and “natural resources” pointed to hidden tensions. This showed Mauritania’s approach of protecting its independence while working with France in ways that fit its own goals.

In Burkina Faso (figure 40), the way people talked was still shaped by the break with France, focusing on “defence cooperation”, “sovereignty”, “colonialism”, and “resource exploitation”. Strong words like “humiliation,” “injustice,” “scars,” “paternalism,” and “condescension” made France seem like an old and unfair partner. Mentions of “youth” and “coup d’état”

connected changes in local politics to a bigger shift in foreign policy, showing a clear move away from France and toward new partners, especially Russia.

In Senegal (figure 41), the main words were “independence”, “sovereignty”, “colonial”, “military bases”, and “younger generations”, showing a focus on self-rule, history, and change between age groups. Words like “neo-colonialism,” “resource exploitation,” “own interests,” and “Franc CFA” highlighted criticism of economic and political issues. Terms like “defence agreements” and “security tutelage” showed that cooperation was still organized, but the biggest event of the year was the peaceful and agreed withdrawal of French troops, which was completed in July when the Dakar and Rufisque bases were handed over. This was the only case in the Sahel where the process happened without a public break.

In Niger (figure 42), the main words were “terrorism” and “French troops”, showing that the country was still unstable even though most French forces left after the 2023 coup. Words like “denunciation” and “accusations” showed ongoing political arguments about what France’s security role used to be, meaning the relationship was still shaped by disagreements, even though there was less direct involvement.

In Mali (figure 43), the way people talked stayed critical, using a wider range of ideas about how France tries to shape things: “influence”, “strategy”, “soft power”, and “development aid” showed France’s methods beyond just having soldiers there. But words like “military presence,” “control,” “manipulation,” and “resource exploitation” kept alive doubts about France’s true intentions, showing that people still viewed France’s actions with suspicion.

In Chad (figure 44), the words used showed both the long history of defence ties and the clear break that started when defence agreements ended in November 2024. Words like “French troops,” “military bases,” “military cooperation contract,” and “sovereignty” highlighted how important defence was in the relationship, while “end of cooperation,” “rupture,” “decline of France,” “false independence,” “anti-French sentiment,” and “arrogance” showed the political split that led to all French forces leaving by January 2025. Mentions of “Sahel States Alliance (AES),” “regional unification,” and “dialogue” showed Chad’s new place in a bigger Sahel region plan, as N’Djamena looked for new partners like Russia, Turkey, China, and Hungary, but still kept a practical way to talk with France about politics and security.

Overall, the words used in 2025 showed that France’s role in the Sahel was being carefully changed. In some places, it ended completely, while in others it was redefined, as countries pushed for more control, made new partnerships, and dealt with their shared history.

3.2. European Union: Conditional Partnerships and Sovereignty Debates

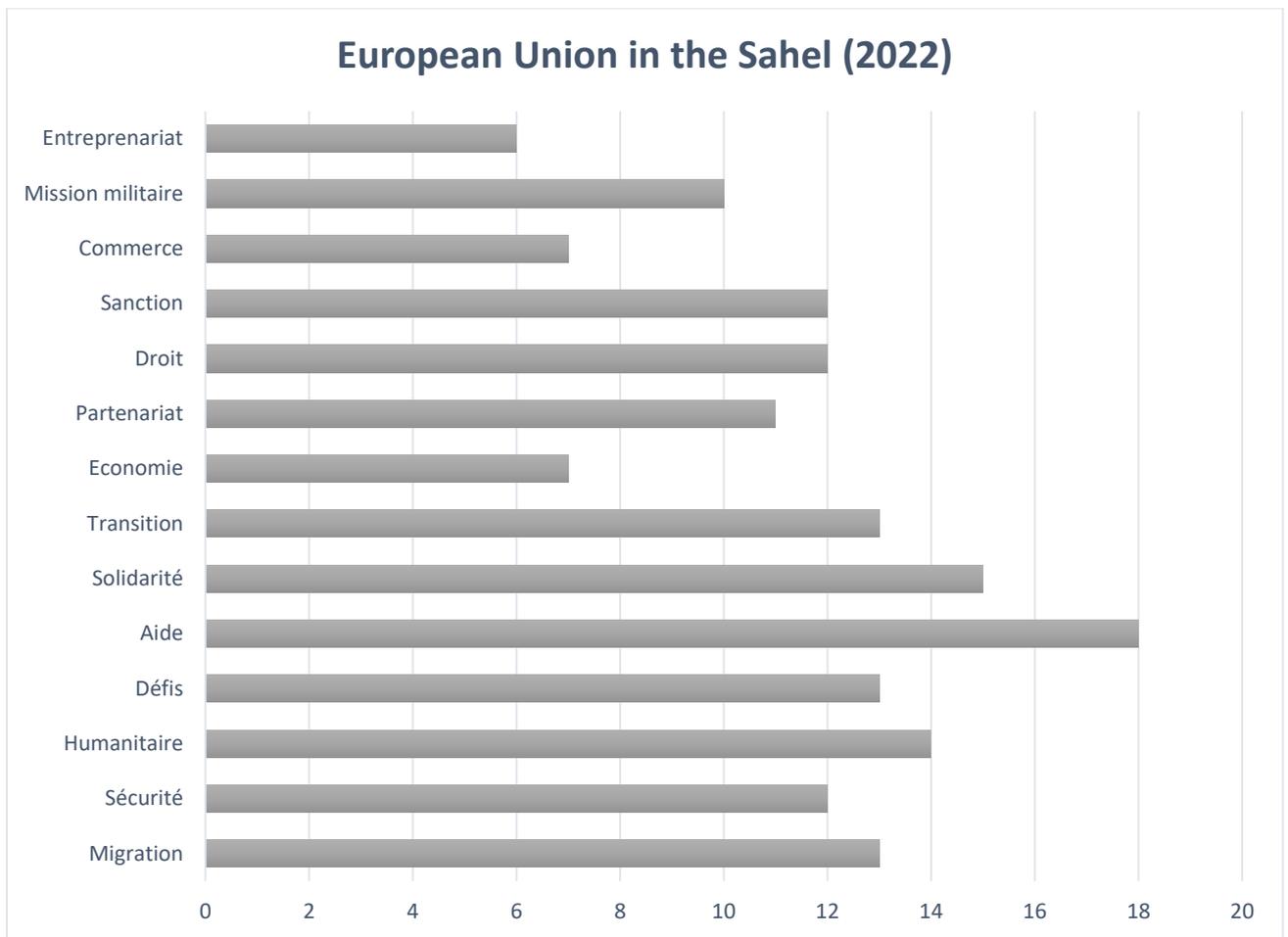
This section presents a quantitative, text-focused analysis of the vocabulary used to describe the European Union in six Sahelian countries: Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Niger, Mali, and Chad, between 2022 and 2025. Over the four-year period, the most frequently used terms were “partnership” (78), “migration” (56), “agreement” (45), “support/aid” (39), “humanitarian” (38), “cooperation” (23), “military” (22), and “rights” (21). The overall discourse conveys a predominantly neutral to positive tonality, emphasising technical assistance, developmental aid, and diplomatic collaboration.

However, the frequent mention of “migration” shows it is often a source of debate, as agreements in this area can lead to public criticism. Words related to “conditionality” also appear, indicating that some EU aid is seen as tied to political goals, with local actors viewing support as dependent on following European priorities. This mix of humanitarian and developmental language on one side, and political and strategic language on the other, shows that the EU’s image in the Sahel is shaped both by its role as a resource provider and its influence on local policies. During these four years, the EU has been seen less as a security force and more as a partner involved in governance, migration management, and cooperation.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing the European Union in the Sahel in 2022

Lexical data from the six Sahelian countries in 2022 shows that the European Union is mainly seen as a humanitarian, governance, and development actor. Security and migration management are central to its regional role. The most common terms, such as “aid,” “solidarity,” “humanitarian,” “transition,” and “migration”, show the EU acting both as a crisis responder and a supporter of political stability after coups. Words like “security,” “law,” “sanction,” and “military mission” suggest a broad approach that mixes capacity building with diplomacy, including working with transitional governments under certain conditions. At the same time, terms like “partnership,” “economy,” “trade,” and “entrepreneurship” show efforts to include economic cooperation and development, though these are less prominent than humanitarian and security concerns. Overall, this language presents the EU in 2022 more as a civilian power than a hard security actor, using aid, governance reforms, and migration agreements to influence the Sahel.

Figure 9. Vocabulary describing the European Union in the Sahel region (2022)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In 2022, looking at the words used to talk about the relationship between the European Union and the Sahelian countries shows that each country has its own main concerns, but security, migration, and the EU's actions in the Sahel are always important.

In Mauritania (figure 45), the frequent use of words like “migration” and “security,” along with “border” and “NGO,” shows that the country is an important EU partner for managing migration to Europe, as part of the Cotonou Agreement and the Rabat Process. Words like “humanitarian” and “development” also appear, showing that migration concerns are linked with support for local growth and border control.

In Burkina Faso (figure 46), the most common words are “transition” and “humanitarian,” along with “aid,” “support,” and “solidarity.” This shows the EU's political and humanitarian involvement with the country after the 2022 coups, during an ongoing security crisis.

Senegal (figure 47) focuses on “economy” and “challenges,” then “partnership” and “security.” This shows a plan that balances working together on the economy, helping with development, and working on security in a region where nearby countries are unstable.

In Niger (figure 48), the main words are “law” and “sanction,” along with “support” and “aid.” This shows the EU supports following the country’s laws and using specific punishments, especially to handle political problems and the security crisis.

In Mali (Figure 49), the frequent use of “military mission” and “trade” indicates both the EU’s involvement in security through the EUTM Mali mission and its efforts to maintain economic connections, despite deteriorating diplomatic relations following Bamako's shift closer to Moscow.

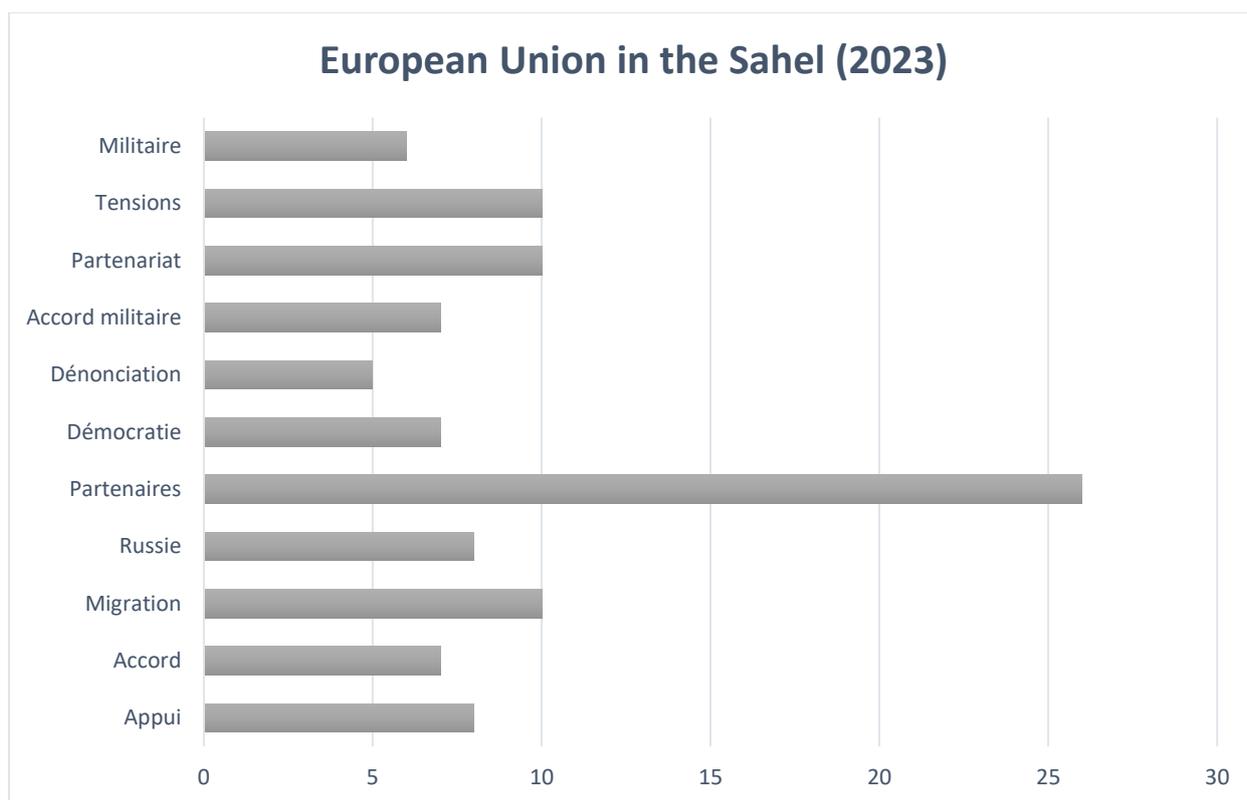
Finally, in Chad (Figure 50), the words “aid,” “transition,” “entrepreneurship,” and “irregular migration” indicate that the EU supports the political changes following Déby and is also interested in maintaining stability and managing migration.

This overview of the words used shows that, even though the EU’s priorities are different in each country, security, political stability, and migration control are always important. Humanitarian and development help are often used to support these main goals.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing the European Union in the Sahel in 2023

In 2023, the main language used to describe the EU focused less on security and more on building partnerships during a time of growing tensions. Key terms included “partners/partnership,” “migration,” “tensions,” “military,” “military agreement,” “democracy,” “support,” “agreement,” and “Russia.” This suggests the year was shaped by efforts to form coalitions and set conditions for policies, especially as the political landscape changed after coups in Niger and ongoing instability in Mali and Burkina Faso. Migration continued to be central to the EU’s approach, but it was discussed alongside issues like democratic legitimacy, offers from Russia, and changes to military agreements.

Figure 10. Vocabulary describing the European Union in the Sahel region (2023)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

Mauritania's trend (figure 50) is led by words like "budgetary support," "agreement," and "migration," with other important words such as "security," "partnership," "stability," "quality," and "development." This word pattern shows that Nouakchott was seen as the EU's most stable West African country in 2023. Brussels combined financial help and program support with efforts to manage migration along the Atlantic route, while also increasing security work at the borders. Mentions of "opposition" show there was debate within Mauritania about these deals, but the use of "stability" and "quality" suggests Mauritania saw the EU as a trustworthy "partner" as they prepared for a bigger migration agreement the next year.

In Burkina Faso (figure 51), the most common word is "partners," with less frequent use of "defense," "accompaniment," and mentions of "Russia." Critical words like "conditional aid," "infantilization," "colonialism," "servile dependence," and "jealousy/gratitude/friendship" appear rarely. This word pattern shows that after Burkina Faso broke ties with Western militaries, the country looked for new partners. The EU kept giving humanitarian help but stopped budget support and limited security cooperation. The use of both "defense" and "Russia" shows the government turned to non-EU partners, while the EU focused more on working together than on military support.

In Senegal (figure 52), the main words are “democracy” and “immigration,” followed by “coup,” “peace,” and “alliance.” Critical words like “colonial powers,” “exploitation,” “post-colonialism,” “absolute failure,” and “endure” are used less often. This mix of words suggests that in 2023, Dakar played two roles: as a strong democracy discussing regional “coups” and as a centre for EU “migration” cooperation and investment. “Alliance” and “peace” show a steady security and economic partnership, even as some debates about “colonial powers” appeared during political disagreements before the 2024-25 elections.

Niger’s main words (figure 53) are “military agreement” and “denunciation,” with “different visions” also appearing. This illustrates the impact of the July 2023 coup: the new leaders rejected earlier security agreements and requested withdrawals, while the EU halted security missions and budget support, and took specific actions. The focus on agreements and their rejection, instead of development, shows how quickly the situation changed from working together to handling a crisis.

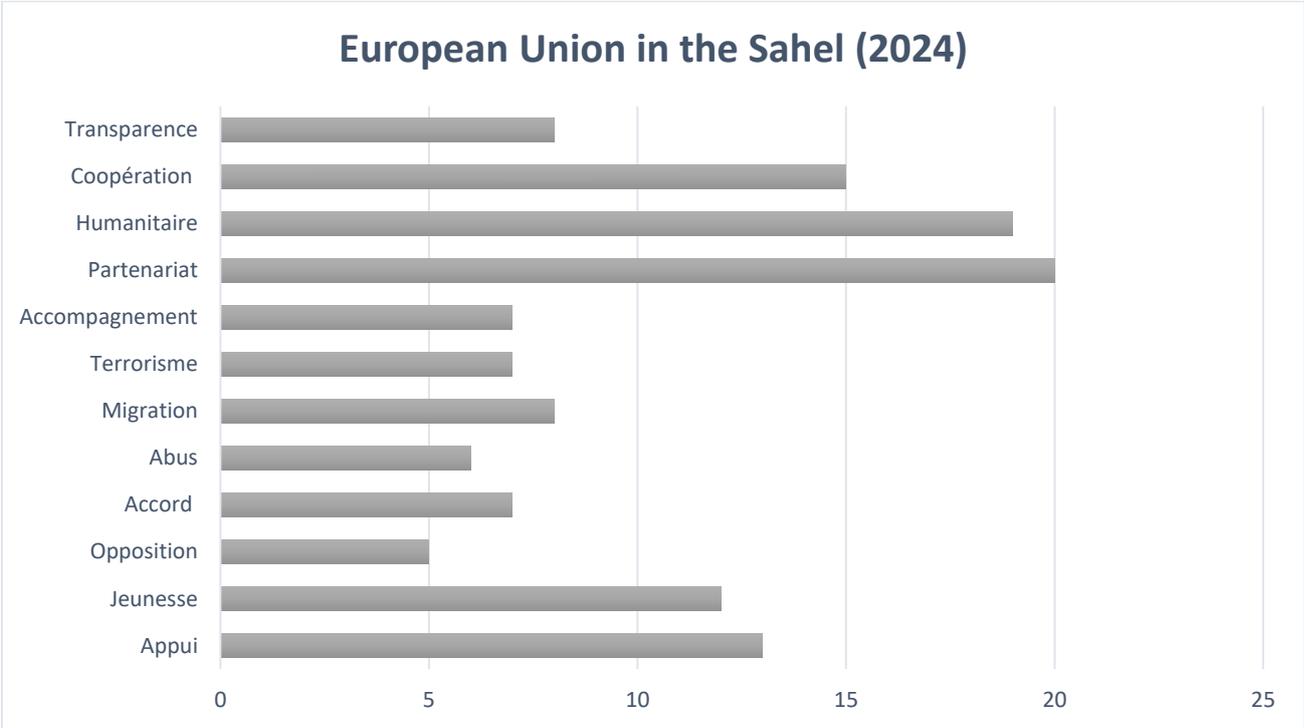
Mali’s 2023 situation (figure 54) centres on “Russia,” with smaller mentions of “break,” “hard blow,” “diversification of partners,” and “influence.” These words show that Bamako is close to Russia. “Break” and “hard blow” show how the EU felt, while “diversification of partners” means Mali’s shift included not just security but also diplomacy and trade. In Chad (figure 55), the main words are “partnership” and “military,” along with “tensions,” “bilateral relations,” “positive results,” “cooperation,” and “dialogue.” This mix showcases both stability and change: N’Djamena remained an important partner for EU military and border projects in 2023, while also taking in many refugees from Sudan. However, the “tensions” reveal disagreements about the transition schedule and issues of independence. The use of “dialogue” and “positive results” suggests the country prefers working together.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing the European Union in the Sahel in 2024

In 2024, the European Union often used words like “partnership,” “humanitarian,” and “cooperation” when talking about the Sahel, along with terms such as “support” and “youth.” This shows that the EU was seen more as a partner in development and governance than as a security force, especially during a time of political change and new alliances in the region. While security topics like “terrorism” were still mentioned, they were less central and appeared with issues like institutional reform, transparency, and social investment. At the same time, the use of words like “opposition,” “abuse,” and “migration” highlights ongoing challenges,

especially regarding human rights, migration policies, and the balance between local control and outside involvement.

Figure 11. Vocabulary describing the European Union in the Sahel region (2024)



(Source: Author’s elaboration)

EU-Mauritania relations in 2024 (Figure 56) combine practical cooperation with a greater focus on governance and human rights issues. Words like “migration” and “agreement” indicate that Mauritania was a key partner in the EU’s efforts to manage its borders, particularly in preventing unauthorized migration to Europe. At the same time, terms like “human rights,” “racism,” and “abuse” show that the EU was worried about how migrants and minorities were treated, especially in detention centres funded by the EU. Mentions of “support,” “opposition,” and “direct involvement” point to the political talks around EU help, since development and budget aid were closely linked to how the country was governed. The 2024 relationship was shaped by both working together on security in the Sahel and arguments about how much control the EU should have over migration and human rights policies.

In Burkina Faso (Figure 57), talks in 2024 were shaped by both efforts to work together against terrorism and political divisions. “Partnership” and “terrorism” are key words, showing the EU was still helping with security even though Burkina Faso was moving closer to other partners and leaving ECOWAS. Words like “cooperation,” “accompaniment,” and “humanitarian”

indicate that development and aid projects continued, despite a decrease in political discussion. The use of “colonial dependence” and “conditioned cooperation” shows doubt about the EU’s motives, matching Burkina Faso’s focus on its own independence. While “development” and “human rights” were still mentioned, the relationship was more about practical work together than about strong political agreement.

The main words used about Senegal in 2024 (figure 58) were “cooperation,” “partnership,” and “youth,” which helped show Dakar as a steady, development-focused partner in the Sahel. However, other words like “neo-colonialism,” “paternalism,” “plundering,” and “arrogance” show that criticism from the colonial past was still present, especially when talking about fairness in the economy and Senegal’s independence. “Migration” shows that Senegal is important in the EU’s efforts to manage who moves to Europe, while “sovereignty” and “development” show that talks about how to work together were still going on. The EU also put more money into education and jobs for young people to help reduce migration, though some people in Senegal saw these efforts as coming with strings attached.

In Niger (figure 59), the EU’s main focus in 2024 was on “humanitarian aid,” showing a move toward helping with emergencies after the political break in 2023 and the pullout of several European missions. The word “misunderstanding” shows the political gap between Brussels and Niamey, as the new leaders were careful and often doubtful about EU security and migration plans. The EU mostly gave humanitarian and development help, but had less political influence than before.

Mali’s main words about the EU in 2024 (Figure 59) were “military,” “Russia,” and “broken alliance,” highlighting the lasting effects of the EU reducing its training mission and Mali strengthening its security ties with Russia. The EU was only involved in small humanitarian efforts, and security cooperation had mostly ended. The way people talked about the EU showed that it was no longer seen as a main partner and was often mentioned as being replaced by Russian help.

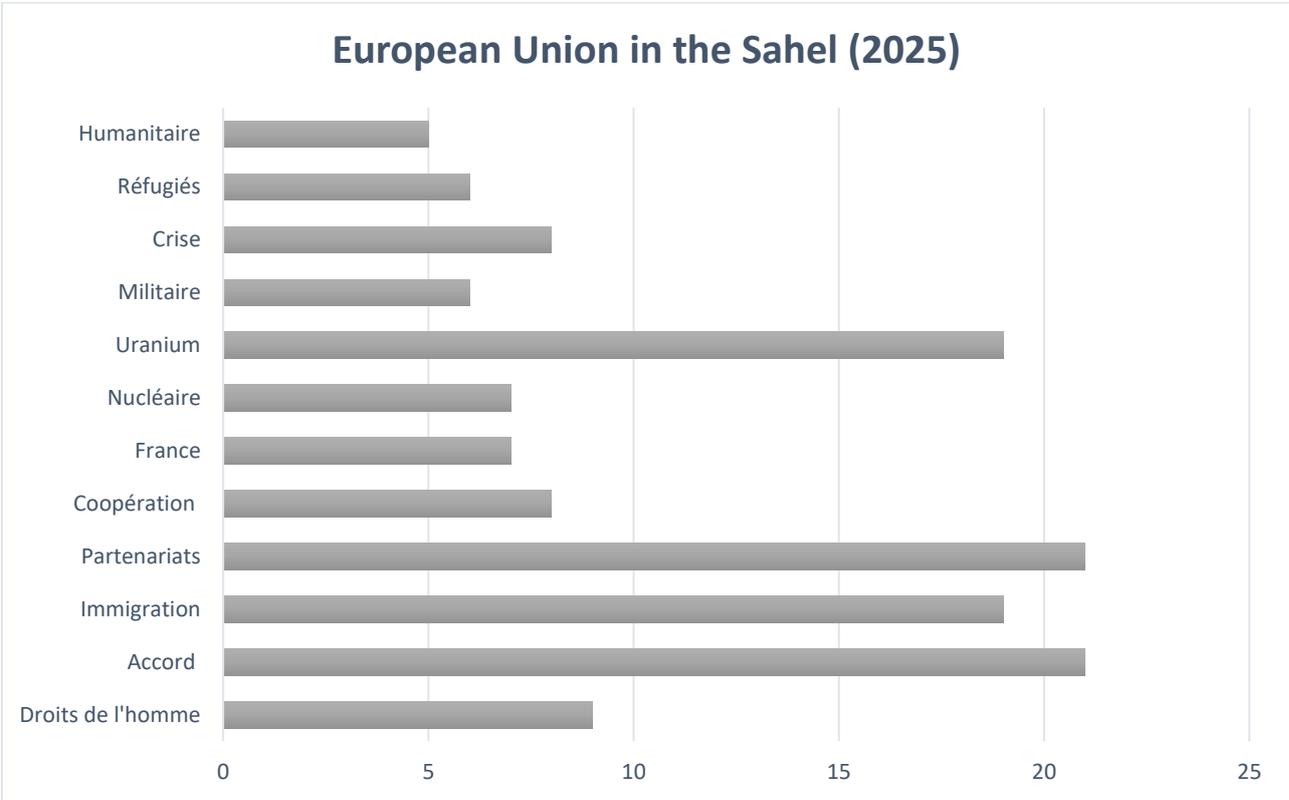
In Chad (figure 60), the EU’s main focus in 2024 was on how the country is run and making changes to its institutions, using words like “transparency,” “people,” “democracy,” and “partnership.” These words demonstrate that the EU viewed itself as both a provider of development aid and a supporter of political change during a year when Chad was preparing for national elections and discussing the inclusion of more people in politics. The EU was less

involved in direct security work than before, but still gave humanitarian and development help, all within a bigger story of supporting political change and democracy.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing the European Union in the Sahel in 2025

In 2025, the language used to describe the European Union emphasizes its focus on the rule of law and crisis management in a more challenging strategic context. Key terms include 'uranium,' 'partnerships,' 'agreements,' and 'immigration,' followed by words like 'human rights,' 'cooperation,' 'nuclear,' 'France,' and 'military.' There is also a layer of words related to conflict and humanitarian issues, such as 'crisis,' 'refugees,' and 'humanitarian.' These patterns suggest three main themes: energy security and supply chains, especially around Niger's uranium; migration management along Atlantic and Sahel routes; and the EU's shift from security missions to civilian tools, humanitarian aid, and targeted agreements with willing states. The vocabulary also shows how France's withdrawal and new partners have led Brussels to rely more on cooperation and partnerships, while keeping human rights as a key condition.

Figure 12. Vocabulary describing the European Union in the Sahel region (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In Mauritania (figure 61), the main topics are “immigration,” “partnerships,” and “agreement,” followed by “human rights,” “security,” and “defence cooperation.” This mix illustrates a practical EU-Nouakchott deal to manage the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, featuring financial assistance, collaboration, and equipment, all under clear rules. This is why terms like “human rights” and phrases like “concerns” and “repression” are important. Mentions of “mutual interest,” “sovereignty,” and “security” show how both sides describe the deal as balancing what the EU wants on migration with Mauritania’s need for respect for its own choices and support for stability. Lighter mentions of “corruption” and “hostility” show public debate about how fast and how well the funding is managed.

Burkina Faso’s 2025 profile (figure 62) talks about: “defence cooperation,” “partners,” “sovereignty,” and “honesty.” With Ouagadougou deep into a post-rupture realignment, the EU’s presence is limited to fundamental engagement and humanitarian lines; the vocabulary’s emphasis on “sovereignty” signals the authorities’ red lines. “Honesty” reads as a discursive appeal to transparent terms, if and when re-engagement on security ever becomes negotiable.

Senegal in 2025 (figure 63) is seen as cooperative: “agreements,” “partnership,” “cooperation,” and “mutually beneficial.” These words fit a year of steady EU-Dakar relations under new leaders who want to adjust outside relationships without ending them. “Mutually beneficial” shows the government’s focus on putting its own interests first in the economy while still working with EU programs. The approach is practical, not argumentative, and matches a negotiated way of handling sensitive issues like migration and industry, while keeping a friendly attitude toward Europe.

Niger’s 2025 lexicon (figure 64) is the most strategic with “uranium,” “nuclear,” “France,” “strategic,” “principal supplier,” and “agreement.” It captures the way energy security climbed to the top of EU discourse after the 2023 coup and the suspension of security missions: the conversation shifted from training and force partnership to supply-chain resilience, contracts, and diversification. References to “France” sit in that frame since French utilities remain a key conduit for EU nuclear inputs. “Agreement” points to the legal-commercial instruments Brussels and companies leaned on to steady flows or hedge them, while “resource” underscores the stakes for Europe’s energy mix.

Mali’s 2025 picture (figure 65) is about pulling back and staying cautious: “military,” “suspension,” and “troop withdrawal” show the state of EU security efforts, while “mediation effort” and “mineral resources” show where Brussels still tries to help, supporting regional talks

and paying attention to how minerals are managed. The choice of words makes it clear that the EU is no longer focused on being there in person but on reducing harm, keeping humanitarian aid going, and working with African partners when there is a chance for talks.

Chad's 2025 keywords (figure 66): "crisis," "refugees," and "humanitarian," are all about helping people in need. This shows the country's role as a main host during the spread of the Sudan conflict and more people moving across the Sahel, with the EU giving more money and aid. The lack of more security-focused words aligns with Brussels' new priorities for N'Djamena this year: maintaining stability under stress, supporting UN and NGO operations, and ensuring people's safety.

The 2025 vocabulary reveals that energy and migration are the primary concerns, with partnerships and agreements serving as the primary tools, and human rights always in the forefront, adopting a careful, country-by-country approach that reflects the region's growing divisions.

3.3. China: Development Rhetoric and Trust Gaps

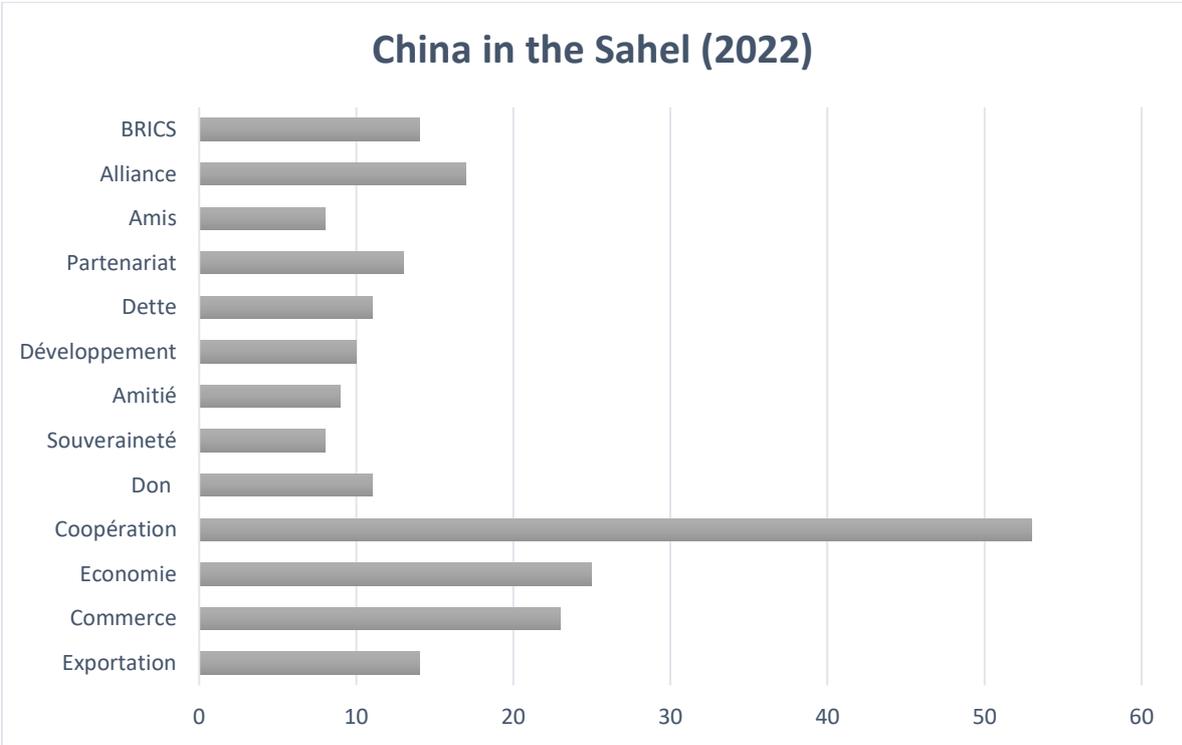
The lexical analysis conducted between 2022 and 2025 regarding China shows the dominance of the words "cooperation" (155), "development" (74), "partnership" (67), "trade" (58), and "economy" (55). These terms highlight the framing of China primarily as an economic partner whose role is grounded in investment, infrastructure, and pragmatic collaboration. The recurrence of "values" (35) and "friendship" (25) illustrates the emphasis placed on solidarity and mutual respect, narratives that align with Beijing's discourse of South-South cooperation.

At the same time, the presence of "aid" (28), "criticism" (19), "global South" (14), and "sovereignty" (12) reflects both the supportive dimension of China's engagement and the ambivalence that surrounds it. While China is generally portrayed as a constructive partner, concerns about "debt" and "dependence," frequently associated with these terms, reveal that local discourses also raise questions about the risks of financial reliance. Overall, the vocabulary indicates that China's image in the Sahel between 2022 and 2025 is one of economic centrality and political pragmatism, accompanied by a cautious awareness of potential asymmetries.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing China in the Sahel in 2022

In 2022, discussions about China in the Sahel often focused on cooperation, the economy, and commerce. Media in the region described China as a development partner, emphasizing its financial support, donations, and trade. Terms like BRICS, alliance, and sovereignty showed how China was seen as a counterbalance to Western influence. At the same time, words such as debt and exportation pointed to both the advantages and risks of relying on China economically. Overall, the narrative presented China as a non-colonial partner, different from France and the European Union, but also raised concerns about debt and unequal exchanges.

Figure 13. Vocabulary describing China in the Sahel region (2022)



(Source: Author’s elaboration)

In Mauritania (figure 67), the most common words were “exportation”, “commerce”, and “economy”, showing that China was mainly seen as a trade partner. The focus on “sanction” and “strategic” shows that people saw these relations as part of global politics, especially with China acting as a protection against Western limits. In 2022, Mauritania tried to build more partnerships with other countries, and Chinese work in fishing, mining, and building projects were often mentioned. The word “influence” shows that discussions about China’s growing role

were about more than just trade, but also about its ability to shape opinions, especially compared to Europe's political demands.

For Burkina Faso (figure 68), the main words were “donation” and “cooperation”, showing that Chinese help and technical support, especially in health and building projects, were important. Words like “support” and “links” make China seem like a dependable partner, especially as the country moved away from Western partners. In 2022, as safety problems grew in the country, China's help was mostly seen in development projects, not in military action. The talk focused on generosity and collaboration, demonstrating that Chinese aid was viewed positively in Burkinabè media.

Senegalese discussion (figure 69) in 2022 focused on “cooperation”, along with “commerce”, “economy”, and “development”. Words like “respect”, “trust”, and “solidarity” also showed a very positive view of China. President Macky Sall, then head of the African Union, made stronger connections with Beijing and supported a world with more than one main power. Words like “diplomacy”, “partnership”, and “debt” indicate that the relationship had both positive and uncertain aspects: while China was viewed as a reliable friend, concerns persisted about the country's debt. The word “pragmatism” showed the careful choice to balance Western and Chinese partnerships, especially as Dakar had big projects funded by China.

In Niger (figure 70), the most frequent word was “friends”, followed by “cooperation”, “partners”, and “brothers”. The discourse was overwhelmingly positive, framing China as a loyal and long-standing ally. The recurrence of “independence” suggests that cooperation with Beijing was linked to narratives of sovereignty and emancipation from Western domination. In 2022, Niger continued to rely on Chinese investments in oil extraction and infrastructure, reinforcing the idea of China as both an economic and political ally. The vocabulary of “always” highlighted the narrative of continuity and reliability in this bilateral relationship.

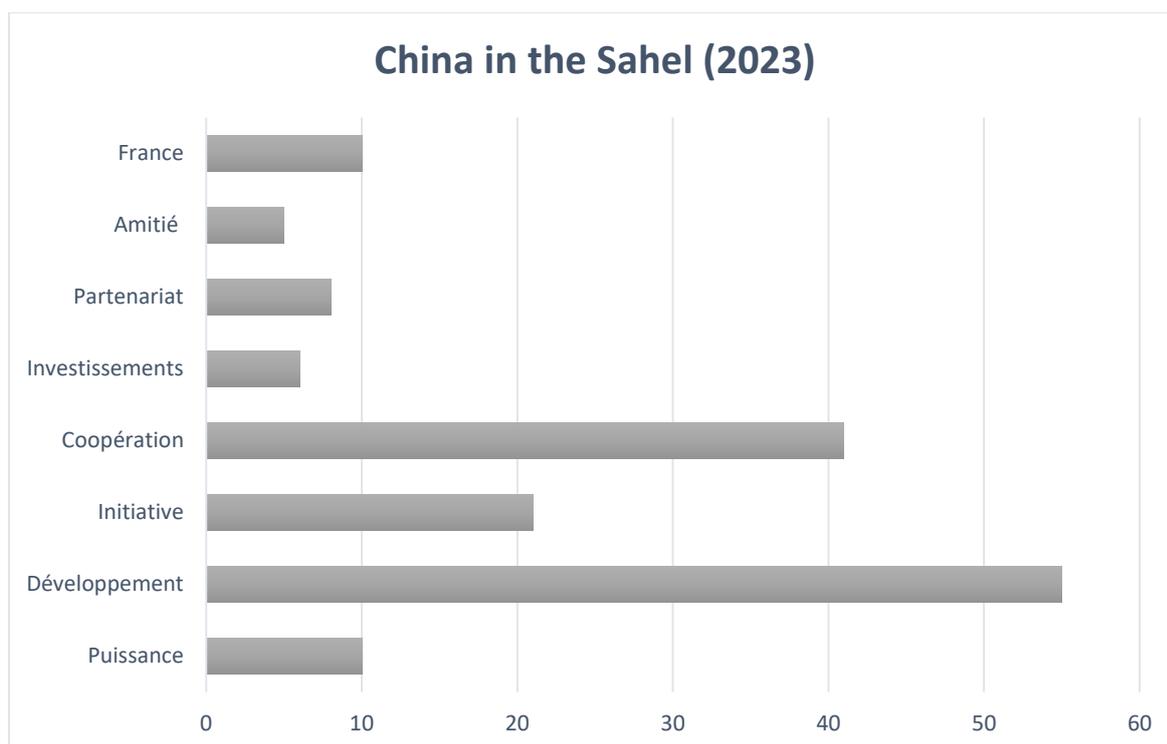
In Mali (figure 71), the main idea was “alliance”, followed by words like “force”, “enemy”, and “Occident”. This shows the tense political situation in 2022, when Mali's ties with France and the EU got much worse after the military leaders sent French and European groups away. In this gap, China was more often seen as an important ally, with its message matching ideas of independence and a world with many powers. Mentions of “dream” pointed to the beliefs behind China's involvement, especially compared to the West, while “sovereignty” added to the political meaning of this partnership. China was not directly involved in military actions but was described as part of the group helping Mali change direction.

In Chad (Figure 72), the main words were “BRICS”, “economy”, and “emergence”, highlighting the partnership with China within a larger group of countries working together. The words “politics,” “security,” and “cooperation” indicate that China’s role extended beyond trade to encompass government support and stability maintenance. In 2022, Chad was still an important partner for China in energy projects. The BRICS group showcased China’s role as a leader of a different kind of international cooperation, aligning with N'Djamena's desire to collaborate with partners beyond the West.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing China in the Sahel in 2023

In 2023, discussions about China in the Sahel focused more on development, cooperation, and new initiatives, while also noting China’s growing influence. Key terms like “development,” “cooperation,” and “initiative” show that Beijing aimed to present its involvement as supporting economic growth and long-term partnerships. At the same time, words such as “power” and “France” suggest that China’s role was seen not just as helpful, but also as part of changing global politics, especially as Western countries stepped back. The conversation described China as a major partner whose investments are changing Sahelian economies, but also as a country facing more questions about debt, sovereignty, and competition with other powers. Overall, 2023 marked a turning point, with China moving from being viewed mainly as a donor to being seen as a rival to France and an appealing option for governments looking beyond traditional Western influence.

Figure 14. Vocabulary describing China in the Sahel region (2023)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In Mauritania (figure 73), the most common words were “development”, “power”, “diplomacy”, “debt”, and “agreement”. These words show that people saw China as both a chance for growth and a possible source of dependence. The focus on development means that Chinese building and business projects played a significant part in the story, while mentioning diplomacy highlights important political talks between Nouakchott and Beijing. The repeated mention of debt highlights concerns about financial difficulties stemming from Chinese loans. The words agreement and power together show that Mauritania saw its relationship with China as both a deal and unequal, with China having more influence over the country’s foreign affairs.

In Burkina Faso (figure 74), people talked about “cooperation”, “development”, and “friendship”, but also used words like “colonized” and “critiques”. The mix of positive words like “prosperity,” “justice,” and “peace” with more critical ones shows mixed feelings. On one side, China was seen as a powerful country and a helpful supporter, giving economic and political options besides Western countries. On the other side, using words like colonized shows that some people wondered if China was acting like past rulers. With political problems and the need for new partners, China was seen both as a useful partner and as someone whose goals were questioned.

In Senegal (figure 75), people mostly talked about “cooperation”, “initiative”, and “development”. The words used were very positive, with others like “partnership” and “happiness” showing that both sides benefit. The word initiative was used often, likely because of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and similar projects in Senegal, where China has spent a lot on building and trade. The mention of investments shows the practical side of the relationship, while the rare use of happiness shows that China was seen not just as a business partner but also as a source of hope and progress. Senegal saw China as a helpful and dependable friend, working alongside, not against, its ties with Europe.

In Niger (figure 76), people talked a lot about “military”, “security,” and “junta”, which shows the focus on politics and safety after the July 2023 coup that put the military in charge. In this situation, China’s partnership was judged by how well it could help with security and support a government cut off from Western help. Discussing the quality of the partnership reveals that people were closely examining China's reliability, as Niger sought to determine if China would remain committed for the long term. The focus on military ties shows that China was changing its role in the region’s security at a time when France and the European Union were leaving.

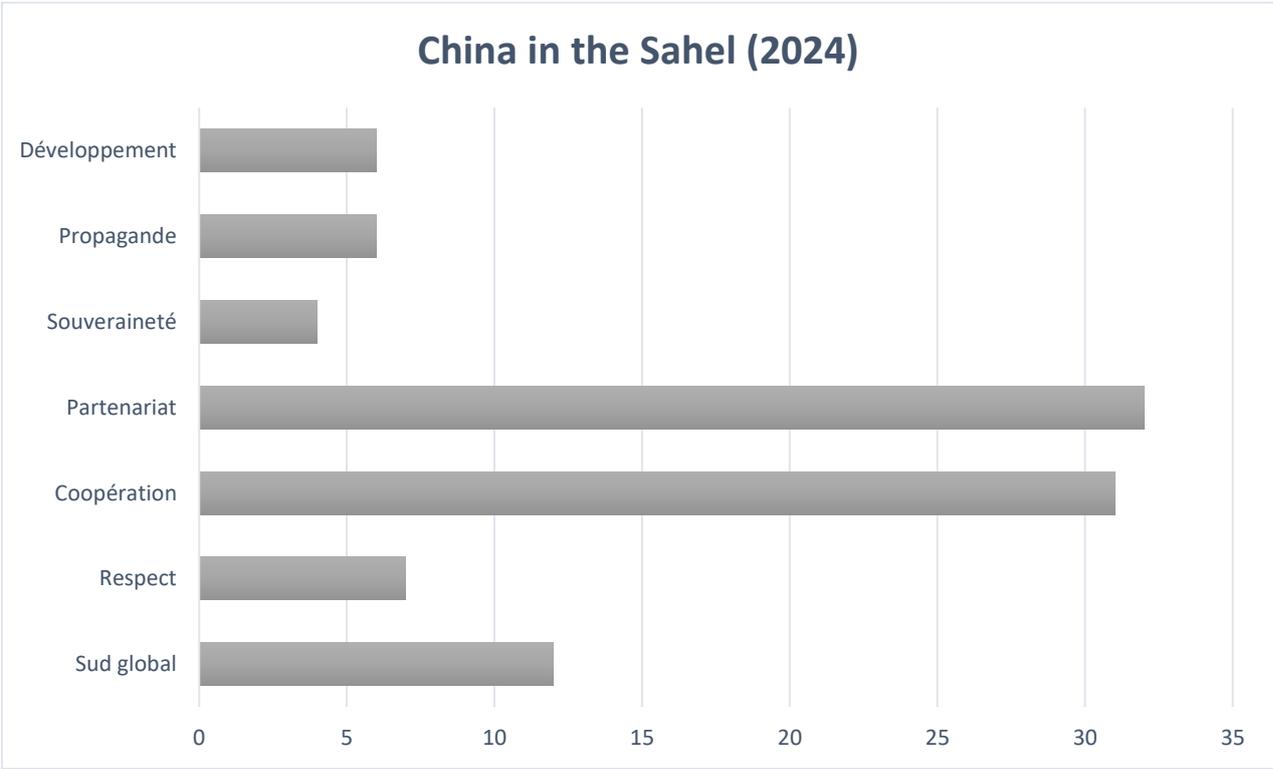
In Mali (figure 77), people talked about China with careful hope and practical thinking. The word “France” came up the most, showing that China was often compared to France, whose influence was getting weaker. Words like “new partner,” “advantages,” and “opportunities” show that China was seen as a real option instead of Western countries, while words like prudence, vigilance, and inconveniences show that people had some doubts. China was not turned away, but people thought carefully about possible problems, like becoming too dependent or things being unfair. The words used show that China was welcomed as an important new player, but people were still careful.

In Chad (figure 78), the most common words were “relations”, “sustainable development”, and “cooperation”, along with “mutual benefits” and “partnership”. People saw China as a long-term and helpful partner, especially in building the economy and infrastructure. Discussing sustainable development reveals that Chinese projects were clearly linked to long-term growth, rather than just short-term profits. Unlike other nearby countries, where some criticism was expressed, the view in Chad that year was overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and seeing China as a reliable partner who gives as much as it receives.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing China in the Sahel in 2024

In 2024, discussions about China in the Sahel frequently employed terms such as partnership, cooperation, and the Global South. These terms showed how China wanted to be seen as a key partner for development, infrastructure, and diplomacy. Words such as respect, sovereignty, and Global South also appeared frequently, underlining the difference China aimed to show compared to Western countries. China presented itself as a supportive, non-colonial power interested in a multipolar world. However, the use of words like propaganda pointed to some scepticism or at least awareness of China’s messaging, raising questions about whether its narrative matched its actions and how people in the Sahel truly felt.

Figure 15. Vocabulary describing China in the Sahel region (2024)



(Source: Author’s elaboration)

In Mauritania (figure 79), the words used focused on “partnership”, “working together on the economy and technology”, and “global development”, showing that China is seen as an important economic and technical partner. Words like “solidarity”, “mutual benefits”, and “shared visions” made it clear that both sides see the relationship as good for everyone. Mentioning the Global South showed that Mauritania is following the bigger ideas China promotes in meetings like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). In 2024,

Mauritania strengthened its ties with China in the fishing and mining sectors, where China's financial support and technology were welcomed, despite concerns about environmental impacts.

The words used in Burkina Faso (figure 80) focused on energy and a partnership where both sides benefit. The phrase "without conditions" reiterated China's policy of providing aid and loans without demanding political concessions, unlike Western countries. Words like "youth" and "friendship" showed the importance of social and cultural exchanges. Calling China a "strategic competitor" showed that people saw China as another option besides France and the European Union after Burkina Faso changed its foreign policy in 2022. In 2024, China increased its influence through building projects and health programs, while Burkina Faso saw China as a dependable partner as its relationships with Western countries got worse.

In Senegal (figure 81), the main words used were "cooperation", "partnership", and "respect", along with ideas about not interfering and letting countries make their own decisions. This shows that China is seen as a partner that does not get involved in Senegal's internal matters, which is different from the criticism often aimed at Western countries. The mention of Belt and Road shows that this project is very important in Senegal's work with China, especially for transport and digital projects. Words like Western narrative show that people in Senegal are thinking about the different stories told about China's role. In 2024, Senegal and China strengthened their collaboration on infrastructure projects and telecommunications, with China also providing support to Senegal's initiatives in the ECOWAS region.

In Niger (figure 82), the main words were "partnership", "cooperation", and "propaganda". The use of propaganda shows that while China was seen as an important partner, people were also questioning the way China talked about itself. At the same time, the focus on cooperation and partnership showed that China was still seen as a key friend, especially after the 2023 coup changed Niger's ties with Western countries. In 2024, with France and the EU less involved, China became a significant option, particularly in infrastructure projects, mining, and security. The mix of positive words about partnership and negative words like propaganda shows that people and the media in Niger had mixed feelings about China's growing role.

In Mali (Figure 83), the words used were especially varied, with key terms such as "cooperation", "partnership", "strategic alliance", and "mutual benefits". The repeated use of words like sovereignty, modernization, and shared vision showed that Mali and China were becoming closer as Mali looked for new friends after breaking with Western countries.

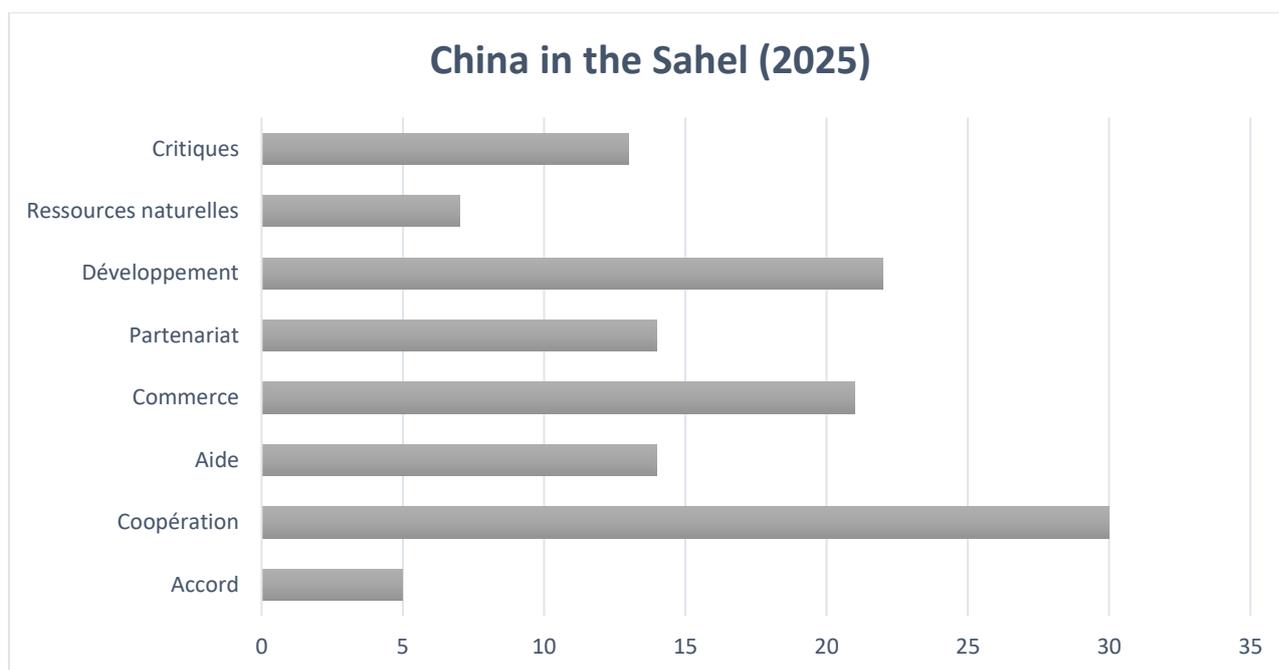
Discussing the Global South and South-South cooperation places Mali-China relations within a broader global context, supporting the notion of a world with multiple powerful countries. At the same time, words like “raw materials” and “promises” showed that Mali depended on China for resources but was also careful about trusting China’s promises. In 2024, Mali’s government worked even more closely with China in mining, building projects, and military training, making China a key partner as Mali changed its place in the world.

In Chad (figure 84), the main words used were “financing”, “strategic partnership”, and “development”. This indicates that China is playing a larger role in financing construction projects and oil operations. Words like “strengthening relations” and “agreement” showed that the two countries were becoming closer, with Chad saying that China is a more dependable partner than Western countries, which are less involved. The word promising showed hope for working together in the future. In 2024, China increased its role in Chad’s oil and building projects, and also gave development loans that were seen as smart investments, not loans with political strings attached.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing China in the Sahel in 2025

In 2025, China’s relationship with the Sahelian population showed both continuity and increased scrutiny. Diplomatic discussions still focused on cooperation, development, and partnership, but more critical views also appeared, highlighting issues like critiques and natural resources. China worked to strengthen its influence through trade, infrastructure, and resource extraction deals. At the same time, Sahelian states started raising concerns about dependency and the conditions of these agreements, showing a more complex and sometimes uncertain attitude toward China’s involvement.

Figure 16. Vocabulary describing China in the Sahel region (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In Mauritania (Figure 85), the main words used were “agreement” and “cooperation,” indicating that official ties between China and Mauritania strengthened in 2025. That year, deals about building projects and fishing were strengthened, which are areas where China had been interested for a long time. Working together was also part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative, with Mauritania still getting Chinese loans and building deals. Unlike other countries in the region, Mauritania’s talk in 2025 stayed practical and focused on deals between the two countries, with little sign of more criticism.

The Burkinabe discussion (figure 86) focused on “cooperation”, “development”, and “trade”, showing that China became more important for Burkina Faso’s economy after the break with France. The words “aid” and “donations” were also commonly used, indicating that Chinese assistance was viewed as a means of bringing stability during Burkina Faso’s political turmoil under military rule. Words like “benefits” and “opportunity” showed the good side of working with China, as Ouagadougou looked for new partners outside its usual ones. In 2025, China became a major economic and important partner, giving other options besides Western money and staying out of Burkina Faso’s internal politics.

The Senegalese discussion (figure 87) was the most critical in 2025, often mentioning “natural resources”, “illegal practices”, and “environmental consequences”, along with criticism and dependence. While “cooperation”, “trade”, and “partnership” were still important, people were

also worried about whether Chinese investments would last, especially in fishing and mining. Discussions about international law and non-interference revealed that Senegal's media and leaders were participating in global debates about whether China adheres to global rules. In this way, 2025 seemed to be a turning point in how Senegal saw China: from a mostly positive partner to one that was both needed and causing problems.

The discussion in Niger (figure 88) focused on “development”, “modernization”, and “partnership”, showing China as a steady supporter of the new military government. The words “success” and “support” helped show the partnership as a good one, especially when Western help was being pulled back after the military took over. Discussing the Global South places Niger's collaboration with China in a broader context, where China has emerged as a leader for countries that were once colonies. In 2025, Niger depended a lot on China for building projects, mining, and military help, which made Niger rely more on China and also made China's position in the region stronger.

In Mali (figure 89), the main words were “cooperation”, “economy”, and “support”, showing that China became an important new partner after Mali's final split with France. Other words like commitments, relations, and friendship suggested a message of reassurance and ongoing ties, showing China's long-term involvement. This matched what was happening in 2025, as China put more money into building projects and energy, while showing itself as a partner that did not interfere and respected Mali's independence. The focus on the economy showed how China was filling the gap left by Western countries.

Chad's discussion (figure 89) was mostly about one word: “solidarity”. This word highlighted the weak but growing connection between N'Djamena and Beijing, based on mutual assistance rather than large-scale economic or security deals. In 2025, Chad's political problems and talks with nearby countries made it harder to build stronger ties with China than with other countries in the region. Still, talking about solidarity showed that China was getting ready to be a partner, focusing on friendly intentions while keeping small but important relations.

3.4. Russia: Security Partnerships, Soft Power, and Strategic Expansion

The lexical analysis conducted between 2022 and 2025 regarding Russia shows the dominance of the words "Cooperation" (99), "Partnership" (69), "Military" (51), "Wagner" (37),

"Symbolic" (34), "Security" (26), "Economy" (24), "Relations" (24), "Terrorism" (21), and "West" (17).

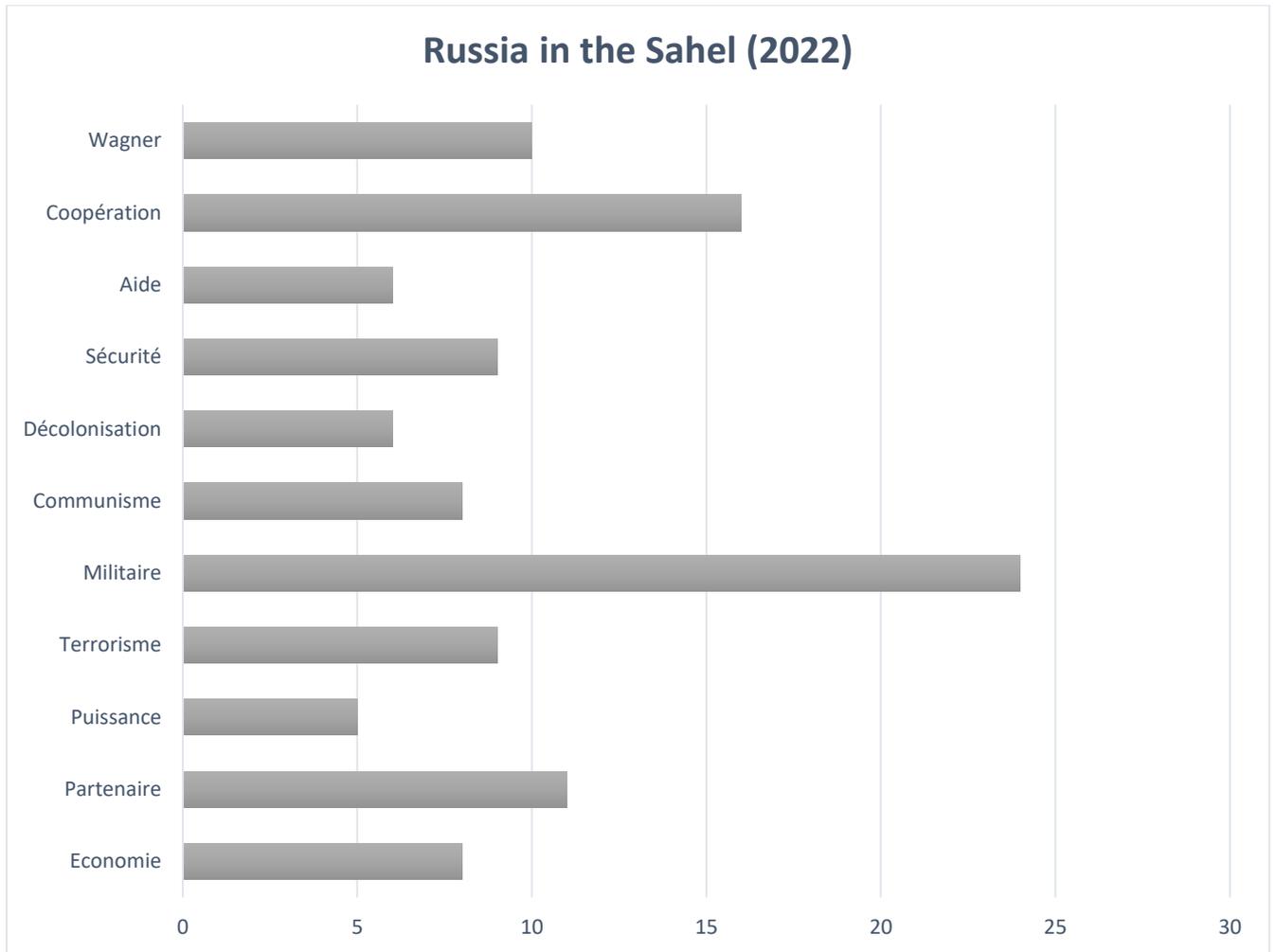
These findings reveal two aspects of Russia's presence in the Sahel. On the one hand, the emphasis on words like "Cooperation," "Partnership," and "Security" helped Moscow appear as a credible alternative to former colonial powers. On the other hand, the frequent mention of "Wagner" points to a more complex and sometimes controversial influence. The repeated use of "Military" and "Terrorism" suggests Russia was seen mainly as a security actor, while "Economy" and "Relations" were less prominent, indicating that Moscow's involvement was more about politics and symbolism than development. The terms "West" and "Symbolic" also indicate that Russia's role was not just about actions, but about shaping the narrative, positioning itself against Western, especially French, neocolonial practices, and as a champion of sovereignty and dignity in the region.

From 2022 to 2025, the focus shifted from Wagner's activities to a more formal partnership between states. This change was marked by the creation of the Africa Corps and Russia's closer ties with the Alliance of Sahel States. Russia's image blended a strong symbolic appeal, presenting itself as a defender of sovereignty against the West, with a practical security role. This helped legitimize its presence through both military actions and its messaging.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing Russia in the Sahel in 2022

A review of language used to describe Russia's role in the Sahel in 2022 highlights frequent mentions of "military," along with "cooperation," "partner," and "security." The term "Wagner" appears frequently, highlighting the visible impact of Russian private military companies in regional conflicts. Other words, such as "terrorism," "aid," "economy," and "decolonization," suggest that Russia presented itself as a security provider, economic player, and political alternative to Western countries. References to "communism" and the "Cold War" in local media suggest that Russia's actions were frequently discussed in the context of historical and ideological themes, linking current events to earlier periods.

Figure 17. Vocabulary describing Russia in the Sahel region (2022)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In Mauritania (Figure 91), the most common words in 2022 were “economy”, followed by “partner” and “power”. This indicates that Russia’s involvement in Mauritania in 2022 was primarily commercial, rather than military, with a focus on trade and fishing deals. Mauritania, usually careful in its foreign policy, did not welcome Russian troops like some of its neighbors did. Instead, news about Russia was linked to investment and the idea that Russia could balance out Western influence in the area.

In Burkina Faso (figure 92), the main words were “cooperation” and “military”, with many mentions of “terrorism”. This appears to be directly connected to the country’s worsening security situation following several coups and increased anger toward France. Russia was shown in local news as another partner who could help with security. The word “population” suggests that Burkinabe media often linked Russia’s involvement to support from ordinary people, showing Moscow as reacting to local anti-French feelings. Mentions of “agreement”

indicate the actual steps taken that year, as Russia collaborated more closely with the temporary leaders on security matters.

In Senegal (Figure 93), the main words were “communism”, followed by “influence”, “decolonization”, and “Cold War”. Unlike in Burkina Faso or Mali, Russia’s role in Senegal was not mainly military but more about spreading ideas. The media often talked about the Soviet Union’s past support for African freedom movements, showing Russia as a long-time friend in fights against colonialism. Words like “liberation” and “historic victories” supported this idea. In 2022, Senegal kept strong ties with Western countries, but its media pointed out Moscow’s position as another source of influence in Africa.

In Niger (figure 94), the main words were “cooperation”, “military”, and “security”, with mentions of “aid” and “military cooperation agreements”. These words show Niger’s mixed position: it was one of the last countries in the region still hosting French and Western troops, but also looking for new partnerships with Moscow. The mention of “departure of French forces” indicates that Russia was already linked in local news to the broader effort to expel France’s military. Mentions of “good relations” show that Niger’s leaders tried to keep a balance between Western partners and new ties with Russia.

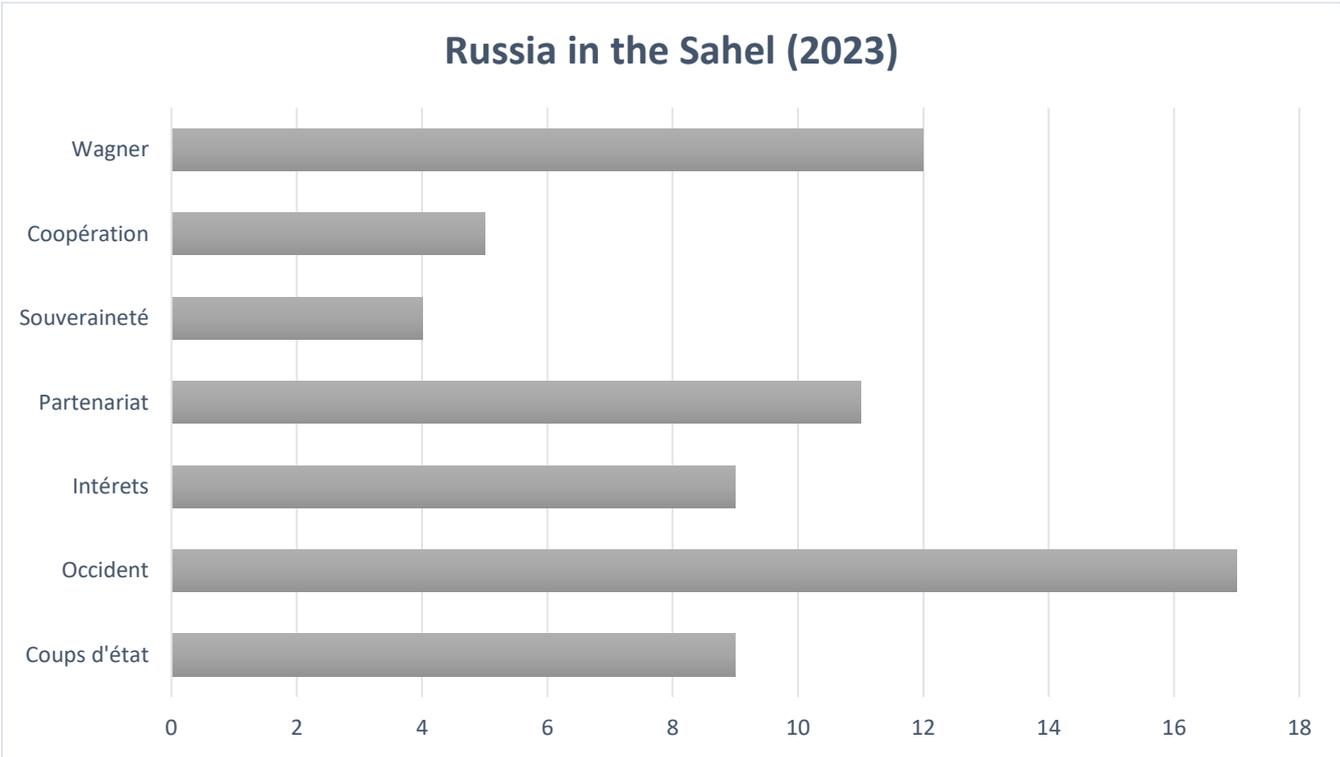
In Mali (figure 95), the main words were “cooperation” and “military”, followed by “security” and “efficiency”. Russia was called a “strong ally” compared to the “failure of Barkhane”. The discussion focused on the practical side of the partnership, with words like “promises” and “efficiency” showing Russia as more effective than Western forces. The mention of “Western pariah” shows how Malian leaders presented their support for Moscow as a way to stand up to Western pressure, strengthening the idea of independence.

In Chad (figure 96), the analysis shows a strong focus on “Wagner” and “private armies”. Words like “military rulers”, “jihadism”, and “mineral resources” show local worries about what Russia’s presence could mean for the region. While Chad did not officially have Wagner troops in 2022, the news coverage showed worry about Russia’s role in nearby countries. Words like “concern” and “particularly painful” suggest that the Chadian press often portrayed Russia’s involvement in mixed or negative terms, focusing on the risks of instability and the exploitation of resources rather than partnership.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing Russia in the Sahel in 2023

A review of keywords in 2023 shows that terms like "West," "Wagner," "Partnership," "Interests," and "Coups d'État" were especially common. This points to Russia's image in the Sahel being shaped by its rivalry with Western countries, its partnerships with local governments, and the involvement of private military groups. The frequent mention of "Sovereignty" highlights how Russia emphasized the importance of defending its independence from Western influence, while "Cooperation" indicates that partnership remained a central theme. In Sahelian media, Russia appeared as a security provider, a political supporter of new governments, and a counterbalance to the West.

Figure 18. Vocabulary describing Russia in the Sahel region (2023)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In Mauritania (figure 97), the most important words were “Coups d'État”, “Power”, “Colonization”, “Security”, and “Domination”. The mention of “Coups d'État” shows that Mauritanian media linked Russian influence to the recent military takeovers in nearby countries. The use of “Colonization” and “Domination” shows worries that Russia might create unequal relationships similar to those from colonial times. “Power” demonstrates that Russia is viewed as a major player whose influence cannot be ignored, while “Diplomatic relations” and

“Security” highlight the practical need to engage with Moscow, as the security crisis in the Sahel has intensified.

In Burkina Faso (figure 98), the discourse was dominated by “West”, “Interests”, and “Win-win partnership”. These terms illustrate both the confrontation with Western powers and the attempt to frame relations with Russia as more balanced and beneficial. The frequent use of “Recovered freedom” and “New master” suggests ambivalence: Russia was seen both as liberating the country from Western tutelage and as assuming a dominant position of its own. The presence of “Success” in the press indicates that Burkinabè authorities emphasized early gains from cooperation with Moscow, especially after distancing themselves from France.

In Senegal (Figure 99), the most common word was “West”, indicating that Russia’s role was often discussed in comparison to Western influence. The use of “Human rights violations” and “Devastating” shows that the Senegalese media were critical and pointed out the negative effects of Russian involvement, especially through Wagner. At the same time, the use of “Cooperation” and “Bilateral relations” shows that Moscow’s efforts to promote itself were noticed. The words “Historical memory” and “Resistance” show that Senegalese discussions still connected Russia to stories of fighting against colonialism, even while worrying about “Sovereignty” and “Pressures”.

In Niger (figure 100), the main words were “ECOWAS”, “Partnership”, “Friendly”, and “African youth”. The mention of “ECOWAS” shows that Niger’s political crisis after the July coup and the sanctions that followed were the main topics. Russia was seen as a “Friendly” partner, with a focus on young people supporting closer ties with Moscow. However, the word “Beggar” shows criticism of Niger’s new reliance on outside allies.

In Mali (figure 101), the words used showed that Moscow had become Bamako’s main partner. The key words were “African policy”, “Reliable partner”, “Attractive alternative”, and “Cooperation”. These words show that Russia is seen as a trustworthy ally and a real alternative to Western countries, especially France, after Operation Barkhane failed. The focus on “African policy” shows that Malian leaders presented Russia’s involvement as part of a bigger plan for Africa, while “Attractive alternative” shows that Russian messages matched anti-Western feelings.

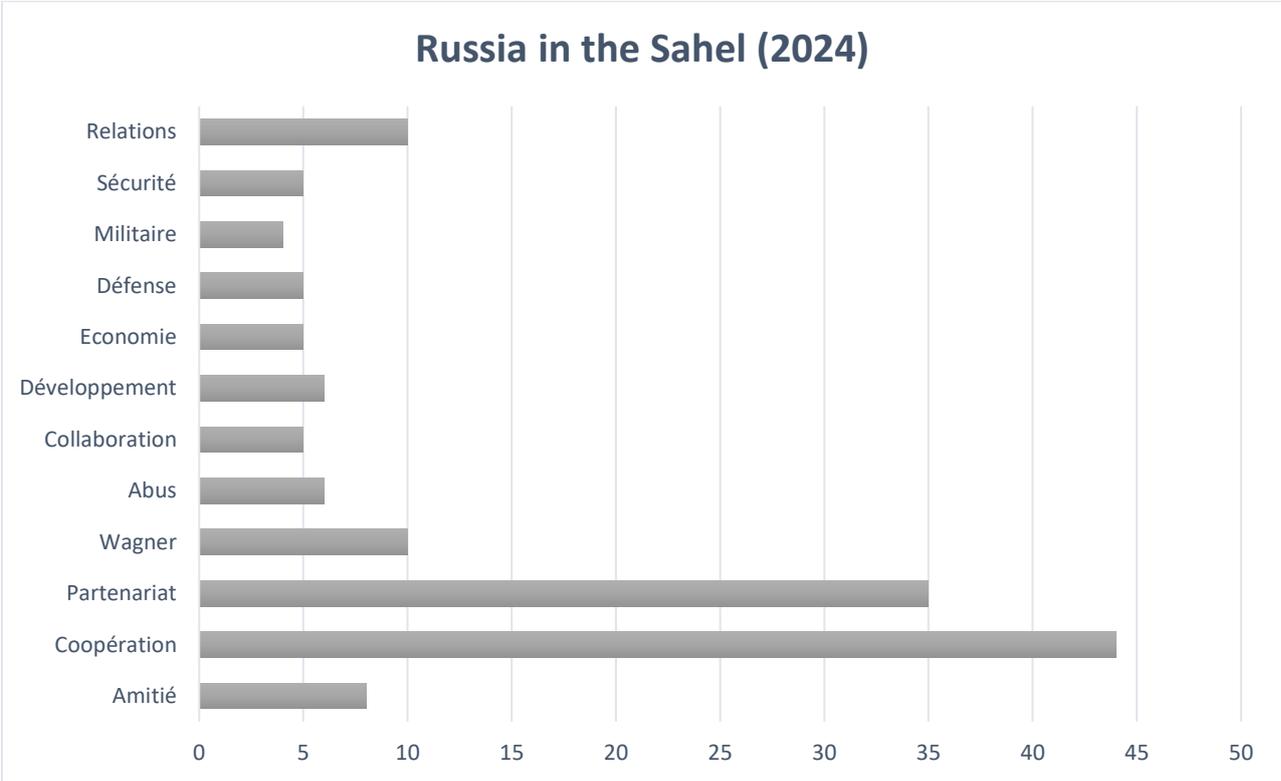
In Chad (figure 102), the main words were “Wagner”, “Burkina Faso”, “Mercenaries”, “Defense”, and “Partners”. The repeated use of “Wagner” and “Mercenaries” shows that Russia’s presence was mostly seen through its use of private soldiers, which raised worries

about instability. The mention of “Burkina Faso” indicates that events in the region were perceived as impacting Chad’s path, while “Defence” and “Partners” suggest discussions about whether Chad should increase or resist Russian military influence.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing Russia in the Sahel in 2024

In 2024, the relationship between Russia and the Sahel was even more deeply marked by a strong emphasis on “Cooperation,” “Partnership,” and “Friendship,” which showed Russia’s attempt to frame its engagement as collaborative and respectful of local sovereignty. At the same time, references to “Wagner,” “Military,” and “Defence” show that Russia’s security presence remained visible, even as official discourse sought to highlight economic and diplomatic collaboration. Criticism was a little present as well, with words such as “Abuse” emerging in the press, particularly in relation to Wagner’s controversial role. Overall, 2024 appears to be a year of both consolidation of Russian influence and some exposure of its contradictions in the region, situated amid deteriorating relations with Western powers and increasing competition with China’s more development-focused approach.

Figure 19. Vocabulary describing Russia in the Sahel region (2024)



(Source: Author’s elaboration)

In Mauritania (figure 103), the words “Cooperation,” “Friendship,” and “Rapprochement” point to a story of improving diplomatic ties. The mention of “New major actor” shows that Russia is trying to be seen as an important new player in Mauritania’s foreign relations, stepping in where France and the EU have pulled back. But the use of “Balance of power” also shows that the relationship was not completely equal, with Russia aiming to be a big power and Mauritania looking for more partners. Mauritania maintained steady relationships with Western countries in 2024, so Russia’s influence was more about appearances than actual changes, especially when compared to China’s larger investments.

In Burkina Faso (figure 104), words like “Partnership,” “Friendship,” and “Cooperation” show closer ties after the country moved away from France. The use of “Without conditions” and “Mutual benefits” shows that Russia described its involvement as different from the demands often made by Western countries. At the same time, “Strategic competitor” points to the competition between big powers trying to increase their influence, especially since Western countries have mostly lost ground. Burkina Faso became one of the Sahel countries most open to Russia’s message of support and independence in 2024.

In Senegal (figure 105), the situation is more mixed. Words like “Partner,” “Trade links,” and “Cooperation” show official talk about working together, but terms like “False demonstrations,” “Spreading false news,” “Atrocity,” and “Abuse against civilians” show doubts about Russia’s actions. The frequent mention of “Wagner” shows that Russian military groups were very visible, seen both as providing security and causing violence. The use of “Honeymoon” and “Strengthen relations” suggests that the relationship was being talked up, but at the same time, talk about human rights abuses hurt the image Russia wanted. Meanwhile, China remained the main player in Senegal through business projects, which was different from Russia’s focus on security.

In Niger (Figure 106), words like “Cooperation,” “Independence,” and “Sovereignty” indicate that Russia was perceived as a partner helping the country maintain its political independence, particularly after issues arose with ECOWAS in the region. The mention of “People” and “Development of relations” shows that local media said Russia cared about what the country wanted, while “Countering neocolonial influence” made it clear that Russia was shown as an alternative to France and Western control.

In Mali (figure 107), words like “Independence,” “Cooperation,” and “Partner” show that Russia became Bamako’s main ally. The repeated use of “Development,” “Mutual support,”

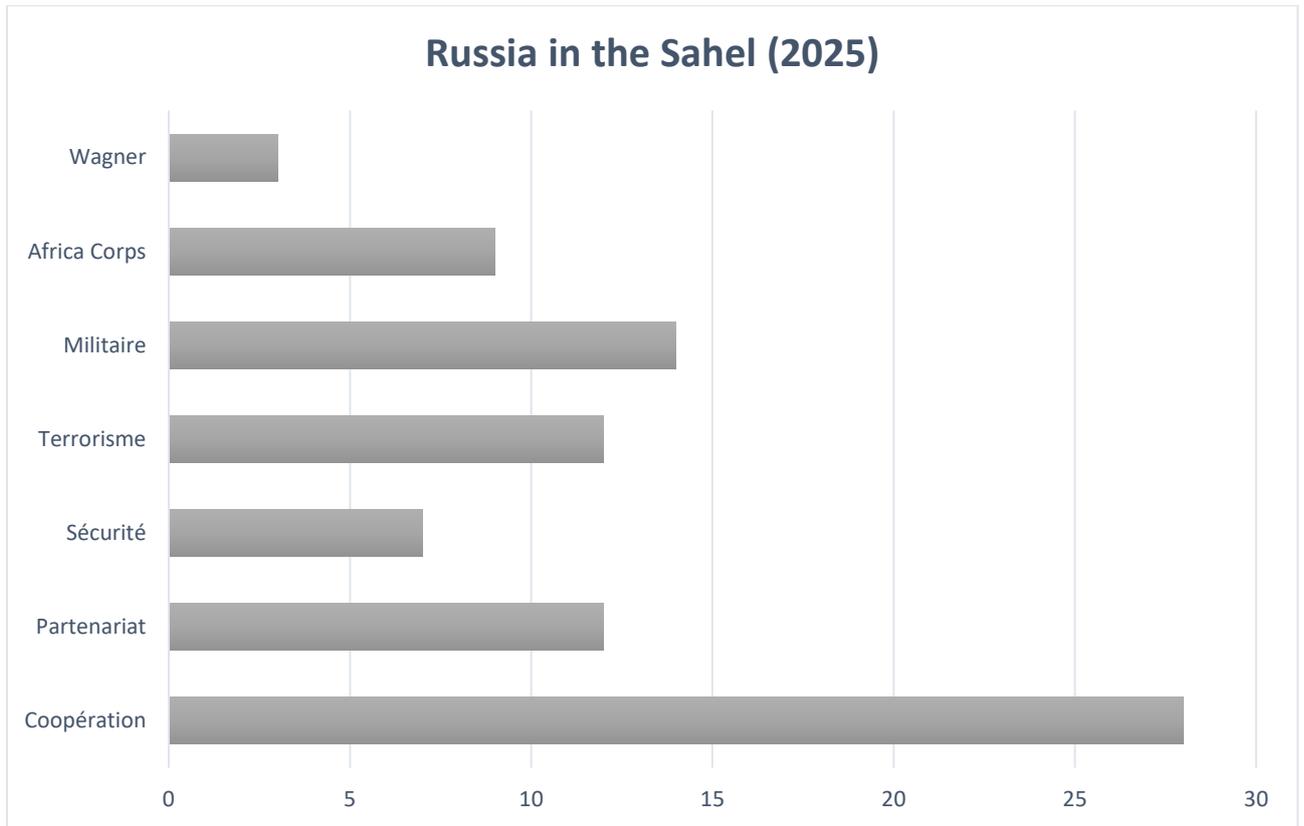
and “Solidarity” helped build the idea of a strong, lasting partnership. At the same time, phrases like “Western inaction,” “Former colonial power,” and “Western blindness” show that Mali’s media described the alliance with Russia as being against France and its Western partners. Words like “New partners,” “New dynamics,” and “Filling the void” show that Russia was seen as stepping in where France left. This story matched Mali’s position in 2024, where Russian assistance allowed the military government to maintain its stance against ECOWAS and Western sanctions.

In Chad (figure 108), the words used were more evenly split between working together and security issues. Words like “Relations,” “Cooperation,” and “Reliable partner” show that diplomacy was part of the conversation, but words like “Military,” “Defense,” and “Security” show that Russia’s role was mostly talked about in terms of security. The mention of “French decline” shows that Chad was slowly moving away from France, while “Dependence” and “Future” show mixed feelings about working with Russia. The repeated use of “Terrorism” and “Bilateralism” shows that the partnership was seen in practical terms, with Chad looking for help against jihadist threats while keeping its independence.

Analysis of the Vocabulary Describing Russia in the Sahel in 2025

By 2025, Russia’s role in the Sahel became more established and less tied to the Wagner Group, shifting instead to the new "Africa Corps." Key terms such as "Cooperation," "Military," "Partnership," and "Terrorism" demonstrate how Moscow sought to establish itself as a formal security partner and build legitimacy through agreements with states. The mention of the "Africa Corps" also suggests that Russia wanted to improve its image after Wagner’s controversial past, positioning itself as a stabilizing force while remaining active in military and counterterrorism efforts. In the Sahel, discussions highlight Russia’s dual role: mainly as a partner in security and sovereignty, but also, to a lesser extent, as a power whose growing influence raised some concerns about dependency or manipulation.

Figure 20. Vocabulary describing Russia in the Sahel region (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

In Mauritania (figure 109), the main words used were “Alliance”, “Partnership”, and “Growing influence”, along with more careful terms like “Fragility”, “Isolation”, and “Insecurity”. This mix shows that the country saw Moscow’s involvement in two ways: Russia was seen as a new friend, but Mauritania was also careful not to rely too much on it. Nouakchott has sought to maintain good relations with Russia, China, and Western countries, highlighting its position as a country situated between different regions. In 2025, Russia’s message of being an “Alliance” was popular at home, but the focus on “Fragility” and “Isolation” shows worries about the weakness of Mauritania’s security forces and doubts about whether Russia could give lasting help.

For Burkina Faso (figure 110), the main words were “Terrorism”, “Military”, “Africa Corps”, and “Cooperation”, along with “Security” and “Commitment”. This highlights the significance of the fight against armed groups, with Russia’s Africa Corps assuming the role of a primary partner for the temporary government in Ouagadougou, following Wagner's departure. Words like “Positive impact”, “Fruitful collaboration”, and “Friendship” show that Russian involvement was seen in a good light in official and media discussions, especially after French forces were forced to leave in earlier years. In 2025, Burkina Faso strengthened its position in

the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), building closer ties with Mali and Niger, where Russia emerged as the primary external security partner.

Senegal's discussion (figure 111) stands out with mentions of "Alliance of Sahel States", "Terrorism", "Trade relations", and "Support". Unlike Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Dakar was not part of the AES, but the frequent mention of "Alliance of Sahel States" shows how much the group influenced local talks. The use of "Cooperation" and "Support" shows Senegal's careful but practical way of working with Russia, mostly through official talks and small amounts of trade. Compared to China, which was still Senegal's main economic partner in 2025, Russia was not seen as a major economic player but more as a political contact in the wider Sahel security scene. The focus on "Terrorism" shows that Russian ideas also made their way into Senegal's discussions, though Dakar stayed closer to Western partners like France in fighting terrorism.

In Niger (figure 112), the main words are "Strategic partnership", "Cooperation", "Sovereignty", "Respect", and "Common values". The use of "Strategic partnership" indicates Russia's effort to formalize its alliance with Niamey, following the 2023 coup and Niger's departure from ECOWAS. "Sovereignty" and "Independence" demonstrate how Russia presented itself as an alternative to Western control, while "Respect" and "Common values" reinforced this idea. In 2025, Russia was seen in Niger mostly as a military and political partner, connected to the AES group. Russia's main message in Niger directly tied the country's independence to its partnership with Moscow, highlighting a connection between independence and security.

In Mali (figure 113), the main words are "Cooperation", "Military", "Partnership", and "Mutual respect", along with "Bilateralism", "Common values", and "Solid links". This highlights Moscow's pivotal role in Bamako's military and political landscape, where the Africa Corps has assumed the primary security partnership from Wagner. The use of both "Alliance" and "Peace" shows that Russia was seen not just as a fighting partner but also as someone who could bring stability. At the same time, the focus on "Common values" and "Bilateralism" shows an effort to present the relationship as equal, in contrast to Mali's break from France.

Chad (figure 114) shows a different set of main words, like "Intelligence", "Conspiracy", "Wagner", "Enemy", and "Foreign power". The focus on "Intelligence" and "Conspiracy" shows worries about secret Russian influence and spreading false information, while "Enemy" and "Foreign power" highlight distrust of Moscow's actions. The mention of "Wagner" shows

that, even though the Africa Corps officially replaced them, the group's reputation still affected how people saw things.

4. France's Decline and Multiple Contestation (Qualitative Analysis)

4.1. Military Rejection and the Collapse of Defence Partnerships

Qualitative discourse analysis of Sahelian media suggests that France's declining influence in the Sahel is largely due to widespread rejection of its military presence. The perceived ineffectiveness in countering terrorism, repeated allegations of misconduct, and violations of sovereignty have all contributed to the gradual weakening of French military presence in the region. Over time, this disillusionment led to abrupt ruptures, with several Sahelian governments denouncing bilateral defence and military agreements with France. These agreements were increasingly criticized as unequal and neocolonial.

4.1.1. Expulsion of French Forces from Sahel States

The end of Operation Serval as a turning point in Franco-Sahelian relations

In 2013, Senegalese media highlighted strong public support in Mali for the French military intervention during Operation Serval (2013-2014). French President François Hollande was often referred to as the "*sauveur du Mali*" ("savior of Mali").⁴⁸ Reports from Mali Actu described his warm welcome in Timbuktu, where thousands gathered after living under jihadist control. Some in the community asked the French army to remain longer to assist in removing the remaining fighters.⁴⁹ Even a year after Operation Serval began, French efforts continued to receive praise. Mali Actu referred to Hollande as the "*pompier d'Afrique*" ("the firefighter of

⁴⁸ Pressafrik. (2013, janvier 14). MALI : Revue de presse africaine : "Le sauveur du Mali s'appelle François Hollande".

⁴⁹ Mali Actu. (2013, février). Le président François Hollande accueilli avec ferveur à Tombouctou.

Africa”), asserting that the country had been “*sauvé de l’obscurantisme par l’intervention française*” (“saved from obscurantism by the French intervention”). Many believed the intervention was necessary, seeing outside help as vital for Africa’s progress.⁵⁰

In 2013, the Senegalese news outlet Pressafrik reported that the French military intervention ended a period of dangerous inaction, breaking nine months of administrative and territorial division. The newspaper reported that Operation Serval quickly achieved its objectives. Still, the article showed some early scepticism, saying Mali was now “*à la merci de son sauveur tricolore,*” (“at the mercy of its tricolour saviour”). Pressafrik also highlighted the unusual situation when the French army captured Kidal and prevented Malian forces from entering the town, which led to suspicions of a secret deal between France and the Tuaregs. The newspaper warned that “*il y a toujours une facture à payer quand quelqu’un fait gratuitement un travail,*” (“there is always a bill to pay even when someone does a job for free”). Besides any possible arrangement with the Tuaregs, the lack of major fighting during the campaign raised more concerns. Journalists suggested that many jihadist fighters were hiding in the caves of the Kidal region and expected a long conflict to follow Operation Serval.⁵¹

An ineffective intervention

This concern was later confirmed. Nearly ten years after Operation Barkhane began in 2014 as the successor to Serval, public opinion in the Sahel had changed significantly from the initial gratitude and support. The Burkinabè outlet Burkina 24 reported that “*l’opération s’est révélée extrêmement inefficace et n’a fait qu’aggraver la situation dans la région*” (“the operation was highly inefficient and only worsened the situation in the region”). The newspaper noted that before the French military arrived in 2013, terrorist activity was limited to northern Mali. By 2022, however, the number of attacks had increased tenfold and the threat had spread to neighbouring countries. This shift highlights the perceived failure of the intervention and growing disappointment among local communities.⁵² Mali Actu also reported rising disillusionment among Malians, accusing France of “*déni d’assistance*” (“denial of

⁵⁰ Mali Actu. (2014, novembre). François Hollande : Pompier d’Afrique.

⁵¹ Ndiaye, B. J. (2013, Janvier 31). Mali : À quoi sert Serval ? Pressafrik.

⁵² Dongobada, G. C. Les massacres de mars 2022 au Burkina Faso : Le rôle de la France, selon Grégoire Cyrille Dongobada. Burkina 24.

assistance”). This suggests a deep sense of betrayal among some people, who felt that France did not fulfil its role as a protector, which contrasts with earlier positive views.⁵³

L'événement Niger summarized French ten years of military presence: “*le terrorisme a augmenté et les groupes djihadistes ont gagné en puissance, cette expédition française a été un pur échec, avec 5000 hommes et du matériel militaire de pointe, le résultat aurait pu être moins triste*” (« terrorism increased and jihadist groups have gained strength, this french expedition has been a complete failure, with 5,000 troops and advanced military equipment, the outcome could have been less disheartening »). This reflexion summarizes the deep sense of frustration and disappointment of local perceptions of Operation Barkhane.⁵⁴

Between intervention and Imperialism, contested legitimacy

Beyond concerns about efficiency, accusations of disrespect for human rights and civilians have damaged the reputation of the French military. A major incident that weakened trust in the Sahel was the alleged violation of Malian airspace during the French troop withdrawal in 2022. Malian authorities accused France of spying and subversion, claiming a deliberate breach of their airspace.⁵⁵ The Malian transitional government also formally accused France at the United Nations of violating its airspace and, more seriously, of supplying weapons to terrorist groups. Paris denied these accusations, but the transitional government stated it would “*exercer son droit à se défendre si la France continuait à porter atteinte à la souveraineté et à la sécurité nationale de son pays*” (“that it would exercise its right to self-defence if France continued to undermine the sovereignty and national security of Mali”). This situation led to a sharp diplomatic escalation and a complete breakdown of trust between Bamako and its former military ally.⁵⁶

Even prior to the official rupture between Bamako and Paris, a series of incidents had already tarnished the image of the French army in the Sahel. As early as 2017, the Senegalese newspaper *Le Quotidien* reported about French troops supposedly responsible for the death of a child in

⁵³ Mali Actu. (2021, juin). Suspension des opérations militaires conjointes : la France entre cynisme et déni d'assistance.

⁵⁴ L'Événement Niger. (2022, août 18). Accusée par le Mali d'aider les terroristes, la France estime que c'est « insultant ».

⁵⁵ Journal du Tchad. (2022). Le Mali accuse la France d'« espionnage » et de « subversion »

⁵⁶ Niger Express. (2022, octobre 19). ONU Conseil Sécurité : le Mali renouvelle ses accusations contre la France

northern Mali. According to the outlet, “*les soldats français l’auraient ensuite enterré en tentant de cacher les faits,*” (“the soldiers reportedly buried the body to conceal the incident”). In response, the French Ministry of Defence declared that the individual was an underage combatant affiliated with a terrorist armed group.⁵⁷ Moreover, this 2017 incident was not an isolated incident. In 2021, the French military faced accusations of harming civilians, this time in Tera, Niger. Niger Express stated : “*le désamour entre l’armée française et les populations du Sahel risque de prendre de l’ampleur*” (« the estrangement between the French military and Sahelian populations risks deepening »). The French media France 24 even gave credence to these accusations, blaming French troops of Barkhane, which was not denied by the French army.⁵⁸

France’s military withdrawal

The lack of efficiency of French military and the lack of trust with the population and Sahelian governments led to a military rejection and ultimately to the departure of French troops. The phenomenon started in Mali between February and August 2022, then expended to Burkina Faso between January and February 2023, followed by Niger between September and December 2023, in Chad in January 2025 and is ongoing in the summer of 2025 in Senegal.

In a recent interview, Senegal’s President Bassirou Diomaye Faye said that having French troops in the country does not align with Senegal’s sovereignty. According to Niger Express, this was not framed as an “*acte de rupture*” (“a rupture”), but rather as a “*partenariat rénové*” (“a renovated partnership”). This change is part of a broader regional trend, where several countries have “*abruptement rompu leurs liens avec la France et se sont tournés vers la Russie*” (“abruptly severed ties with France and pivoted toward Russia”).⁵⁹ However, public opinion in the Senegalese population appears less diplomatic. In Pressafrik, writer Diagne Fodé Roland supported the removal of foreign troops from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, stating that these decisions contributed to the formation of the Confédération des États du Sahel. He also noted that Senegal and Chad have joined this trend by announcing the closure of French military bases, marking a significant break from a long history of outside influence.⁶⁰ While some elites

⁵⁷ Le Quotidien. (2017, janvier 14). Mali : Une possible bavure des militaires de la force française Barkhane.

⁵⁸ Niger Express. (2021, décembre 1). Civils tués à Téra : plainte contre la France et le Niger, annonce un comité.

⁵⁹ Niger Express. (2024, novembre 29). Le Sénégal demande à la France de fermer ses bases militaires

⁶⁰ Pressafrik, January 5, 2025, “Bases militaires françaises et étrangères : retrait concerté ou décision souveraine ?”

still supported French involvement in 2022, press analysis indicates that most people now want the military to withdraw. In Niger, political scientist Dr. Issoufou Yahaya has criticized the French presence, arguing that “*le destin du Niger est entre les mains des étrangers, en particulier des Français,*” (“Niger’s fate lies in the hands of foreigners, especially the French, due to a decade of political alignment with Western interests”). According to him, “*le Niger tout entier est devenu une base au service de la France et de sa volonté d’expansion hégémonique en Afrique* » (« Niger has become a base for France’s hegemonic ambitions in Africa »). He has also highlighted a growing gap between the political elite and a younger generation determined to resist foreign control. While leaders supported France in 2022, many young people in Niger openly call for its departure.⁶¹

In February 2022, Mali Actu portrayed the French military withdrawal from Mali, the first country rejecting French intervention, as forced and humiliating rather than a strategic redeployment. Describing France as “*défenestrée,*” (“thrown out of the window”), by both Malian authorities and a growing wave of public protest, framing the end of Operation Barkhane as the culmination of “*neuf ans de fiasco antidjihadiste*” (“nine years of antidjihadist fiasco”). More than not wanting French presence anymore, the article emphasized Mali’s sovereign right to diversify its partnerships, particularly with Russia, Turkey, and China, and applauded the strengthening of the Malian army, whose recent operational gains had reportedly been acknowledged by an independent UN expert. The journalist mocks France for being incapable to help, but not wanting anyone else to do so: “*moi je suis incapable de vous aider, mais je ne veux pas que quelqu’un d’autre vous aide à sécuriser vos populations et à restaurer votre souveraineté à l’intérieur de vos frontières* ” (“ I am unable to help you, but I don’t want someone else to help you secure your populations and restore your sovereignty within your borders”).⁶²

Alternatives to the French Military Presence

Finding new military partnerships was viewed by multiple Sahelian countries as a restoration of their sovereignty and an alternative to addressing security threats without the need for French intervention. According to Le Pays, the departure of French troops was welcomed

⁶¹ L’Événement Niger, December 19, 2022, “Le Niger tout entier est devenu une base au service de la France”

⁶² « (Mali Actu, February 2022, “Barkhane la France défenestrée”

in Burkina Faso by thousands of citizens. Demonstrators carried Burkinabè and Russian flags, singing slogans such as “*L’impérialisme à bas*” (“Down with imperialism”) and “*Non au diktat de Macron*” (“No to Macron’s diktat”), calling for a new strategic alliance with Russia.⁶³ In 2023, Senegalese President Macky Sall commented on the withdrawal of French troops from Burkina Faso, framing it not only as a sovereign decision but also as part of a broader geopolitical competition unfolding on the African continent. Sall added that such shifts in military alignments are better understood as “*une question de concurrence et de lutte d’influence entre différentes forces*” (“a matter of competition and struggle for influence among various powers”).⁶⁴

The withdrawal of French forces is paving the way for Chad to consider new military partnerships, such as with Russia, China, or Turkey. In June 2024, *Le Pays* reported that France was reducing its military presence across Central and West Africa, with Chad being the most notable case. For the Macron government, leaving Chad is a setback, as it was France’s last permanent base in the Sahel after being forced out of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Political analyst Abderrahmane Conte notes that this change comes as Chad and Russia are growing closer.⁶⁵ In Chad, many see the planned departure of French troops in January 2025 as both the end of a chapter and a move toward greater national independence. Still, as *Le Pays* points out, this raises concerns about how Chad will address its security needs and fill the gap left by France. The article highlights Chad’s challenging position: it is one of Africa’s largest countries and is surrounded by unstable neighbours. Any new military partnership will need to take these realities into consideration. The article also suggests that future agreements will likely be different from the old French model established after independence.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Le Pays*, January 30, 2023, “Retrait de la France au Burkina : Des burkinabè apportent leur soutien à la transition”

⁶⁴ *Le Pays*, February 3, 2023, “Macky Sall sur le retrait des troupes françaises au Burkina”

⁶⁵ *Le Pays*, June 29, 2024, “La France continuera à réduire le nombre de ses soldats en Afrique centrale et occidentale ?”

⁶⁶ *Le Pays*, February 17, 2025, “Tchad : après la France, la Turquie ?”

4.1.2. Contesting Defence Agreements

Defence Agreements Regarded as Necessary in the Early Phase

The withdrawal of French troops explained previously started with the condemnation of the bilateral defence agreements between Sahelian countries and France. However, these agreements, as well as French military intervention, were considered necessary in its early stage.

In July 2014, Mali Actu published an article in favour of the signing of the Franco-Malian defence agreement, presenting it as both necessary and inevitable in the context of growing insecurity. While acknowledging opposition from certain radical factions, particularly the MP22 movement, the article emphasized that a large majority of civil society organizations and political parties, including the opposition, supported the accord. The journalist argued that the Malian public was increasingly aware that “*il n’y a pas d’autre alternative à la stabilité et à la sécurité*” (“there is no other alternative to stability and security”), particularly in the north of the country. The article dismissed revolutionary critiques as “*jeu de la contradiction devenue stérile*” (“game of the contradiction having become sterile”), suggesting that rhetorical opposition should agree with the practical need for cooperation with France. The defence agreement, it claimed, was “*indispensable et même incontournable*” (“not only necessary but unavoidable”), for restoring state authority, protecting civilians, and ultimately paving the way toward lasting peace.⁶⁷

Understanding the Defence Agreements from the Sahelian Point of View

A Niger Express article from February 2022 discusses how Franco-African defence agreements differ from typical military cooperation, focusing more on politics and giving France significant operational freedom. For example, in Mali, France had “*pleine liberté de circulation*” (“full freedom of movement”) for its personnel and aircraft, as outlined in the “*Statut de la force Serval.*” By late 2021, relations between Mali and France had become strained. Malian officials have called for changes to the 2013 agreements, arguing that certain

⁶⁷ (Mali Actu, July 2014, “Accord de défense Mali–France : Le jeu et les enjeux”).

terms undermine Mali's control over its airspace and national sovereignty. Analysts like Thomas Borrel and Roland Marchal also criticized these agreements for being unclear and hard to access, especially regarding intervention rules and transparency in countries such as Chad.⁶⁸

Journal du Tchad reports that several agreements shaped the relationship between France and African countries, especially in Mali. In May 2022, the Malian government ended three military agreements that had defined Franco-Malian defence cooperation since 2013. The first was a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which set the terms for French troop deployment under Operation Serval, launched at Mali's request to push back jihadists in the north, and later continued as Operation Barkhane. The second agreement, signed in 2014, focused on military support, including training and equipment. The third, from 2020, expanded the SOFA to include foreign troops involved in Takuba, a European special forces initiative led by France. Although these agreements were initially seen as vital for Mali's security, the transitional government later found them incompatible with national sovereignty, pointing to political imbalances and repeated violations of Malian airspace by French forces. The 2022 decision marked a clear end to the military partnership between France and Mali.⁶⁹

Withdrawal from Defence Agreements

A detailed report from Journal du Tchad in late 2024 calls the year a turning point for France's role in Africa, as several former colonies in the Sahel expelled French troops. The process began in Mali in February 2022, when the transitional government ordered French forces to leave. Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Senegal soon took similar actions, ending military cooperation and emphasizing their independence. The article notes that these moves left France "*pratiquement sans présence militaire en Afrique*" ("with no military presence left on the continent").⁷⁰ By 2023, both Burkina Faso and Niger had completed the withdrawal of French troops. Chad and Senegal soon followed, with Chad requesting that French forces leave by January 2025 and Senegal asking for all French bases to be closed. For Traoré, symbolic gesture was insufficient: "*Si vous voulez une rupture avec ces forces impérialistes, c'est simple,*

⁶⁸ Niger Express, February 14, 2022, "France-Afrique : en quoi consistent les accords de défense ?"

⁶⁹ Journal du Tchad, "Quels sont ces accords militaires avec la France dénoncés par Bamako ?"

⁷⁰ Journal du Tchad, December 2024, "La France tente désespérément de trouver un moyen de rester en Afrique après son expulsion généralisée du Sahel"

on dénonce les accords” (“true rupture requires the formal denunciation of defence agreements, not just the evacuation of bases).”⁷¹

Burkina Faso offers a clear example of how rising tensions can lead to the end of defence agreements. In January 2023, the country officially ended the agreement that allowed French forces to operate on its territory. This decision led to the withdrawal of French special forces and deepened the diplomatic divide between the two nations. Earlier, signs of strain had appeared, including the expulsion of the French ambassador and suspicions of French espionage against the Burkinabè army. Public opinion also shifted, with more people accusing France of secretly supporting armed groups and calling for closer ties with Russia.⁷² The transitional government then ended the 1961 military assistance agreement, which had been a key link between the countries since independence. This move not only ended France’s military presence in Burkina Faso but also symbolized a break from a postcolonial system that many had criticized for perpetuating dependency.⁷³

Contesting Defence Agreements: Obsolescence, Neocolonial Legacy, and Sovereignty Concerns

Some saw Paris's efforts to present the Sahelian withdrawal from defence agreements as strategic repositioning, as an attempt to hide the fact that former partner states were clearly rejecting its role. There were several reasons for rejecting these agreements.

First, as Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno stated, “*Cet accord a été conclu à une autre époque [...] il est obsolète*” (“the defence agreement was a product of another era and is no longer relevant today”).⁷⁴ According to Déby, while the military cooperation agreement with France had been valuable in the past, it had become outdated in the face of contemporary security challenges and shifting geopolitical realities. He pointed out that the agreement no longer met Chad’s defence needs nor its strategic priorities, highlighting that the French military presence was not based on reciprocal terms, an essential principle in international relations.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Cridem, January 13, 2025, “Emmanuel Macron a insulté tous les Africains”

⁷² Journal du Tchad, “Départ des forces françaises du Burkina : Macron veut des ‘clarifications’ de Traoré”

⁷³ Le Pays, March 2, 2023, “France – Burkina : Les autorités de la transition dénoncent l’accord militaire de 1961”

⁷⁴ Journal du Tchad, December 2024, “La France tente désespérément de trouver un moyen de rester en Afrique après son expulsion généralisée du Sahel »

⁷⁵ Journal du Tchad, “Mahamat Idriss Déby justifie la rupture de la coopération militaire entre le Tchad et la France”

The defence agreements were also seen as a legacy of colonialism. In 2014, Mali Actu published a critical article that described the Franco-Malian agreements as tools of neocolonial control. The outlet described the bilateral framework as a “*traité néo-colonial de défense et de coopération militaire*” (“a neocolonial defence and military cooperation treaty”). It denounced the signing of what it called “*un nouveau pacte colonial qui place définitivement le Mali sous sa tutelle*” (“a new colonial pact that places Mali permanently under French tutelage”). The article used strong language to express mistrust among some Malians, who saw France’s military presence as a way to maintain dependency and limit Mali’s sovereignty.⁷⁶ Over the next decade, this sentiment spread throughout the Sahel. By November 2024, Pressafrik noted that France seemed to be losing influence in Africa, especially in the Sahel. There was growing pressure in the region to end postcolonial military arrangements, which many viewed as of “*vestiges de la période coloniale*” (“remnants of colonial rule”), of an unequal relationship between African countries and France, obstructing genuine solidarity between African peoples and France.⁷⁷

Thirdly, the withdrawal from defence agreements was seen by Sahelian countries as a means of recovering their sovereignty. On November 29, 2024, L’Événement Niger reported that Chad had officially broken its defence agreement with France, joining Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in a growing wave of regional governments rejecting their former colonial power. The junta in Chad emphasized that it was time for the country to “*redéfinir ses partenariats stratégiques en fonction de ses intérêts nationaux*” (“redefine its strategic partnerships based on its national interests”).⁷⁸ Déby framed sovereignty not only as the power of the state or government, but as a collective responsibility, calling on citizens, particularly the youth, to actively engage in defending the nation's future.⁷⁹ At the same time, Senegal, a key partner in West Africa’s security, echoed these sentiments by declaring that France would soon be required to close its military bases in Senegal, as President Bassirou Diomaye Faye affirmed, “*la souveraineté ne s’accommode pas de la présence de bases militaires*” (“sovereignty cannot accommodate the presence of military bases”).⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Mali Actu, August 2014, “La France a mis au point un ‘plan d’occupation du Mali’

⁷⁷ Pressafrik, November 29, 2024, “Présence militaire en Afrique : la France, est-elle en train de perdre son pré-carré ?”

⁷⁸ L’Événement Niger, November 29, 2024, “Le Tchad rompt son accord de défense avec la France”

⁷⁹ Le Faso, January 31, 2025, “Tchad : ‘Nous ne rompons pas avec la France mais nous mettons terme à la coopération militaire’”

⁸⁰ L’Événement Niger, November 29, 2024, “Le Tchad rompt son accord de défense avec la France”

Le Pays from Chad contextualizes these moves within a broader regional strategy that began in 2022, when Sahelian nations chose to pursue greater regional unity, focusing on peace, security, anti-terrorism efforts, economic cooperation, and the establishment of joint armed forces. This led to the formation of the Alliance des États du Sahel in September 2023, offering a promising alternative to the outdated Franco-Sahelian military relationship. The newspaper highlights that these policies signal not only the decline of France's influence in the region but also the emergence of a new, durable regional union, united by shared political, economic, and security interests, geographic proximity, and mutual respect for sovereignty.⁸¹

4.2. Reject of Neocolonial Practices

The qualitative analysis of Sahelian media reveals that France's declining influence in the region extends beyond its military withdrawal or the termination of defence agreements. The entire neocolonial system is being questioned. Critics point to France's economic dominance, claims of resource exploitation, and the ongoing presence of the Françafrique network. Cultural issues, such as the use of the Francophonie, are also criticized. As a result, symbols associated with the former colonial power are often viewed with suspicion or rejected totally.

4.2.1. Economic Domination and Resource Exploitation Accusations

Economic Domination as a Continuation of Colonial Power Structures

In March 2025, Le Faso published an article urging the Alliance des États du Sahel, which includes Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, to seek reparations from France for the lasting effects of colonial exploitation. The article points out the deep wounds left by French colonialism, especially in Burkina Faso, where it allegedly brought poverty and injustice instead of progress. It also notes that French companies, such as Orano, have continued to extract

⁸¹ Tchad le pays, January 24, 2025, "Adieu la France-Afrique : effet domino dans la région du Sahel"

resources like gold, gas, and uranium from Sahelian countries after independence, keeping these nations economically dependent. According to the journalist, the AES's demand for reparations could be an important step in the ongoing effort for African sovereignty and in addressing the persistent impacts of colonialism on the region's economy and politics.⁸²

Furthermore, an article published by Journal du Tchad highlights how *Françafrique*, as a system of continued French influence in the Sahel and West Africa, was established as a tool of neocolonial control. After granting formal independence to African countries, France maintained its dominance by creating a network of political and economic ties. Under the pretext of protecting French interests, this system kept African nations dependent on France, dictating their foreign policies and limiting their sovereignty in international forums.⁸³

The Strategic Use of Military to Safeguard Economic Assets

In addition to its alleged neocolonial economic domination, France is also accused of using its military interventions to preserve this control and make a profit. In June 2019, Niger Express published a speech from Burkina Faso's Minister of Defence, who argued that France had no interest in eliminating terrorism in the Sahel. He explained that doing so would compromise France's military contracts, reduce arms sales to Africa, and leave the French military without work. He further claimed that the ongoing conflicts were artificially maintained for these reasons. According to the minister, France's unwillingness to end terrorism in West Africa was based on the fear that, once driven out, terrorists would migrate directly to Europe. Moreover, he noted that without ongoing conflict, France would no longer be able to exploit the region's natural resources or would face higher costs in doing so.⁸⁴

Media sources often mention Niger as a country where France, with support from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has sought to maintain its military presence to protect its economic interests and secure access to resources. According to Niger Express, tensions escalated following the coup in Niger, but the move garnered strong popular support.

⁸² Le Faso, March 23, 2025, "L'Alliance des États du Sahel doit exiger des réparations de la France"

⁸³ Journal du Tchad, "La France dédommage-t-elle la Centrafrique après des décennies de pillage de ses richesses?"

⁸⁴ Niger Express. (2019, June 25). Barkhane est une stratégie de la France pour vendre des armes au Sahel, selon le ministre burkinabé de la défense. Niger Express

Some African leaders, reportedly influenced by France, responded by threatening military action through ECOWAS. The article emphasized that Niger had not attacked any other country and argued that foreign intervention in its internal affairs was unjustified. It also noted that similar interventions have not happened elsewhere for the same reasons, referencing the idea of non-interference in domestic matters. The article highlighted the irony that, despite Niger being among the world's poorest countries, its natural resources continue to be exploited, particularly by France.⁸⁵

In Mali, where resentment and disappointment about French intervention run high, Mali Actu published an article in October 2016 that questioned France's reasons for maintaining its military presence. The article began by recalling the initial support for French troops in 2012, when they intervened to stop jihadists from advancing toward central Mali. It then raised concerns about the effectiveness of France's efforts, suggesting that France's priorities may have shifted to strategic interests, such as the north's agricultural, archaeological, and mining resources. The article also criticized France for not eliminating terrorism in the region, asking why, after years of daily encounters with terrorists, the French military had not ended the threat.⁸⁶

Alongside Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, Senegal has also accused France of prioritizing its own economic interests through its military presence in the region. In 2025, historian Diarra Diouf wrote in *Pressafrik Sénégal* that Senegal cannot yet be considered fully sovereign. She argues that, despite gaining independence in 1960, French neocolonial influence remains strong, especially through the ongoing presence of French military bases. According to Diouf, these bases primarily serve France's geopolitical interests rather than benefiting the Senegalese people, and reflect a security system from colonial times that maintains French influence in West Africa. She states that "*chaque jour de présence militaire étrangère est une entrave à notre dignité nationale*" ("every day of foreign military presence is an obstacle to our national dignity"). Diouf also highlights French dominance in Senegal's economy, where major French companies control key sectors such as water, electricity, telecommunications, and retail. She

⁸⁵ Niger Express, August 25, 2023, "Niger CEDEAO France: la CPI va sévir en cas d'intervention militaires"

⁸⁶ Mali Actu, October 2016, "Menace jihadiste au Mali : La France reste-t-elle réellement pour ça ?"

believes this situation creates a structural imbalance that leaves Senegal dependent and vulnerable.⁸⁷

The CFA Franc and the Persistence of Economic Neo-Colonialism

Diouf also supports creating a national currency that is independent from the CFA franc, which she calls a “*chaîne coloniale moderne*” (“modern colonial chain”). She explains “*Nous ne sommes pas anti-français, mais profondément panafricanistes. Nous voulons coopérer, mais d’égal à égal.*” (“We are not anti-French, but deeply Pan-African. We want to cooperate, but as equals”).⁸⁸ According to Sahelian media, the CFA franc is often seen as a tool of French neocolonialism. Le Quotidien Sénégal covered a protest by Pan-Africanists who want to abandon the CFA franc. These activists criticized President Macky Sall for defending the currency, which was established in 1945 for 15 African countries. One protester asked “*Est-il normal qu’on parle de souveraineté alors que notre monnaie est garantie par l’ancienne puissance coloniale ?*” (“Is it normal to talk about sovereignty when our currency is guaranteed by the former colonial power?”). The activist argued that France should stop its economic influence in Africa and that true independence is not possible as long as France is involved in economic decisions. He added that “*Les Français ont vicié les indépendances, mais ne peuvent pas vicier l’indépendance du 21ème siècle qui est la souveraineté monétaire*” (“the French corrupted independence, but they cannot corrupt the independence of the 21st century, which is monetary sovereignty”).⁸⁹

The rejection of the CFA Franc took on new meaning in 2016, when Niger Express discussed France’s economic and monetary influence in Africa. The newspaper examined France’s involvement in the Libyan conflict and the death of Muammar Gaddafi. According to the article, one major reason for the French intervention, led by then-President Nicolas Sarkozy, was the discovery of Gaddafi’s plan to launch a Pan-African currency. This initiative was perceived as

⁸⁷ Pressafrik Sénégal, April 14, 2025, “Le Sénégal est-il toujours entravé par le néocolonialisme français après 65 ans d’indépendance?”

⁸⁸ Pressafrik Sénégal, April 14, 2025, “Le Sénégal est-il toujours entravé par le néocolonialisme français après 65 ans d’indépendance?”

⁸⁹ Le Quotidien Sénégal, January 9, 2017, “MOBILISATION - Pour l’abandon du franc Cfa : Des panafricanistes déclenchent le mouvement”

a direct challenge to France's economic interests in Africa, particularly its control over monetary systems, such as the CFA franc.⁹⁰

4.2.2. Cultural Domination and the Francophonie as a Tool of Influence

Francophonie Considered a Tool of Neocolonial Domination

If French economic influence is considered by Sahelian population a neocolonial tool, Francophonie, the use of French language by former French colonies is equally very criticized in the media.

In February 2025, *Le Quotidien* published an editorial about Senegal's changing relationship with France and the frustrations that come from ongoing ties to its former colonial ruler. The article questions the use of French in international relations, noting that even minor language differences can lead to misunderstandings. It highlights the rising nationalist sentiments in Senegal, with a focus on the country's pride in its independence and its desire to move beyond colonial influence. The editorial notes that Senegal's connection to France is deeply rooted, but questions whether maintaining the CFA franc and a French military presence truly aligns with its independence. It also discusses how Senegal's identity as a Francophone country is shaped by its colonial history, including its name and political background. The article ends by saying, "*A soixante-cinq ans, on ne se refait pas*" ("at sixty-five, we cannot change"), showing how strong France's influence remains.⁹¹

Sahelian countries have recently taken steps against the Francophonie, viewing it as a tool of French influence. In December 2023, *L'Authentique* from Mauritania reported that Niger suspended all cooperation with the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF), citing concerns about French involvement. Niger argued that France was using the OIF to advance its interests in Africa and questioned why France remained active in the organization, given that it was not among the founding members. The Nigerien government stated that the suspension

⁹⁰ Niger Express, July 12, 2016, "Pourquoi la France a tué Kadhafi? La vraie cause enfin révélée"

⁹¹ *Le Quotidien*, February 13, 2025, "La France dégage et le français fout le camp"

aimed to challenge what it perceived as neocolonial practices and to promote the use of national languages, reflecting Pan-African ideals.⁹²

Later, in October 2024, L'Événement Niger reported that Niger too had officially distanced itself from its colonial past, removing French-inspired names from streets and monuments in the capital, Niamey. This action was part of a broader trend of rejecting the remains of *Françafrique*. The government emphasized that these names "*rappellent simplement les souffrances et les brimades endurées par notre peuple pendant l'épreuve de la colonisation*" ("simply remind us of the sufferings and humiliations endured by our people during the colonial ordeal").⁹³

The rejection of Francophonie Instruments of Influence

Along with concerns about the French language itself, Sahelian countries have also questioned the tools used to promote it, expressing doubts about the influence of French media. In an article for Cridem, Dr. Mohamed Ahmed Baba Ahmed Salihi criticizes modern colonialism, arguing that it now operates in more subtle ways. He believes these strategies shape perceptions and affects internal affairs in African nations. The article focuses on the Mauritanian media scene, which has drawn attention from some European outlets whose intentions are seen as questionable. The author specifically points to Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France 24, suggesting that "*Radio France Internationale (RFI) et France 24, sous couvert de liberté éditoriale, semblent une fois de plus jouer un rôle douteux dans l'escalade des tensions entre la Mauritanie et ses voisins.*" ("Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France 24, under the guise of editorial freedom, seem once again to play a dubious role in escalating tensions between Mauritania and its neighbours").⁹⁴

⁹² L'Authentique, December 27, 2023, "Espace Francophone : le Niger suspend « toute forme de coopération » avec l'OIF et accuse la France"

⁹³ L'Événement Niger, October 16, 2024, "Le Niger tourne le dos à la françafrique en purgeant la capitale des noms de rues et monuments évoquant la France"

⁹⁴ Cridem, "Stop au venin de RFI et de France 24 ! / Par Dr. Mohamed Ahmed BABA AHMED SALIHI"

4.3. Decline of French Soft Power

The qualitative discourse analysis further reveals that the military, economic, and cultural rejection of France is contributing to the emergence of an apparently irreversible wave of anti-French sentiment across the Sahel. This hostility has spread rapidly throughout the region, significantly undermining France's ability to reposition itself and to exercise any meaningful form of soft power.

4.3.1. Rise of Anti-French Sentiment

France's perceived Arrogance and Disrespect in the Sahelian Discourse

In December 2024, Le Faso published an article discussing the decline of France's influence in Africa, giving an overview of French failures, and focusing particularly on the attitude of its leaders and its disrespectful policies. The article notes that, while France was once praised as a liberator in Africa, its presence in the Sahel and French-speaking Africa had become increasingly contested. It describes the military withdrawals of French troops, framed as an indication that the strategy has not adapted to Africa's changing realities. Africa, it is suggested, is no longer the same as it was in the early days of independence; it is now a post-colonial Africa seeking new identities and reconfiguring its external relationships. The failures of France's policies are linked to its continued reliance on Gaullist principles, which are seen as outdated in a continent asserting its sovereignty. The article calls for a new, more respectful, and collaborative approach from France, one that adopts a partnership model aligned with African aspirations, enabling France to play a constructive role on the continent.⁹⁵

French attitudes, especially those of Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and Emmanuel Macron (2017-), have been described by Sahelian media as disrespectful, which is said to have contributed to rising anti-French sentiment in the region. An article in *Journal du Tchad* examines the increase in anti-French feeling in Africa during Macron's presidency, attributing it in part to what is described as his "*approche arrogante et méprisante*" ("arrogant and

⁹⁵ Le Faso. (2024, December 3). France-Afrique : La fin d'une ère face à la montée russe?

contemptuous approach”) toward African leaders and a lack of respect for their decisions.⁹⁶ On January 7, 2025, Pressafrik Sénégal published an article by Aly Saleh, who criticized President Macron’s comments as reflecting a *“attitude méprisante”* (“contemptuous attitude”) toward African people and argued that French leaders should show more respect for the African population. The article also discusses how colonial powers undermined African cultures, forced changes in religious beliefs, and imposed their own, which, according to the author, *“n’ont servi qu’à hiberner le cerveau de l’homme noir”* (“only served to freeze the minds of Black people”). The author connects this to the concept of neocolonialism and references a controversial statement by former President Sarkozy, who said that *“l’homme africain n’est pas assez entré dans l’Histoire”* (“the African man has not yet entered history”). This remark, criticized for reinforcing stereotypes, is said to have further damaged France’s image in Africa.⁹⁷ In June 2024, Le Quotidien from Sénégal published an article reflecting on France’s historical arrogance and exploitation of Africa, stating that for centuries, France took everything except Africa’s soul.⁹⁸ Another example of criticism toward Macron’s policy appeared in January 2025 in Le Pays Burkina Faso, which analysed France’s changing relationship with Africa. The article discusses Macron’s reaffirmation of France’s African policy and his rejection of withdrawal from the continent, instead calling for modernized relations with former colonies. It notes that Macron suggested some African leaders were ungrateful, claiming their countries would not be sovereign without French support. The article acknowledges France’s involvement in supporting allies, especially in Mali and Chad, but argues that many of France’s current challenges are self-inflicted. For years, France influenced the political actions of African leaders, sometimes supporting coups against those who resisted. The article concludes that France is now facing the consequences of its actions, often showing paternalism and arrogance, and that it has no one to blame but itself, as it has always claimed to have no friends, only interests.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Journal du Tchad, “Macron écarte son féroce rival au détriment de l’avenir de la France en Afrique”

⁹⁷ Pressafrik Sénégal, January 7, 2025, “Grosse bourde de Macron : faudrait-il convoquer le passé pour comprendre le présent et bâtir l’avenir ?”

⁹⁸ Le Quotidien Sénégal, June 21, 2024, “La France cramée accueille le Président Diomaye !”

⁹⁹ Le Pays Burkina Faso, January 2025, “POLITIQUE AFRICAINE DE LA FRANCE : Paris victime de ses propres turpitudes”

France Accused of Interference and Support for Authoritarian Regimes in the Sahel

Besides being seen as arrogant, France is also accused of interfering in Sahelian politics, which has fuelled local resentment. In January 2022, Seneplus discussed France's actions against the Malian government, describing Mali's demand for the Danish military contingent to leave after entering without permission. Malian officials warned Denmark about working with partners who, in their view, still act with colonial attitudes. The article also criticized France for calling Mali's government 'illegitimate' while supporting undemocratic moves in other African countries, such as allowing Alassane Ouattara to run for a third term in Côte d'Ivoire and backing the suspension of Chad's constitution. These examples are contrasted with France's image as a defender of human rights. The article argues that France's support for undemocratic regimes in Africa undermines its criticism of Mali's government, which it continues to call a "*junte militaire*" ("military junta"), a term with negative implications.¹⁰⁰ In May 2022, L'Événement Niger reported that Mali's government announced it had stopped a coup attempt involving military personnel allegedly backed by a Western country. The statement also noted that since the military junta took power, France has openly opposed them and expressed a desire to see them removed from power. The article suggests that France is frustrated by its declining influence in Mali.¹⁰¹

According to Sahelian media, the situation in Chad suggests that France intervenes in politics mainly when its interests are at risk. In October 2022, Journal du Tchad reported that protests in Chad, led by citizens demanding a return to civilian rule as promised by the Transitional Military Council in April 2021, were met with violent repression, resulting in many deaths. Although the transition period was supposed to end, General Mahamat Idriss Déby remained in power and announced an extension of the transition by 24 months. In response to the violence, which included the use of lethal force against demonstrators, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the actions but stated that France was not involved, emphasizing that the events were an internal matter for Chad.¹⁰² Meanwhile, L'Événement Niger published an article holding France responsible for the deaths of civilians. The article argued that under President Emmanuel Macron, France has shown a double standard in its response to military coups in Africa. While France condemned coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, it did not express

¹⁰⁰ Seneplus, January 24, 2022, "POURQUOI LA FRANCE S'ACHARNE-T-ELLE SUR LE GOUVERNEMENT MALIEN ?"

¹⁰¹ L'Événement Niger, May 17, 2022, "Mali -Tentative de putsch: la France a le profil parfait du pays occidental accusé par le gouvernement"

¹⁰² Journal du Tchad, October 20, 2022, "Tchad : répression sanglante des manifestants, la France se désolidarise"

the same level of disapproval for the military takeover in Chad. Instead, Macron visited N'Djamena alongside military leaders, including General Mahamat Idriss Déby, who succeeded his father as president after his death. The article criticized Macron for supporting the regime in Chad and claimed that his actions indirectly supported the military leadership. According to the media, *“Macron est comptable de ce massacre et le drapeau français est désormais tâché du sang des dizaines de victimes de cette barbarie,”* (“Macron is accountable for this massacre and the French flag is now stained with the blood of the dozens of victims of this barbarism”).¹⁰³

A year after the previous incident, France faced new accusations of interfering in Niger’s internal politics. On July 30, 2023, L’Événement Niger reported that thousands of supporters of Niger’s military junta gathered outside the French embassy, attempting to damage the building and waving Russian flags. This protest came after the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed sanctions on the military coup that removed President Mohamed Bazoum from power. Niger Express criticized France for suggesting military intervention in Niger while refusing to do so in Ukraine, calling this position inconsistent.¹⁰⁴ Another article argued that France influenced ECOWAS to impose unfair sanctions and proposed military action against Niger’s new government, which it claimed violated international law. It also questioned France’s involvement in African politics, asking why France would interfere in African regimes when coups are common and should be handled locally. According to the article, *“Les masques sont tombés, la France finance le terrorisme pour empêcher l’exploitation des ressources naturelles ou les exploiter à sa manière à travers des contrats qui ne favorisent pas les pays africains”* (“the masks have fallen, France finances terrorism to prevent the exploitation of natural resources or to exploit them in its own way through contracts that do not favour African countries”).¹⁰⁵ On August 27, 2023, L’Authentique from Mauritanie reported that about 20,000 people gathered in Niamey to support the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP), the military regime that took power after the coup. The demonstration included Nigerien, Algerian, and Russian flags, reflecting changing alliances. This rally followed the expulsion of the French ambassador, Sylvain Itté, after he failed to respond to an invitation from Niger’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as for other actions perceived as being against Niger’s interests. The expulsion came after a month of protests and statements

¹⁰³ L’Événement Niger, October 21, 2022, “Tchad : la France porte la responsabilité des civils massacrés par le ‘chevalier servant’ de Macron”

¹⁰⁴ L’Événement Niger, July 30, 2023, “Niger: « Vive Poutine » et « A bas la France », des milliers de nigériens tentent de prendre d’assaut l’ambassade de France”

¹⁰⁵ Niger Express, August 9, 2023, “Niger CEDEAO: la France évite l’Ukraine et prône le chaos au Sahel”

against French policy since the coup that removed President Bazoum, who was detained with some family members. The CNSP, led by General Abdourahamane Tiani, has since focused criticism on France, the country's former colonial ruler. *"Le combat ne s'arrêtera que le jour où il n'y aura plus aucun militaire français au Niger,"* ("the fight will not stop until there are no more French soldiers in Niger"), said a member of the CNSP, Colonel Ibro Amadou, to the crowd. He further stated, *"C'est vous qui allez les chasser,"* ("it's you who will chase them out"). The new leaders also accused ECOWAS of acting on behalf of France, which had 1,500 soldiers stationed in Niger. In the days that followed, tensions in Niger increased, and anti-French sentiment grew in the media.¹⁰⁶ On September 10, 2023, L'Événement Niger reported that Niger's military authorities accused France of preparing an armed attack on Niger with the help of some West African countries, including Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal. France does not recognize the coup and continues to regard Mohamed Bazoum as the legitimate leader and the primary contact for resolving the crisis.¹⁰⁷ Finally, on September 12, 2023, L'Authentique reported that tensions between Paris and Niamey rose as France denied planning any military intervention in Niger, despite accusations from Niger's military authorities. President Emmanuel Macron stated that any redeployment of French forces would only happen at the request of President Bazoum and in coordination with him, not with the current military leaders. The newspaper presented France's denial as an effort to ease concerns about its involvement in military actions in the Sahel, especially with ECOWAS's participation.¹⁰⁸

French influence Undermining Sahelian Struggle for Sovereignty

Criticism of French interference in the media reflects a broader concern that France, through its policies, hinders African sovereignty. A 2022 article in Tchad le Pays reports that the platform "Néo-panafricaniste de souveraineté" accuses France of managing the power transition in Chad after the death of Marshal Idriss Déby Itno on April 20, 2021. The platform claims this shows France's ongoing efforts to protect its interests. The group also argues that France excluded credible opposition groups and supported the transitional military council to maintain its influence in Chad, especially by avoiding reforms that could affect its military

¹⁰⁶ L'Authentique, August 27, 2023, "Niger : des milliers de personnes rassemblées à Niamey après un ultimatum à la France"

¹⁰⁷ L'Événement Niger, September 10, 2023, "Préparatifs d'une agression armée contre le Niger : Le CNSP dénonce la France en complicité avec des pays ouest-africains"

¹⁰⁸ L'Authentique, September 12, 2023, "La France dément préparer une intervention militaire au Niger avec la Cedeao"

presence: “*écartant les questions de fond relatives à la souveraineté du Tchad et susceptibles de remettre en cause les intérêts de la France*” (“avoiding substantive issues regarding Chad’s sovereignty that could threaten French interests.”) These accusations highlight the perception that France continues to interfere in Chad’s internal affairs, which some see as a form of neo-colonialism and a denial of the country’s sovereignty.¹⁰⁹

This quest for sovereignty is a recurring theme in Sahelian media, and when it fails, it is often attributed to France, leading to diplomatic tensions, notably in Mali. According to L’Authentique, the diplomatic tensions that happened between Paris and Bamako revealed a significant shift away from the Françafrique era in the Sahel. The Malian military junta asserts itself as the guardian of the country’s sovereignty, rejecting the historical dependence that has lasted more than six decades. The crisis of reciprocal visa suspensions symbolized this broader change, reflecting a policy that : “*Désormais c’est la réciprocité qui va régir les relations jusqu’au prochain président français en 2027*” (“From now on, reciprocity will govern relations until the next French president in 2027.”) The article also identifies a common thread linking recent military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger, characterized by their anti-French stance and determination to sever ties with former colonial influences: “*Le Mali fait figure de tête de pont de cette nouvelle jeunesse d’officiers qui entendent couper le cordon ombilical de la Françafrique*” (“Mali is at the forefront of this new generation of officers determined to cut the umbilical cord of Françafrique.”)¹¹⁰ Indeed, according to Le Pays from Mali, diplomatic relations between Mali and France had deteriorated significantly, notably during the previously mentioned visa crisis, leading Mali to assert its sovereignty: “*Le Mali semble être dans une logique de ne plus se laisser faire*” (“Mali seems determined not to back down anymore.”) The increasingly hostile relationship was also marked by previous incidents such as the expulsion of the French ambassador, the suspension of French media outlets RFI and France24, and the departure of French forces from operations Barkhane, Takuba, and MINUSMA previously mentioned in this research. Obviously, these diplomatic frictions significantly affected France’s image among Malians who previously respected and trusted the country.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Tchad Le Pays. (2022, octobre 11). Changement dynastique au Tchad : « Un plan de la France »

¹¹⁰ L’Authentique. (2023, août 11). France-Mali : entre Paris et Bamako, de mal en pis

¹¹¹ Le Pays Mali. (2023, août 14). Brouille diplomatique Mali-France : la réciprocité commande désormais toutes les actions

Beyond diplomatic efforts, people in West Africa have taken direct action to regain power. Pressafrik Sénégal reports that recent anti-French protests across the region show a strong desire for real sovereignty. For example, a large protest in Niamey, Niger, on January 14 criticized « *les actions destructrices menées par la France pour maintenir son influence dans la région* » (“the destructive actions carried out by France to maintain its influence in the region.”)¹¹² In January 2025, PressAfrik Sénégal also discussed how relations between France and Africa are becoming increasingly complicated, particularly due to French military bases. These bases were a growing source of tension for younger Africans, indeed “*La jeunesse africaine, plus éduquée et plus consciente des enjeux géopolitiques mondiaux, est de plus en plus exigeante vis-à-vis de la France*” (“Young Africans, more educated and aware of global geopolitical issues, are increasingly demanding towards France”). Many young people are now calling for true independence and equality, which has led to increased rejection of France in Africa.¹¹³

Allegations of French Collusion with Terrorist Groups in the Sahel

Alongside the previously mentioned political crisis, anti-French sentiment grew due to accusations in some Sahelian media. These outlets not only criticized military inefficiency in the region but also suggested it was intentional and linked to support for terrorism. Niger Express reported on a study by the Scientific Committee of the Economic and Social Observatory of Burkina Faso's Economic and Social Council, which examined possible sources of terrorism financing in the Sahel. According to the study, France, and its Western allies, as well as multinational companies, were identified as the main sources of terrorism funding. The article states that France, through its involvement in the Malian conflict, contributed to separatist rebellions, especially the Tuareg rebellion, as part of a broader strategy related to the Libyan conflict. It also claims that in 2013, France made an agreement with terrorist leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, allowing France to divide Mali and control the northern region, particularly the city of Kidal. The article describes this area as a centre for illegal activities, such as arms and drug trafficking. Additionally, the report accuses France of financing terrorism by paying ransoms, including over 20 million euros to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb for the release of hostages. The article also notes that since 2013, French and Western companies in the Sahel have not

¹¹² Pressafrik. (2025, janvier 19). Les manifestations anti-françaises des citoyens ouest-africains comme symbole de la lutte pour une véritable souveraineté

¹¹³ PressAfrik Sénégal, 2025, "La difficile évolution des relations franco-africaines sous Emmanuel Macron"

experienced hostage-taking incidents, suggesting that France has paid both preventive and reactive ransoms.¹¹⁴

French influence, in Mali particularly, decreased due to accusations of supporting terrorism. In March 2023, *Le Pays Mali* reported that the Malian government officially rejected France's role as its spokesperson at the United Nations. This move came after the Malian authorities requested a UN meeting to present evidence of France's assumed complicity with certain terrorist groups. The article claims that France, acting as the spokesperson for Mali at the UN, obstructed the organization of this meeting, obstructing the presentation of critical evidence. It emphasizes that the Malian government, which has been combating terrorism since 2012, had previously trusted France, only to feel betrayed by its supposed associations with groups that had caused considerable harm to the country.¹¹⁵ Additionally, *Mali Actu* reported that Mali's minister called for a reform of the United Nations Security Council after specifically denouncing the role of external powers in the Malian security crisis, which he claimed facilitated the activities of armed terrorist groups in Mali and the Sahel region.¹¹⁶

The same accusations happened in Niger. In 2024, *Mali Actu* reported that the Nigerien Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Bakary Yaou Sangaré, accused France of being involved in a "new strategy of recolonization" by supporting terrorism in the Sahel. He claimed that France was actively providing intelligence, training, funding, and weapons to terrorist groups operating in the region.¹¹⁷

In 2025, reports highlighted growing scrutiny of France for its alleged role in terrorism in the Sahel. *Niger Inter* raised questions about whether France was a main actor behind groups like Al-Qaeda in the Sahel and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. The article noted that these organizations, including the Macina katiba, lack the resources to operate independently. It suggested that outside support is necessary for such operations and pointed to France as a possible source. According to the report, intelligence and statements from former terrorists indicated links between French officials and terrorist leaders, especially in Mali. The article

¹¹⁴ Niger Express, June 2, 2022, "FINANCEMENT DU TERRORISME AU SAHEL : La France en tête de liste, selon une étude"

¹¹⁵ *Le Pays Mali*, March 3, 2023, "ONU : La France ne parlera plus au nom du Mali"

¹¹⁶ *Mali Actu*, 2023, "Mali : le ministre dénonce les ingérences de la France et appelle à une réforme du Conseil de sécurité"

¹¹⁷ *Mali Actu*, 2024, "La France 'renseigne, forme, finance et arme des groupes terroristes au Sahel', accuse le Niger"

also discussed France's 2014 military operation, Opération Chibok, which was connected to the kidnapping of schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Some reports claimed that this operation included meetings between Boko Haram leaders and French intelligence agents, adding to suspicions about France's involvement with terrorist groups.¹¹⁸

Colonial Memory as a Driver of Anti-French Feelings

According to the analysis, colonial memory is a key factor behind the rise of anti-French sentiment. As these memories become more widely acknowledged, actions are beginning to follow. In December 2024, *Le Quotidien Sénégal* reported on the changing relationship between Senegal and France, noting the decline of French influence in Africa. This shift is linked to increased awareness and a new generation of leaders, as seen in the Pastef party's victory in the March 2024 presidential elections. The newspaper attributes this change in part to the ongoing impact of colonialism in Senegal, which includes events like the massacre of Senegalese soldiers at Thiaroye in 1944. According to the newspaper: "*Ce crime abject, par sa cruauté et son ignominie, longtemps volontairement sous-estimé, se révèle chaque jour davantage aux yeux du monde grâce à la persévérance des chercheurs africains et suscite aujourd'hui un intérêt grandissant pour nos peuples dans leur quête de justice et de véritable émancipation*" ("this abject crime, by its cruelty and ignominy, long deliberately underestimated, is increasingly coming to light thanks to the perseverance of African researchers, and now sparks growing interest among our peoples in their quest for justice and genuine emancipation »). The article also criticizes the colonial era for its involvement in the slave trade, domination, and efforts to erase local social values through a so-called civilizing mission. It describes colonialism as a period marked by violent repression and "*volonté d'aliénation culturelle des peuples africains, l'époque coloniale a été parsemée d'épisodes sanglants de répressions barbares*" ("a desire for cultural alienation of African peoples, the colonial period was marked by bloody episodes of barbaric repression").¹¹⁹

In 2025, PressAfrik pointed out the growing demand across Africa for reparations as part of a broader assertion of sovereignty and justice regarding colonial-era crimes. This demand seeks to redefine Africa's relationships with its former colonial powers through a strong pan-African

¹¹⁸ Niger Inter, 2025, "Terrorisme au Sahel : La France sur la sellette"

¹¹⁹ *Le Quotidien Sénégal*, 2024, "Relations avec la France, le tournant enfin amorcé"

perspective. Nestor Podassé, spokesperson for *Planète des Jeunes Panafricanistes*, emphasized that reparations must address all colonial crimes, including slavery and forced labour. While France's acknowledgment of the Thiaroye massacre in December 2024 was considered a positive step, Podassé stressed that “*cette reconnaissance reste insuffisante si elle ne s’accompagne pas d’actes concrets*” (“this acknowledgment remains insufficient unless accompanied by concrete actions”). He further argued that “*une véritable justice va bien au-delà d’une compensation financière. Elle implique la fin immédiate du néocolonialisme*” (“true justice goes far beyond financial compensation. It involves the immediate end of neocolonialism”).¹²⁰

In an opinion piece published by PressAfrik in March 2025, Samba Diouldé Thiam critiques former colonial powers and emphasizes the historic oppression and exploitation of Africa, particularly by European nations. Thiam refers explicitly to the previously mentioned and controversial remark that “*l’homme noir n’est pas assez entré dans l’histoire*”, (“the Black man has not yet sufficiently entered history”), by Nicolas Sarkozy, highlighting its irony against the backdrop of European atrocities: “*Les tueries européennes de nos populations, le transfert par voie de déportation coloniale de nos ressources les plus valides en Amérique, la colonisation meurtrière directe de nos pays, voilà quelques unes des raisons de notre non entrée dans l’histoire comme sujet majeur*” (“the European killings of our populations, the colonial deportation of our most valuable resources to America, and the direct murderous colonization of our countries, these are some of the reasons we haven't entered history as major subjects”).¹²¹

The Politicization of Anti-French Sentiment: Local Discontent and Foreign Influence

Some media in the Sahel are starting to recognize that anti-French sentiment is shaped not only by historical events but also by current geopolitics and the influence of foreign actors. L’Événement Niger points out that the widespread rejection of France in the region is rooted in both past and present frustrations. According to the author, this feeling comes from a mix of real historical injustices and conspiracy theories. The article explains that, while some reasons for rejecting France are based on facts, others are shaped by imagination and ideology. These ideas gain strength because they build on the real pain and mistrust left by colonization,

¹²⁰ PressAfrik, 2025, "La souveraineté africaine et la question des réparations dans un élan de justice"

¹²¹ PressAfrik, 2025, "Entrée et sortie de l'histoire," par Samba Diouldé Thiam

neocolonialism, and ongoing foreign involvement. The article describes three main conspiracy theories: first, that “*l’intervention française aurait une cause cachée : mettre la main sur les immenses ressources naturelles (supposées) du Sahel*” (“the French intervention hides a secret motive: to lay hands on the Sahel's supposedly vast natural resources”), even though these resources are not as valuable or easy to access as some claim; second, that « *les Français s’entendraient en sous-main avec les jihadistes, pour créer une instabilité régionale qui justifierait leur intervention militaire* » (“the French are allegedly colluding secretly with jihadists to create regional instability that would justify their military intervention”), a theory that echoes past accusations of French duplicity; and third, that « *Les Français sont des ‘cafres’ (des païens) qui participent à la nouvelle croisade des chrétiens contre l’islam* » (“The French are ‘kafirs’ (infidels) participating in a new Christian crusade against Islam”), a belief that is especially strong among some religious groups and spreads through social media and sermons. Even though these theories often lack evidence, they resonate because they connect with people’s experiences and memories. This makes it hard to challenge them, especially since they are linked to undeniable historical truths. As a result, politicians, religious leaders, and foreign powers like Russia use these narratives to weaken France’s influence in the region. As the article states: “*Certains acteurs extérieurs (Russie surtout, mais parfois Turquie) mettent aussi de l’huile sur le feu (un feu qu’ils n’ont pas allumé mais dont ils tirent parti)*” (“Some external actors, especially Russia, and at times Turkey, pour fuel on the fire, a fire they did not ignite but from which they benefit”). Given these developments, France will need to make more than surface-level changes if it wants to rebuild its relationship with Africa. « *Un changement d’attitude de la politique française qui soit profond et non pas cosmétique ou sémantique devient nécessaire* » (“A change in French policy must be profound and not merely cosmetic or semantic”). Without a genuine shift in policy, the current divide, driven by both reality and perception, will likely deepen, pushing African communities further apart and making it harder for France to achieve its objectives in the Sahel.¹²²

¹²² Le rejet de la France au Sahel : mille et une raisons ! (10 décembre 2021). L’Événement Niger

4.3.2. Attempts at Strategic Repositioning

France's Strategic Shift in the Sahel: Turning to Soft Power in a Hostile Sahel

As resentment and anti-French feelings have grown in the Sahel, France's military and economic influence has declined. In response, the French government is trying new strategies to improve its position in the region. Facing criticism for its neocolonial image, particularly due to its military presence, France now seeks to be perceived as a more economically focused and diplomatically responsive partner. French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna promised a rigorous dialogue and said France aims to be a credible, competitive, and attractive partner. This shift marks a clear change from years of military-focused involvement, such as operations Serval and Barkhane, which are now widely rejected by people and governments in the Sahel. France's new approach involves aligning African ambitions, particularly among young people and the growing middle class, with economic opportunities and a fresh perspective in areas such as entrepreneurship, education, and technology. One key sign of this change is the promise of visa reforms, which aim to address ongoing concerns about inequality and paternalism. As SenePlus notes, "*Sur un continent qui compte de plus en plus géopolitiquement, Paris espère regagner en influence en s'affirmant comme un interlocuteur soucieux des aspirations des peuples africains*" ("On a continent that is becoming increasingly geopolitically significant, Paris hopes to regain influence by presenting itself as a partner attentive to the aspirations of African peoples"). However, despite these statements, many remain sceptical. The main challenge for French diplomacy in Africa is closing the gap between words and actions. The article notes: "*Reste à transformer les intentions affichées en actes concrets sur le terrain*" ("It remains to turn these declared intentions into concrete actions on the ground"). Years of military alliances, support for authoritarian regimes, and perceived economic exploitation have led to mistrust that cannot be fixed by words or minor reforms alone.¹²³

The Limits of Soft Power, France's Struggle to Rebuild Influence

Regaining power and influence has been difficult for France, even with new approaches, because Sahelian countries do not fully trust their former colonial ruler. The situation in Niger

¹²³ Folarinwa, B. (2023, novembre 22). La France à la recherche d'un nouveau souffle en Afrique. SenePlus

shows this challenge. After leaving Mali in 2022, France attempted to strengthen its influence in Niger but was unsuccessful. As relations with Mali worsened, France increased its cooperation with Niger and described the country as a key regional partner. Journalist Aboubacar Yacouba Barma explains that this relationship was presented as both strategic and essential. However, many people there remain sceptical of France. The article suggests that “*ces dons et appuis de la France peuvent être interprétés comme une volonté de l’ancienne puissance coloniale de redorer son image au Niger et en Afrique* » (“these donations and support from France may be interpreted as a desire by the former colonial power to restore its image in Niger and in Africa”).¹²⁴

Today, many people in the Sahel are critical of France’s new strategies. A 2025 article from Mali Actu closely examines the legitimacy and purpose of French development aid in Africa, focusing on its strategic rather than humanitarian aspects. The article asks : “*L’aide au développement, un enjeu majeur pour l’Afrique. Mais, est-ce un simple geste humanitaire ou une arme stratégique pour la France ?* ” (“Development aid is a major issue for Africa. But is it a simple humanitarian gesture or a strategic weapon for France?”). Several economists in the article view French aid as a way to exert influence, not just an act of generosity. The article highlights failures in Mauritania, such as reports of misused funds, which have damaged the credibility of French efforts in the region. These examples suggest that France’s role in Africa is changing, shifting from direct military involvement to more subtle forms of influence. The article notes that “*La France mise désormais sur le soft power. Plus de présence militaire directe, mais une influence subtile via des organisations de la société civile. Le but ? Maintenir son emprise sur le continent africain*” (“France now relies on soft power. No more direct military presence, but a subtle influence through civil society organizations. The goal? To maintain its grip on the African continent.”). This move toward soft power brings new concerns. The author, Lamine Fofana, warns African countries about the risk of manipulation by their former colonizer, arguing that this approach could be as harmful as military occupation. Although France presents its aid as fair and respectful, the article questions whether these values are truly reflected in practice or if they simply hide neocolonial goals. In this light, development

¹²⁴ Journal du Tchad. (2022, novembre 18). Coopération bilatérale : la France aux petits soins avec le Niger. Journal du Tchad

aid is viewed as part of a broader geopolitical strategy, with France seeking to maintain its relevance in postcolonial Africa through less visible yet still significant means of influence.¹²⁵

Emmanuel Macron's presidency has drawn significant criticism, particularly regarding its shift toward soft power, which has often been seen as ineffective. A 2023 article in *L'Événement Niger* criticizes the president's approach to Africa, arguing that it perpetuates patterns of paternalism and neocolonialism, despite claims to offer a new strategy. The article portrays Macron's discourse as a reaffirmation of France's traditional policies in Africa, suggesting that, despite promises of reform, France continues to seek to maintain its influence through military and diplomatic means. Rather than withdrawing, France is focusing its military presence within a network of allied states, using collective security arrangements to preserve its geopolitical power. The article ultimately argues that Macron's approach is more a rebranding of *Françafrique* than a true departure from it, maintaining structures of dominance while adopting the language of reform.¹²⁶ Journalists at *Seneplus* share the view that France has failed to make the strategic changes needed to stay relevant in Africa. The article asserts: "*la France a raté le virage africain*" ("France has missed the African turning point"). They highlight France's inability to anticipate the rise of new geopolitical actors like China, Turkey, and Russia, which has weakened its position in the region. The article describes a growing disconnect between France and its former African partners, a "*situation de frustration amoureuse*" ("a situation of romantic frustration"), as mutual expectations diverge and democratic aspirations struggle to take hold. According to the journalist, France's African policy lacks a clear vision and an approach suited to the continent's evolving geopolitical landscape, "*la promotion du modèle démocratique français se heurte aux réalités complexes des pays africains*" ("the promotion of the French democratic model collides with the complex realities of African countries"). Overall, the relationship between France and Africa appears to be weakening, marked by declining democratic legitimacy, new alliances, and increasing calls from African states for partnerships based on equity and sovereignty. The Macron presidency, therefore, represents a continuation of missed opportunities and strategic stagnation rather than meaningful change.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Mali Actu. (2025). Aide au développement : arme de la France en Afrique ?

¹²⁶ *L'Événement Niger*. (2023, février 27). Stratégie de Macron pour l'Afrique : la France n'a aucune intention de laisser le continent respirer

¹²⁷ Dianke Wally de *SenePlus*. (4 septembre 2023). Avec Macron, la France a raté le virage africain. *SenePlus*

Le Faso reviews France's position in Africa in 2023, highlighting the mistakes that led to its military and diplomatic exclusion from much of the Sahel. The article notes that, despite official promises to reset relations, France did not achieve its main strategic goals. Frédéric Lejeal, a journalist and Africa specialist, notes that "*La France n'accomplit pas encore l'aggiornamento nécessaire et attendu depuis 40 ans pour clarifier sa politique*" ("France has still not undertaken the necessary aggiornamento that has been expected for forty years to clarify its policy"). The French government maintained close ties with autocratic regimes in countries such as Chad, Togo, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon, even as these leaders lost support at home. This approach hurt France's credibility on democracy and human rights, and reinforced the idea of ongoing neocolonialism. Economically, the promised reform of the CFA franc remains "*totalelement inaboutie*" ("completely unfulfilled"), and the return of African cultural artifacts remains "*parfaitement symbolique*" ("purely symbolic"). On the military side, at the time, France announced troop reductions but did not close its bases until it was compelled to do so. Lejeal argues that a real change would have meant closing some bases, as was done in the Central African Republic in 1998. Overall, France's actions seemed more like a balancing act than a clear new strategy. Lejeal describes this as "*un jeu d'équilibriste d'une France poussée par un contexte hostile, mais cherchant par tous les moyens à s'aménager des portes de sortie honorables ou de maintenir une influence résiduelle*" ("a balancing act by a France pushed by a hostile context, seeking by all means to secure honorable exit strategies or maintain residual influence"). The analysis reveals that France's policy in Africa remains unclear, characterized by a reluctance to relinquish old privileges and a reactive approach to a continent that is shifting its alliances.¹²⁸

Conditional Cooperation: The Possibility of a Renewed France-Sahel Partnership According to the Media

According to Le Pays, in Burkina Faso, to restore trust, France must "*changer de fusil d'épaule*" ("change its tune") by embracing a posture of equal partnership. However, such transformation cannot rely on sentiment alone. As the author insists, "*ce dont le continent a véritablement besoin, ce n'est ni de la compassion ni de l'assistanat, mais d'une relation*

¹²⁸ Le Faso. (2023, mars 1). France-Afrique : « La France n'accomplit pas encore l'aggiornamento nécessaire et attendu depuis 40 ans pour clarifier sa politique » – Frédéric Lejeal, journaliste et spécialiste de l'Afrique

équilibrée” (“what the continent truly needs is neither compassion nor dependency, but a balanced relationship”) in which Africa “*peut disposer de ses richesses naturelles pour subvenir, de façon souveraine, à ses besoins*” (“can manage its natural resources to meet its own needs, in full sovereignty”). The article underscores a broader shift in African diplomacy: demands for equality, dignity, and tangible benefits are replacing passive alignments and symbolic rhetoric.¹²⁹

Emerging African perspectives, as outlined in a 2024 Mali Actu article, highlight what is needed for a “*partenariat gagnant-gagnant*” (“win-win partnership”) between France and African countries. The first step is for France to “*reconnaître les erreurs du passé*” (“recognize the errors of the past”), with a genuine acknowledgment of the harm caused by unequal cooperation. Next, France is called to “*s’adapter aux nouvelles réalités*” (“adapt to new realities”), recognizing the continent as an active and evolving player. The article suggests that France should shift away from outdated, “*politique paternaliste*” (“paternalistic policy”) and instead “*bâtir de nouveaux partenariats*” based on “*le respect mutuel, l’égalité et la coopération gagnant-gagnant*” (“build new partnerships based on mutual respect, equality, and win-win cooperation”). Supporting African-led development and security initiatives is also emphasized, with France expected to back strategies created by Africans themselves. These points emerge as African countries increasingly turn to other partners, such as Russia and China, for new development models. This shift highlights the need for France to redefine its role in Africa, moving from a position of dominance to one of cooperation and dialogue. According to African media, the future of Franco-African relations depends on this fundamental change in approach.¹³⁰

The France-Mauritania Partnership: A Specific Case in the Sahelian Landscape

Mauritania stands out in Franco-African relations by presenting itself as a stable and constructive partner, even as the region faces instability. In an interview with *Le Figaro*, President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani called his country “*un îlot de stabilité au Sahel*” (“an island of stability in the Sahel”) at a time when France’s role in the region is under debate.

¹²⁹ Le Pays Burkina Faso. (2024, novembre 27). Mini-tournée africaine du chef de la diplomatie française : La France peut-elle encore recoller les morceaux ? Le Pays Burkina Faso.

¹³⁰ Mali Actu. (2024). L’Afrique se libère : La France face à un tournant historique.

Unlike neighbouring countries that frame France's military withdrawal as a failure or humiliation, Ghazouani suggests that "*elle a sans doute raison de partir*," ("France is probably right to leave"). He avoids anti-French language and instead describes the situation as "*des malentendus de parcours, comme il en existe parfois entre amis de longue date*" ("misunderstandings along the way, such as sometimes occur between long-standing friends.") This approach lowers the emotional tone of the discussion about France's role in Africa and frames criticism as the result of unmet expectations, not a complete break. Ghazouani also says that "*l'Afrique attend trop de la France*" ("Africa expects too much of France"), pointing out that the postcolonial imbalance continues partly because of high expectations from African countries as well as French policies. He recognizes France's deep knowledge of Africa and calls for both sides to rebuild their relationship based on their existing strengths, so that both can benefit. By focusing on mutual respect, shared values, and common challenges like migration and cooperation, Mauritania takes a practical approach to redefining France's role in the Sahel. Ghazouani's message is different from the more critical tone of other Sahelian leaders. While he acknowledges France's complex past, he emphasizes continuity, shared responsibility, and a common future over division and resentment. Mauritania's perspective adds a valuable dimension to the ongoing discussion about France's evolving role in the Sahel.¹³¹

Mauritania's approach to France's evolving Sahel strategy demonstrates a pragmatic focus on sovereignty. According to Cridem, Nouakchott bases its security decisions on balancing national interests and independent decision-making. Facing regional threats like terrorism, organized crime, and irregular migration, Mauritania sees value in foreign technical help, especially for aerial surveillance. French support is described as a technical contribution that serves national security, rather than as a relic of colonial times, "*une étape technique dénuée de toute graisse colonial*" ("a technical step stripped of all colonial fat"). Cridem notes that, unlike some other Sahel countries, Mauritania clarified its relationship with France in the 1970s through actions like nationalizing the mining company Miferma and introducing its own currency, the ouguiya. This history positions Mauritania as an independent partner open to "*des partenariats intelligents et ciblés*" ("intelligent and targeted partnerships"). The article also highlights internal challenges to this cooperation. While working with France on aerial surveillance brings strategic benefits, such as better training and military skills, Cridem

¹³¹ L'Authentique. (2023, octobre 2). Le président mauritanien Mohamed Ould Ghazouani au Figaro : « L'Afrique attend trop de la France »

observes that the “*L’opinion publique intérieure considère la présence étrangère avec prudence*” (“domestic public opinion views foreign presence with caution,”) especially given the importance of national sovereignty. The government must balance these external benefits with domestic concerns, ensuring that there are legal and institutional safeguards in place for any military cooperation. Cridem also highlights that France is not the only outside power seeking influence; countries like China, Russia, and Turkey are also active in the region. Mauritania manages these competing interests with careful diplomacy, seeing the French offer as one of several ways to strengthen its position and capabilities. Overall, the article reflects a common theme in West Africa: cooperation with France is accepted when it is useful and does not create new dependencies.¹³²

France’s Strategic Shift Amid the Rise of New Actors in the Sahel

France’s influence in the region faces growing criticism, but this does not mean people are unaware of new partnership options. Some media and journalists believe that if France changes its approach, the partnership could still succeed. In August 2023, Mali Actu presented a thoughtful view on Africa’s shifting alliances, noting the complex choices between old and new partners. Russia and China are seen as potential alternatives to Western influence, but the article cautions against viewing them in overly positive terms. For Russia, “*les opportunités offertes [...] sont à la fois prometteuses et délicates*” (“the opportunities offered [...] are both promising and delicate”) and the country is advised to carefully weigh the pros and cons before deepening ties. Regarding China, the article describes it as a rising global force, but stresses “*il est essentiel de comprendre les motivations qui sous-tendent son engagement*” (“it is essential to understand the motivations behind its engagement in Africa.”) Unlike the strong anti-French tone found elsewhere, this article offers a more balanced view of France, stating that France remains an important economic partner and brings valuable expertise in many fields. “*La tâche de l’Afrique n’est pas nécessairement de rejeter la France, mais plutôt de renégocier les termes de leur relation sur un pied d’égalité*” (“Africa’s task is not necessarily to reject France, but rather to renegotiate the terms of their relationship on equal footing.”) This approach moves away from outright rejection and instead calls for a practical rethinking of partnerships, where

¹³² Cridem, Mauritanie et contrôle aérien français, 2024

France is one of several outside actors whose involvement should be reconsidered rather than simply accepted or dismissed.¹³³

Recent commentary from Cridem Mauritanie in 2025 highlights growing worries about the security situation in the Sahel following the French withdrawal, as well as the uncertain future of the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES), which includes Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The article points to worsening regional stability, noting that *“l’Alliance des États du Sahel s’enlise dans l’insécurité, la répression politique et l’influence croissante de la Russie”* (“the Alliance of Sahel States is mired in insecurity, political repression, and the growing influence of Russia.) Although some argued that removing French forces would lead to greater sovereignty, these expectations have not been met. The author notes that *“l’heure est aujourd’hui à un premier bilan: le compte n’y est pas”* (“the time has come for a first assessment: the results are not there.”) This is seen as both a strategic and rhetorical setback, with coup leaders turning to more populist and anti-French rhetoric to make up for unfulfilled promises: *“les putschistes doivent compenser les promesses non tenues par une surenchère populiste alimentée par une rhétorique d’hostilité à la France”*, (“the coup leaders must compensate for their unfulfilled promises through populist escalation, fuelled by anti-French rhetoric.”) The article also mentions the presence of Russian mercenaries and renewed armed rebellion in northern Mali, especially by the CSP-Touareg coalition, as evidence of a more unstable security environment. The United Nations has raised concerns about the growing threat posed by these groups, which has increased since the French army left. The article suggests that France’s exit has unintentionally allowed Russia to expand its influence in the region, as *“l’ours russe s’engouffre dans la brèche”*, (“the Russian bear slips through the breach.”)¹³⁴

¹³³ Mali Actu. (2023, août). Perspectives africaines : l’opportunité et le défi des relations avec la Russie, la Chine et la France.

¹³⁴ Cridem. (2025, avril). Faillite de l’alliance des États du Sahel : un problème pour la France et l’Europe.

5. Comparison with Other Actors (Qualitative Analysis)

5.1. European Union: Ambiguous and Conditional Solidarity

The qualitative analysis of Sahelian perceptions of France from 2022 to 2025 identified key factors contributing to France's declining influence in the region. This analytical framework was subsequently extended to other international actors, beginning with the European Union. Despite France's membership in the EU, the Union's external policy is viewed as distinct, and both attitudes toward the EU and expectations for its future role in the Sahel differ distinctly from those associated with France. Therefore, it is essential to examine the strategies of this broader group of Western actors in the region. The analysis indicates that humanitarian aid from the European Union is generally valued in the Sahel. However, the EU must ensure that its assistance is not overly conditional and remains responsive to local political contexts.

5.1.1. Humanitarian Partnership and Development Support

The European Union in the Sahel Seen as an Aid Provider Only?

When the European Union donates significant funds to Sahelian states, media coverage tends to be straightforward and factual. In Mauritania, for example, humanitarian aid is mentioned without much detail. Le Calame reports on a new EU-funded assistance project in a neutral tone. This style of reporting is common in Sahelian media, where coverage of EU humanitarian aid rarely includes emotional language, criticism, or praise. The focus remains on logistics and coordination with local authorities or NGOs. As a result, even though the EU's financial support is substantial, it does not appear to have a significant narrative or ideological impact.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Le Calame. (2022, mai 17). Aioun : Démarrage des activités du projet d'assistance aux ménages les plus vulnérables.

Beyond humanitarian assistance, the European Union also supports governance-related initiatives in the Sahel, particularly in the field of human rights. Yet, once again, local media discourse surrounding EU interventions remains largely descriptive and emotionally neutral. In Niger Express, the article reporting on a meeting between the Nigerien National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) and a European delegation on February 22, 2022, briefly notes that several regional branches of the CNDH “*ont pu être installées grâce à l’appui de l’Union Européenne*” (“were able to be established thanks to the support of the European Union”). This acknowledgement, though it highlights a concrete and positive outcome, is not accompanied by any evaluative commentary or broader framing. This aligns with the broader trend observed throughout the corpus: even when the EU engages in politically relevant sectors such as human rights, local media coverage tends to avoid emotional rhetoric or ideological positioning.¹³⁶

L’Authentique reported in October 2023 on a significant European Union investment in Mauritania. The article notes that “*le Président de la République signe deux documents avec la Commission européenne*” (“the President of the Republic signs two documents with the European Commission”), formalizing support for infrastructure, green hydrogen production, job creation, youth entrepreneurship, and private sector growth. This move fits within the EU’s broader Green Deal strategy and its efforts to expand into Africa’s emerging sectors. The article mentions nearly €37 million in funding. Its tone is straightforward and avoids emotional or ideological language. The EU appears as a technical partner providing sectoral support, rather than as a dominant or historical force. This approach to media coverage shows a trend of presenting EU development cooperation as neutral. While this may help the EU maintain a reputation for impartiality, it also raises questions about the visibility and influence of the EU’s role in public discussions across the Sahel.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Niger Express. (2022, février 22). Situation droits humains au Niger : rencontre d’échanges entre la CNDH et une délégation de l’Union Européenne.

¹³⁷ L’Authentique. Aidara Cheikh. (24 octobre 2023). Le Président de la République signe deux documents avec la Commission européenne.

The Dominance of Official Narrative Regarding European Union in Sahelian Press

When European donations are discussed, the tone is often neutral or positive, with many articles describing the relationship as a partnership. Most of these articles are official communications or public statements from organizations and government officials. Sahelian media reports, especially those based on official sources, often refer to EU-Sahelian relations as a partnership. For example, MaliActu highlights the EU's role in Mali during the 2013 crisis, calling its actions "*efficace et multiforme*" ("efficient and multifaceted") and noting that its interventions were "*essentielles dans certains domaines*" ("essential in certain areas"). However, this positive view should be seen in context, as the article mainly reports diplomatic statements rather than offering its own opinion. This pattern is common in texts that share institutional information. Words like "partnership," "support," and "cooperation" appear frequently, but are used in a straightforward, informational manner, rather than to convey strong emotional or ideological support. So, while the EU is often described positively, the tone stays diplomatic. The EU is portrayed as a reliable partner in areas such as humanitarian aid, crisis response, and development; however, this is often presented in a formal, bureaucratic manner rather than with enthusiasm from the public.¹³⁸ Pressafrik also supports this view, describing a meeting between Senegalese authorities and the EU as their annual partnership dialogue, which is presented as a routine event rather than a political statement. The article highlights that this was the first session with the new Senegalese authorities, demonstrating both continuity and renewal in the EU's approach to governance changes. Overall, the EU is viewed as a legitimate actor in domestic policy areas, such as development and public welfare, particularly through dialogues described as strategic and structured. Again, this image comes mainly from official language and diplomatic protocol.¹³⁹

Pressafrik's 2024 coverage continues the usual technocratic and institutional approach to EU-Sahelian cooperation, but adds a slightly warmer tone by mentioning concepts such as friendship, mutual cooperation, and gratitude. President Faye's statement, in which he warmly welcomed President Charles Michel and emphasized "*l'importance des liens entre l'Europe et l'Afrique*" ("the importance of the relationship between Europe and Africa"), employs more

¹³⁸ Mali Actu. (2014). Coopération Mali - Union européenne : Un bilan impressionnant.

¹³⁹ Pressafrik. (2025, janvier 29). Sénégal - Union européenne : Un premier dialogue stratégique avec les nouvelles autorités.

symbolic language while maintaining a formal style. Even with these positive words, the discussion stays within official communication, marked by diplomatic language and shared goals. Terms such as “*partenariat renouvelé*” (“renewed partnership”), “*objectifs communs de justice et de progrès*” (“common objectives of justice and progress”), and “*coopération mutuelle*” (“mutual cooperation”) highlight a joint development agenda, but the overall tone remains institutional. The analysis reveals that this friendly language primarily originates from elite figures and official statements, and it does not strongly resonate with the broader media or reflect local voices.¹⁴⁰

While French military and political involvement in the region is often described in emotional and controversial terms, the media tends to present the EU as a stable and strategic partner. This pattern appears throughout the discourse analysis: France is usually seen through the lens of past tensions and debates over sovereignty, whereas the European Union is shown in a more neutral or even aspirational light, with an emphasis on institutional alignment and economic cooperation.

Neutral Tone Preserved, Even on Sensitive Issues

Even when covering a controversial topic like migration, the press tends to stay neutral. For example, *Journal du Tchad* reports on the EU’s efforts to address irregular migration by focusing on solutions and new opportunities for African youth. The article describes the results as positive and encouraging, but the overall tone remains factual and institutional, using terms like “*expérience positive*” (“positive experience”), “*bons résultats*” (“good results”), and “*nouvelles perspectives*” (“new perspectives”)¹⁴¹ Similarly, *Pressafrik* highlights the EU’s financial support of nearly 30 million euros (about 19.7 billion CFA francs) in a straightforward

¹⁴⁰ PressAfrik. (2024, April 23). *Diplomatie en action : Dialogue stratégique entre l’UE et le Sénégal à Dakar*

¹⁴¹ *Journal du Tchad*, 2022, novembre 17). *Sénégal : l’UE veut combattre la migration irrégulière*. *Journal du Tchad*

way. The EU's actions are described as reinforcing efforts to address irregular migration, without using emotional language or stirring controversy.¹⁴²

Alongside migration, Tamtam Info, a newspaper in Niger, brings attention to another sensitive topic: the European Union's changing relationship with Niger following the breakdown of diplomatic ties with France. The EU has agreed to buy 31,000 tonnes of uranium directly from Niger, a deal that previously went through the French company Orano. This move is more than just a business decision; it marks a shift away from France's traditional role as a middleman. The reporting remains neutral, without strong opinions, demonstrating that even important economic partnerships with the EU are presented in a straightforward manner. Notably, there is no anti-European sentiment, despite high nationalism and tensions with France. This suggests that, for now, the EU is not seen in Niger as an intrusive or neocolonial force, unlike France. The article talks about changes and a steady supply, focusing on practical matters rather than ideology or history. This supports a key finding from this discourse analysis: while France is often discussed with strong emotions in African media, especially around issues of trust and sovereignty, the EU is typically described as a technical partner, even in important sectors such as uranium. This is true, at least in official news coverage; however, editorial pieces may present different views, which will be explored later in this analysis.¹⁴³

5.1.2. Sovereignty Concerns and Strategic Self-Interest

Sovereignty Concerns in Sahelian media Regarding European Union Interventions

Most media coverage about the European Union focuses on official communication and discourse. However, some articles also discuss the EU's involvement in the Sahel.

One of the main criticisms highlighted in the analysis is the perceived lack of respect for the sovereignty of Sahelian states. A 2024 article from *Le Quotidien in Sénégal* offers insight into the tensions and perceptions of foreign influence. Unlike the mostly institutional and

¹⁴² Kéwoulo. Jeanne-Marie Sagna. (2024, 17 octobre). Lutte contre la migration irrégulière au Sénégal : l'Union européenne injecte près de 19,7 milliards de francs CFA.

¹⁴³ Tamtaminfo. (2025, janvier 2). L'Union européenne va acheter directement auprès du Niger 31 000 tonnes d'uranium. Tamtaminfo.

cooperative tone found in much of the media coverage about the European Union, this editorial presents a strongly critical perspective. It accuses the EU of undermining Senegalese sovereignty by putting pressure on internal political processes, especially during the 2024 electoral crisis. The article asserts Senegal's right to make its own decisions "*Encore une fois, l'Union européenne nous revient avec sa condescendance, son arrogance, et veut nous imposer sa voix dans la manière de répondre à la demande du Conseil constitutionnel*" ("once again, the European Union returns with its condescension and arrogance, trying to impose its voice on how we should respond to the Constitutional Council's request.") It also frames the EU's involvement as reminiscent of a colonial past: "*Nous vous ferons face comme des citoyens d'une Nation fière qui veut se défaire des chaînes du néo-colonialisme et du paternalisme*" ("We will stand up to you as citizens of a proud Nation determined to break free from the chains of neo-colonialism and paternalism.") This rhetoric shifts the view of EU actions from diplomacy or partnership to coercion. It reflects broader criticisms that external actors, including France and the European Union, often do not treat Sahelian states as equals, instead trying to influence political outcomes. The article's tone is emotionally charged and nationalistic, providing a rare but important example of popular discontent beneath formal diplomatic language. As a result, this article highlights a secondary but significant trend in African media: while most coverage describes the EU as a partner, this piece presents a counter-narrative that views the EU's actions as conflicting with the sovereignty and dignity of Sahelian nations.¹⁴⁴

The situation involving humanitarian aid in Niger helps illustrate the challenges Sahelian states face with European Union involvement. According to L'Événement Niger, the EU decided to allocate €1.3 million for flood victims without a formal request from Niger, which led to diplomatic tension. The article reports that "*L'ambassadeur a procédé arbitrairement à répartition, par région, de cette subvention*" ("The ambassador unilaterally proceeded to allocate the funds by region"), a decision Nigerien authorities found unacceptable, « *Une attitude qui jure avec les principes régissant les relations diplomatiques* » ("A behaviour that clashes with the principles governing diplomatic relations.") In response, Niger began its own investigation and asked the EU to do the same to clarify how the funds were used. The EU, in turn, stated that "*rien ne devrait justifier l'instrumentalisation de l'aide humanitaire à des fins politiques*" ("nothing should justify the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid for political purposes"). This incident reflects a common criticism: some believe the EU sometimes acts

¹⁴⁴ Le Quotidien. (2024, mars 6). L'Union européenne : encore une fois, c'est assez !

without involving national authorities, which can undermine local sovereignty even when the intention is to provide humanitarian support. The situation highlights the importance of sovereignty in these diplomatic discussions.¹⁴⁵

Some media point out differences within the European bloc, comparing the positions of the EU or France with those of individual member states. Following the 2023 coup in Niger, Niger Express reported that Belgium had chosen to continue its development cooperation despite the political crisis. The report used Belgium as an example and described this decision as a sign of respect for national sovereignty: “*Respectueuse de la souveraineté des pays africains, la Belgique [...] dit ne pas suspendre son aide au développement au Niger*” (“Respectful of the sovereignty of African countries, Belgium [...] stated it would not suspend its development aid to Niger.”) This stance was contrasted with France and the European Union, whose actions were seen as more interventionist. The coverage suggests a critique of what is seen as a double standard or paternalistic attitude in the wider EU approach. It also highlights that non-interference and ongoing partnership are possible European responses. This theme is also evident in other critical media coverage, which frequently highlights that sovereignty is a crucial issue in Sahel–EU relations and that disregarding this principle can have significant political and diplomatic implications.¹⁴⁶

A notable example of criticism from the Sahel towards the EU is the fishing agreement with Senegal, which media sources describe as not only political oppression but also economic exploitation. The Pressafrik article is a clear case of independent media expressing disappointment with the EU’s economic partnerships in the Sahel. The article uses strong and suggestive language, presenting the end of the EU-Senegal fishing agreement as a positive step. The title, “*Un ouf de soulagement*” (“a sigh of relief”), suggests that leaving the agreement is seen as a form of regaining autonomy. The author criticizes both local and European parties for maintaining an unfair deal, stating, “*Cette enveloppe annuelle est tellement dérisoire qu'elle représente à peine 2% du budget du ministère de la pêche du Sénégal*” (“This annual envelope is so paltry that it barely represents 2% of Senegal’s fisheries ministry budget.”) Words like “*dérisoire*” (“paltry”) and “*objectivement défavorables*” (“objectively unfavorable”) show a clear evaluative stance, different from neutral reporting. The author also questions the EU’s

¹⁴⁵ L’Événement Niger. (2024, novembre 23). Niger : l’UE rappelle son ambassadeur pour consultation.

¹⁴⁶ Niger Express. (2023, juillet 31). Coup d’État au Niger : la Belgique défie la France et maintient sa coopération avec le pays.

stated commitment to “good governance” by highlighting its role in what is called an unbalanced agreement: “*Comment l'UE si prompt à rappeler les règles de bonne gouvernance a-t-elle pu accepter d'aller dans le sens d'un protocole aussi bancal?*” (“How could the EU, so quick to invoke the rules of good governance, agree to such a flimsy protocol?”) The tone suggests a broader critique of unequal economic relationships, even though the term “neocolonialism” is not directly used. The final statement emphasizes the return of national control : “*Le Sénégal recouvre sa pleine souveraineté sur des quotas de pêche vendus à vil prix.*” (“Senegal regains full sovereignty over fishing quotas previously sold off at rock-bottom prices.”) Terms like *souveraineté*, *vendus à vil prix*, and *protocole bancal* highlight themes of loss, dependence, and recovery. In this context, the EU is portrayed as a strong actor whose actions can impact national interests.¹⁴⁷

Senegal is not the only country raising concerns about the EU’s partnerships. Mali Actu presents the relationship as contested and unequal, highlighting a gap between official claims of partnership and the economic reality seen by African actors. The article’s title, “*partenaires ou adversaires commerciaux?*” (“partners or commercial adversaries?”), sets a critical tone and questions the EU’s supposed generosity in Africa. It notes the EU’s leading role: “Europe, the continent’s leading partner, intends to strengthen its ties with Africa...” but quickly adds, “...but on the African side, economic actors want a rebalancing of the power dynamic.” The phrase “rebalancing the power dynamic” highlights a sense of structural inequality, with Europe perceived as a dominant force. This reflects wider African criticism of unfair trade within the EU-AU framework. The article also addresses a key issue: agricultural exports. It states, “A mutually beneficial partnership is possible if European exporters restrain their desire to offload agricultural surpluses in Africa at low prices.” Words like “restrain” and “dump” suggest excess and unfairness. Overall, the article’s language, balance of power, rebalancing, selling out, surplus, and beneficial frames the EU-Africa economic relationship as one that needs renegotiation. The focus is on economic justice and sovereignty, adding depth to how Sahelian media represent the EU.¹⁴⁸

Le Faso summarizes the current state of African-European partnerships and shows how the concept of sovereignty has become central in how Sahelian states communicate with European partners. The article reports on a diplomatic meeting and quotes the Burkinabe Prime Minister,

¹⁴⁷ Pressafrik. (2024, novembre 12). Fin des accords de pêche UE-Sénégal : un ouf de soulagement.

¹⁴⁸ Mali Actu. (2022). Union européenne/Union africaine : partenaires ou adversaires commerciaux ?

who uses strong language to change the way cooperation with the European Union is described. The phrase “Sovereignty is our struggle. We affirm our firm will to forge our own path” highlights a nationalist and independent approach to development, making sovereignty an active goal. The Prime Minister also says, “*Nous sommes amis avec tous les peuples qui respectent notre souveraineté et nos valeurs. Partout où nos intérêts se trouvent, nous y allons.*” (“We are friends with all peoples who respect our sovereignty and our values. Wherever our interests lie, we will go.”) This shifts the usual conditions of cooperation: instead of the EU setting the terms, the Sahelian state now requires respect for its sovereignty and values. This marks a move from dependency to a focus on strategic autonomy, or at least a claim to it. The Prime Minister also sets a new standard for partnerships, saying, “*Le Burkina Faso privilégie désormais une coopération honnête à fort impact.*” (“Burkina Faso now prioritizes honest, high-impact cooperation.”) The word “honest” suggests criticism of past relationships perceived as lacking transparency or mutual benefit, while “high-impact” emphasizes a focus on tangible results, moving away from aid that appears only symbolic or paternalistic. Overall, the article presents EU-Burkina relations as centred on sovereignty, mutual respect, and practical cooperation. The language used reflects a broader shift in Sahelian media, from being a passive recipient to an active participant in international partnerships.¹⁴⁹

European Condition Aid: Political Conditionality in the Sahel

The European Union often criticizes political regimes in the Sahel, particularly when it perceives a lack of sovereignty, and this criticism is frequently accompanied by sanctions. Typically, the EU responds to coups in the region by either supporting or condemning them. For example, Senepus reports a formal statement from Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, reaffirming support for democratic legitimacy in Niger: « *Le président Mohamed Bazoum, élu démocratiquement, est le seul président légitime du pays* » (“President Mohamed Bazoum, democratically elected, is the only legitimate president of the country.”) Statements like this, though formal, clearly show the EU’s position on governance and legitimacy. Phrases such as “*autorités issues du putsch*” (“authorities resulting from the coup”) and “*demande sa libération immédiate et inconditionnelle*” (“calls for his immediate and unconditional release”) signal a clear rejection

¹⁴⁹ Le Faso. (2025, janvier 22). Coopération Burkina Faso - Union européenne (UE) : Le Chef de la délégation de l’UE chez le Premier ministre.

of new military leaders, like France's stance. The EU's response to the 2021 military succession in Chad followed a familiar pattern: conditional engagement and official condemnation. L'événement Niger describes the EU's approach as consistent, supporting constitutional order while criticizing military takeovers and human rights abuses. The language remains formal and is based on international law. The EU is described as strongly condemning repeated violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. The article highlights the EU's dual approach: helping conditionally, while also employing sanctions or diplomatic pressure to counter undemocratic changes. This pattern in Sahelian media shows the EU acting as both a partner and a watchdog, promoting universal principles but sometimes missing local context. The discourse analysis highlights the repeated use of terms such as "condemnation," "violations," "rights," and "order," especially following military coups. However, these terms typically appear in official EU statements, rather than in local editorial commentary, which suggests that local media do not fully adopt this discourse.¹⁵⁰

As noted earlier, European sanctions often follow official criticism. L'événement Niger takes a critical and politically charged approach, reporting on EU sanctions against five members of Mali's transitional government. The article begins by employing the formal language characteristic of official statements, emphasizing the EU's stated commitments. It then shifts to a more sceptical tone, suggesting that these sanctions may be more about geopolitical strategy than practical diplomacy. The article notes that the sanctions occur amid diplomatic tension between Mali and France, which currently leads the European organization: « *Ces sanctions interviennent à un moment où le Mali est en pleine tension diplomatique avec la France qui comme par hasard, est actuellement à la tête de l'organisation européenne.* » ("These sanctions come at a time when Mali is in full diplomatic tension with France, which, coincidentally, currently heads the European organization.") By using the phrase 'coincidentally,' the article questions France's motives and hints that it may be using the EU to pursue its own interests. The article reinforces this suspicion with an even more provocative comparison : « *On serait tenté de croire que la France essaie par tous les moyens d'impliquer l'Europe dans son affront personnel avec le Mali, comme ce qui s'est passé avec Mouammar Kadhafi en Libye.* » ("One might be tempted to believe that France is trying by all means to drag Europe into its personal feud with Mali, as it did with Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.") This perspective presents the EU

¹⁵⁰ L'Événement Niger. (2021, mai 21). Situation au Tchad : l'Union européenne condamne la prise du pouvoir par le Conseil militaire.

less as an independent actor and more as a tool of French foreign policy, offering a strong counterpoint to the usual neutral narratives about EU actions in the Sahel.¹⁵¹

EU Security Policies Driven by Strategic Priorities: The EU's Migration-Centered Approach in the Sahel

The analysis also showed that some Sahelian media view the EU's security policies as serving its own interests. In Mauritania, the relationship with the EU appears strained, particularly due to migration agreements. Cridem highlights the gap between public perception and official communication regarding these agreements, with a focus on migration. While the EU presents its cooperation with Mauritania as balanced and respectful of sovereignty, local media often report ongoing suspicion and unease among regional governments and the Mauritanian public. Cridem reports that *“la répression des migrants irréguliers a alarmé les pays voisins, en particulier le Sénégal et le Mali”* (“the repression of irregular migrants has alarmed neighboring countries, particularly Senegal and Mali”), prompting diplomatic talks with Mauritania. Within Mauritania, concerns have been raised about potential agreements with the EU that could involve resettling or expelling migrants to their countries of origin. The EU responded by denying these claims and stating that its migration partnership with Mauritania does not involve sending third-country migrants from Europe to Mauritania. Despite these statements, the article suggests that the EU's initial silence contributed to the development of mistrust. Cridem notes that *“l'UE a peut-être pensé que ces rumeurs disparaîtraient d'elles-mêmes”* (“the EU may have thought these rumors would disappear on their own”), but instead they grew. This case illustrates how words like 'rumour,' 'repression,' and 'sovereignty' reflect a climate of mistrust and defensive diplomacy. The article shows that migration agreements, often described as neutral or positive in official EU or Sahelian statements, are viewed with caution and even alarm by Sahelian civil societies.¹⁵² Cridem also offers a critical view of European migration policies in Mauritania, questioning the state's alignment with the EU and highlighting the tensions these partnerships create both within the country and in the region. The expulsion of West Africans, including Senegalese and Malians, from Mauritania as part of its cooperation with the EU is presented as part of a broader, securitized migration policy. These actions have

¹⁵¹ L'Événement Niger. (2022, février 4). Plusieurs membres du gouvernement malien sanctionnés par l'Union européenne. L'Événement Niger.

¹⁵² Cridem. (2025, mars 29). La déclaration de l'UE à propos de l'accord avec la Mauritanie relatif à la migration illégale a-t-elle dissipé les doutes ?

“suscité moult réactions, notamment au Sénégal” (“provoked many reactions, notably in Senegal”), particularly amid *“critiques internes et internationales concernant les conditions de vie des migrants et les accusations de racisme”* (“internal and international criticism regarding migrants’ living conditions and accusations of racism”). The article describes Mauritania as *“un lieu d’expérimentation des politiques migratoires européennes”* (“a testing ground for European migration policies”), showing how these strategies aim to shift EU border control to African states in exchange for financial and logistical support. This cooperation is seen as seeking not only financial benefits but also diplomatic recognition, allowing Mauritania’s government to present itself as a recognized EU partner.¹⁵³ Cridem further criticizes the EU, accusing it of systemic human rights violations in its migration management in North and West Africa. The language is especially strong and accusatory, suggesting that *“l’Europe finance, et parfois participe directement, à la détention et l’expulsion systématique de communautés noires”* (“Europe finances, and sometimes directly participates in, the detention and systematic expulsion of Black communities”) in Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. The article links EU funding to what it calls racist practices, as part of a broader migration management strategy. It repeatedly uses strong language to denounce the EU’s role, claiming that *“l’enquête révèle que Bruxelles est bien consciente des abus et y participe directement”* (“the investigation reveals that Brussels is fully aware of the abuses and participates directly”). It also describes *“une réalité troublante où des fonds européens sont utilisés pour perpétrer des abus systématiques et racistes”* (“a troubling reality where European funds are used to perpetrate systematic and racist abuses”), putting the EU in violation of its own human rights commitments. This portrayal differs significantly from the neutral or diplomatic tone typically used in official coverage of EU-Sahel relations. Instead, words like abuse, detention, systematic expulsion, racist, responsibility, and concealed highlight deep distrust and moral accusation. From a qualitative discourse analysis perspective, this text shows how some Sahelian media not only question the legitimacy of European involvement but also see it as a form of racialized control and neo-imperial governance. It reveals an undertone of anger tied to perceived violations of African sovereignty and dignity, with Brussels seen as complicit in actions that would be condemned if they happened in Europe.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Cridem. (2025, mars 26). La Mauritanie à l’épreuve de l’immigration : entre partenariats européens et tensions internes.

¹⁵⁴ Cridem. (2024, novembre 5). La Mauritanie accusée des pratiques abusives financées par l’Union européenne.

L'authentique draws attention to opposition against the EU migration deal by sharing the perspective of activist Birame Dah Abeid. He argues that the deal was driven not by concern for "*l'intérêt attaché à ces migrants ni à celui des Mauritaniens*" ("neither the interest of the migrants nor that of the Mauritaniens"), but by a desire to "*empocher le pactole*" ("pocket the jackpot"), pointing to the €210 million involved. Words like "pactole," "empressement," and "deal" suggest a focus on corruption and opportunism instead of sovereignty or rights. This language expresses doubt about European intentions and accuses local leaders of prioritizing personal gain over public interest.¹⁵⁵ In addition, a Mauritanian Member of Parliament's opinion piece illustrates how this critical discourse diverges from the neutral language used in official statements. The piece describes the EU agreement as a threat to national dignity, sovereignty, and pan-African unity. The author writes that "*notre pays est désormais perçu comme un simple garde-frontières de l'Union européenne*" ("our country is now seen as nothing more than a border guard for the European Union"), highlighting a sense of subordination. Phrases such as "*réprimer nos frères africains*" ("repressing our African brothers") and "servitude" indicate that the EU's role is viewed as both external pressure and a betrayal of African solidarity. Yahya Loud also connects the agreement to corruption, stating that "*la mise en œuvre de cet accord a exposé l'ampleur de la corruption au sein de l'État*" ("the implementation of this agreement has revealed the extent of corruption within the State").¹⁵⁶

Over time, criticism of the migration deal in Mauritania grew so strong that Cridem published an article titled, "*L'Europe finira par être chassée de Mauritanie*" ("Europe will be chased out of Mauritania"). In an interview, Mauritanian parliament member Biram Dah Abeid offers one of the most direct and emotional critiques of the migration partnership between the European Union and Mauritania. Unlike the cooperative or neutral language found in official statements, his comments reflect deep public resentment and a sense that the agreement represents a new form of colonial control. Biram calls the partnership a "masquerade," expressing strong distrust of both EU intentions and the local authorities involved: « *Ce partenariat n'a eu aucun impact perceptible pour les citoyens mauritaniens. Ce n'est qu'une mascarade.* » ("This partnership had no perceptible impact on Mauritanian citizens. It is a masquerade.") He also claims that European funds end up with corrupt leaders, arguing that EU aid not only fails to help but also supports authoritarianism and inequality. Biram further connects the EU's migration policy to

¹⁵⁵ L'Authentique. (2024, mars 13). Birame Dah Abeid : « C'est rendre service au régime que de s'opposer à l'accord sur la migration avec l'Union européenne ».

¹⁵⁶ Cridem. (2025, mars 17). Retirons-nous de cet accord avant qu'il ne soit trop tard / Par Yahya Loud, Député

systemic racism, saying that “*Les haratines et les Afro-Mauritaniens sont les plus touchés par la pauvreté, l’exclusion et la marginalisation. [...] La Mauritanie est pour eux une prison, et l’Europe [...] semble vouloir les y maintenir enfermés*” (“The Haratines and Afro-Mauritanians are the most affected by poverty, exclusion, and marginalization. [...] Mauritania is a prison for them, and Europe seems to want to keep them locked inside.”). The article also notes that the presence of Spanish Guardia Civil patrols in Mauritania is perceived as an affront to national sovereignty and a source of public anger, reinforcing the notion that migration agreements serve as a form of security outsourcing to African governments. Biram concludes with a warning that if such agreements persist, Europe could be compelled to withdraw from Mauritania. Overall, the article presents a sharply critical view, associating European involvement with repression, corruption, and racism, in stark contrast to official narratives of partnership and development.¹⁵⁷

The EU and the Rise of Alternative Security Partners

The analysis found that people are aware that the EU’s approach to conditional, especially military, assistance now faces competition from Russia. Mali Actu highlights how the EU’s foreign policy in West Africa has become increasingly focused on military strategy, with new European missions aimed at limiting Russian influence. The article shifts the security discussion from development or peacebuilding to geopolitical competition. Its main language centres on rivalry and containment, not cooperation or local control. The EU is portrayed as responding to setbacks, and the article’s wording suggests a dynamic like the Cold War, where West Africa becomes a venue for power struggles rather than a region where African interests take precedence. From a discourse analysis perspective, the article presents EU actions in military and strategic terms, not humanitarian or democratic ones: “*Après ses déboires au Mali et en Centrafrique, l’UE n’entend pas laisser le champ libre à la Russie qui étend son influence en Afrique par mercenaires interposés*” (“After its setbacks in Mali and the Central African Republic, the EU does not intend to leave the field open to Russia, which is expanding its influence in Africa through proxy mercenaries.”) Words like “setbacks,” “proxy mercenaries,” and “military missions” move the focus toward power and competition, not partnership or shared progress. Overall, the article frames Africa less as a partner and more as a geopolitical

¹⁵⁷ Cridem. (2025, mars 29). « L’Europe finira par être chassée de Mauritanie » : entretien avec le député abolitionniste Biram Dah Abeid.

arena where the EU tries to regain influence.¹⁵⁸ European countries, especially Germany, are shown as supporting France, which suggests limited independence in EU foreign policy: “*les pays européens ont décidé de se ranger du côté de Paris*” (“European countries have decided to side with Paris”). The article also notes that Mali can fill the gap left by Europe, either with Russian support or independently. The language is strong and critical, portraying the EU as a neocolonial force whose departure is seen as an opportunity for Mali to realign and assert its sovereignty.¹⁵⁹ In 2024, another article from Mali Actu situates the end of the EU’s military training mission within the broader context of Mali’s geopolitical changes. The description of Mali breaking its anti-jihadist alliance with France and other European countries signals a clear and final split, while the move “*pour se rapprocher militairement et politiquement de la Russie*” (“to move closer militarily and politically to Russia”) highlights the ongoing shift. Although the tone is mostly neutral, the language suggests that the EU’s withdrawal is due to shifting alliances, rather than a planned or strategic move by Brussels.¹⁶⁰

Niger’s break with the European Union and shift toward Russia followed EU sanctions and political criticism. An article from L’Événement Niger describes how diplomatic and military cooperation between the EU and Niger ended after the July 26, 2023 coup. The Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP) reportedly “*dénoncé et annulé un accord militaire avec l’Union européenne*” (“denounced and cancelled a military agreement with the European Union”). The use of the words “denounce” and “cancel” signals a strong stance on political independence and resistance to outside influence. The article presents this break as a result of conflicting political views, noting that Niger and the EU “*Le Niger et l’Union européenne ne regardent pas la même direction depuis les évènements du 26 juillet*” (“Niger and the European Union no longer look in the same direction since the events of July 26”). From the Nigerien viewpoint, the EU’s refusal to recognize the new government and its call to reinstate President Bazoum are seen as provocations. This framing fits with a broader Sahelian narrative that emphasizes national autonomy and criticizes European conditions.¹⁶¹ Mali Actu adds that “*Le Niger met fin à ces deux missions avec l’Union européenne parce qu’il préfère désormais travailler avec la Russie*” (“Niger ends its two missions with the European Union because it now prefers to work with Russia”). The repeated references to Russia’s growing role highlight

¹⁵⁸ Mali Actu. (2022). Afrique de l’Ouest : l’Union européenne veut déployer trois nouvelles missions militaires pour contrer la Russie

¹⁵⁹ L’Événement Niger. (2022, mai 10). Départ des forces européennes du Mali : « nous n’avons pas à trembler devant cette déclaration »

¹⁶⁰ Mali Actu. (2024). L’Union européenne met fin à sa mission de formation des forces armées maliennes

¹⁶¹ L’Événement Niger. (2023, décembre 5). Le Niger dénonce un accord militaire avec l’Union européenne

a shift in the Sahelian media, where the EU is no longer seen as an essential security partner. This trend in the Sahelian press shows a focus on sovereignty, new alliances, and scepticism toward Western powers.¹⁶²

5.2. China: Massive Development Engagement and Perceived Resource Predation

The analysis also compared China to France as a new actor in the Sahel. China has been active in the region since the early 2000s and does not have a colonial history there. Instead, it has increased its influence by appealing to the Global South narrative and investing more in the area. Still, the analysis found some scepticism and suspicion, especially about possible exploitation of natural resources and concerns over human rights.

5.2.1. Large-Scale Investment under the Global South Narrative

A Praised Partnership in Sahelian Press

Views on Chinese involvement in the Sahel differ noticeably from how Western, especially European, engagement is seen, even if some strategies overlap. For example, an article in Niger Express presents a positive perspective, highlighting mutual respect, sovereignty, and non-interference. The language used here stands out from what is often found in media coverage of the EU, and is even more distinct from French coverage, which frequently mentions conditions, interference, or neocolonialism. Malian interim president Assimi Goïta states : *“Nous partageons les mêmes principes et les mêmes valeurs avec la République populaire de Chine, à savoir le respect de la souveraineté de nos États, la défense des intérêts de nos peuples, la non-ingérence dans les affaires intérieures, mais surtout le rejet de la manipulation liée aux questions des droits de l’Homme”* (“We share the same principles and values with the People's Republic of China, namely respect for the sovereignty of our states,

¹⁶² Mali Actu. (2023, décembre). Le Niger rompt avec l’Europe et se tourne vers la Russie : Un coup dur pour l’UE dans la lutte contre le terrorisme

the defence of our peoples' interests, non-interference in internal affairs, and above all, the rejection of manipulation related to human rights issues"). In this context, the partnership with China is described as both historically significant, stemming from Mali's independence, and focused on development that meets national needs. This approach reflects a broader trend in Sahelian media, where China is often portrayed as a reliable partner that respects local priorities and does not impose its own ideology. Describing the cooperation as strategic further emphasizes the focus on sovereignty and a shared vision, which contrasts with the more conditional approach often linked to Western countries.¹⁶³

By 2015, Mali Actu was already presenting a favourable and ideologically strong view of China's role in Africa. The language used highlights the pragmatism and respect seen in Chinese cooperation, setting it apart from Western former colonial powers. For example, Robert Mugabe's statement, "*Voici un homme qui représente un pays considéré autrefois comme pauvre, un pays qui ne nous a jamais colonisés. Il fait avec nous ce que nous attendions de ceux qui nous ont colonisés hier*" ("Here is a man representing a country once considered poor, a country that never colonised us. He is doing with us what we expected from those who colonized us"), captures this perspective. China is described not only as pragmatic but also as morally superior. Phrases like "taken the lead over traditional partners" and references to the "private preserve" of former colonial powers challenge their ongoing influence. The article employs terms related to progress and mutual benefit, such as "crossing important thresholds" and "to the benefit of both countries," to emphasize equal partnership. Chinese involvement is celebrated in economic, cultural, and security areas, with investments in solar energy and peacekeeping operations serving as evidence of their commitment. This portrayal supports a broader narrative in Sahelian media, where China is viewed as both an economic opportunity and a departure from neocolonial ties, particularly with France.¹⁶⁴ Ten years later, in 2024, Mali Actu's narrative about China remains consistent. The language is positive and emphasizes a shared future. Terms like "*amitié historique*" ("historic friendship"), "*partenariat stratégique*" ("strategic partnership"), and "*confiance et solidarité*" ("trust and solidarity") show a long-term commitment between the two countries. The article highlights values often linked to Chinese cooperation, especially "*le respect de la souveraineté nationale*" ("respect for national sovereignty"), which is described as a key principle. This is particularly important given the

¹⁶³ Niger Express. (2024, septembre 3). La Chine et le Mali portent leur coopération au niveau de « partenariat stratégique ».

¹⁶⁴ Mali Actu. (2015, décembre). Coopération Afrique-Chine : un pragmatique palier historique franchi.

frequent criticism of Western interventions in the region for being conditional or overly intrusive. The depth of the relationship is demonstrated by cooperation in areas such as defence, agriculture, health, and infrastructure, as well as phrases like “*construire un avenir commun*” (“build a shared future”) and “*de nouvelles opportunités de collaboration*” (“new opportunities for collaboration”). These reinforce a vision of mutual progress based on equality and mutual respect. The statement that “*la Chine se positionne comme un accompagnateur clé dans le processus de développement du Mali*” (“China positions itself as a key supporter in Mali’s development process”) portrays China as a partner in growth, rather than a controlling force. The relationship is described as supportive rather than dominating, a distinction often made in Sahelian media when comparing Chinese and French involvement. Overall, the article reflects a broader trend in Sahelian media, where China is consistently described with language about partnership, respect, and strategic alignment, offering an alternative to French intervention, which is often criticized for neocolonial attitudes.¹⁶⁵

Le Quotidien from Sénégal, featuring commentary from a former Senegalese Minister of Foreign Affairs, provides a clear example of the positive and unified language often used to describe China-Africa relations in Sahelian media. The article marks the twenty-year anniversary of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) as a milestone, highlighting what it calls a “*parfaite convergence de vues et d’intérêts*” (“perfect convergence of views and interests”) between China and African states. The tone is appreciative and confident, focusing on a long tradition of friendship, exchanges, and cooperation built on a “*un solide socle de valeurs et de principes*” (“a solid foundation of values and principles”). This approach helps present China as a reliable, long-term partner whose involvement in Africa is both historically grounded and aligned with African priorities. The article also highlights specific achievements, such as the construction of thousands of kilometres of roads, railways, airports, stadiums, universities, schools, and hospitals, to demonstrate the tangible impact of Chinese cooperation. In Senegal, more than \$ 2.5 billion in Chinese investments has been noted, covering areas from agriculture to solar energy. These details support a narrative of effectiveness and responsiveness. The article repeatedly highlights pragmatism, stating that “*ce qui fait la force du partenariat sino-africain, c’est son pragmatisme*” (“the strength of the China-Africa partnership lies in its pragmatism”). This idea is used to distinguish Chinese aid from that of Western donors, who are often portrayed in African media as imposing conditions or being

¹⁶⁵ Mali Actu. (2024, septembre). Rencontre bilatérale : Assimi Goïta et Xi Jinping célèbrent l’amitié historique entre le Mali et la Chine.

hindered by bureaucracy. Overall, the article demonstrates how Chinese involvement is portrayed as timely, efficient, respectful of sovereignty, and mutually beneficial, particularly when compared to more mixed or critical views of French involvement in the Sahelian press.¹⁶⁶

From Donor to Model: China's Soft Power and its Perception in the Sahel

Beyond its significant investments, China is also using soft power, especially with younger generations, to present itself as a dynamic and pragmatic presence in the region. Le Faso, for example, notes that many Burkinabè businesses people admire China, describing it as “*l’eldorado des hommes et femmes d’affaires*” (“the El Dorado of business men and women”). The media often highlights China's economic appeal and efficiency, using positive terms like “*l’Empire du Milieu*” (“the Middle Kingdom”), and characterized by “*un système de travail différent*” and “*des hommes et femmes d’affaires professionnels et exemplaires*” (“a different work system” and “professional and exemplary businesspeople”). China is described in highly favorable terms : “*Les Chinois sont dynamiques et accueillants. Ils travaillent beaucoup. Le pays est très développé*” (“The Chinese are dynamic and welcoming. They work a lot. The country is very developed”). Such language reveals an emotional side to the coverage, characterized by admiration and respect for Chinese methods. This portrayal helps normalize China as a leading economic partner and supports the idea of Chinese superiority in work ethic and development. In contrast, coverage of the European Union tends to be more neutral and administrative. References to China as the world's second-largest economy and Africa's top trading partner for the past fourteen years add a quantitative dimension to this admiration, reinforcing China's legitimacy in the media's view.¹⁶⁷ Le Faso also states that “*Le Burkina doit s’inspirer du modèle chinois*” (“Burkina must draw inspiration from the Chinese model”), positioning China as both a donor and a role model. The repeated use of words like 'dynamic' and 'pragmatic' further links China with action, competence, and respect. This language reflects a broader shift in how Sahelian media perceive international cooperation, with China increasingly viewed as an alternative to Western approaches, offering practical benefits without political conditions.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Le Quotidien. (2020, novembre 18). Le FOCAC : vingt ans de coopération Chine-Afrique.

¹⁶⁷ Le Faso. (2024, mars 4). Commerce international : La République populaire de Chine, l’eldorado des hommes et femmes d’affaires burkinabè

¹⁶⁸ Le Faso. (2024, septembre 30). Chine - Burkina : Des Burkinabè donnent leurs points de vue sur la coopération.

China's Discursive Strategy in the Sahel: Soft Power and South-South Solidarity

China seeks to strengthen its regional influence and differentiate itself from former partners, such as France, by promoting a Global South narrative that emphasizes its shared future with Africa. Mali Actu presents Sino-African relations in a highly positive and emotional light, describing them as a model for South-South cooperation. The language used emphasizes closeness, with phrases like “indestructible friendship” and “unshakable mutual support,” suggesting a relationship founded on solidarity and shared history rather than mere diplomacy. The article refers to China as a “*partenaire fiable et solidaire, respectueux des aspirations et des choix stratégiques des nations africaines*” (“a reliable and supportive partner, respectful of the aspirations and strategic choices of African nations.”) The metaphor “hand in hand” further supports the idea of equal partnership and mutual respect in development. The article also highlights China's significant economic role, particularly in infrastructure and investment, and notes that admiration for China stems directly from the African people, lending the partnership a sense of grassroots support. By referring to the relationship as a “*modèle à suivre pour le reste du monde*” (“a model to follow for the rest of the world”), the article positions the Sino-African alliance as a standard for others, fitting it into a larger narrative of the Global South seeking unity and independence. The language contrasts cooperative terms like respect, admiration, and equality with criticism of Western approaches as outdated or forceful.¹⁶⁹ This vocabulary is used throughout the outlet in other articles, presenting the Sino-African relationship as a model of mutual transformation. The language is not just supportive but also idealistic, describing the partnership as “*solidarité entre les deux continents*” (“solidarity between the two continents”), and driven by a “*vision commune d'un monde plus juste et plus prospère*” (“a shared vision of a fairer and more prosperous world.”) The article calls this connection a “*véritable alliance stratégique qui transforme le paysage africain*” (“a true strategic alliance that transforms the African landscape.”) These terms show China as more than just an economic player; it is seen as a partner that respects sovereignty and supports local development. The concept of “*modernisation conjointe*” (“joint modernization”) challenges traditional, top-down development models and advocates for equal progress. This choice of words helps make China's presence in Africa seem normal and even preferred, while quietly rejecting neocolonial ideas. The article reflects a trend in African media that utilizes the China-Africa relationship to envision new political possibilities and reevaluate the South's role in global politics.¹⁷⁰ Cridem

¹⁶⁹ Mali Actu. (2024, avril 20). Chine-Afrique : Une amitié indestructible et un soutien mutuel inébranlable.

¹⁷⁰ Mali Actu. (2024, septembre). Chine-Afrique : Un partenariat pour la modernisation du Sud.

Mauritanie also highlights China's shared goals and values with Africa. Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ghazouani says the relationship "*ne repose pas seulement sur les échanges économiques et commerciaux, mais avant tout sur un fort partage des visions et des positions*" ("is not only based on economic and trade exchanges, but above all on a strong sharing of visions and positions.") The article describes a shared future for humanity, employing language that emphasizes fairness and collective progress. References to long-term plans, such as Vision 2035 and the Belt and Road Initiative, add to the sense of a lasting and legitimate China-Africa partnership. "*Nous sommes déterminés... à renforcer le partenariat avec la Chine pour réaliser les aspirations du peuple africain et du peuple chinois,*" ("We are determined... to strengthen the partnership with China to fulfil the aspirations of the African and Chinese peoples.")¹⁷¹ Le Faso also highlights both the economic and ideological benefits of collaborating with China, distinguishing it from French or Western partnerships. The article notes that "*la politique officielle non interventionniste de la Chine rend encore plus séduisant son partenariat*" ("China's official non-interventionist policy makes its partnership all the more attractive"), a theme often seen in Sahelian media. It also places this cooperation in a postcolonial context, saying China acts in the name of South-South solidarity and a shared history of being dominated by the West. Unlike the West, the article states that China's relations are characterized by friendship and equality, supporting a view of horizontal cooperation and rejecting outdated, hierarchical models. Overall, the article's language aligns with a broader trend in Sahelian media, which presents China as a respectful, practical, and like-minded partner.¹⁷²

China's south-south narrative is supported by actions that garner positive media coverage, particularly in international forums. For example, an article from Niger Inter about the 38th African Union summit shows how China is linked to Africa's modernization and growing influence. The article highlights China's support for the AU's entry into the G20 and for African participation in the BRICS group. The phrase "*le continent a un allié de taille prêt à faire avancer sa cause sur l'échiquier international,*" ("the continent has a major ally ready to advance its cause on the international stage") strengthens China's image as a dependable partner. The article employs language that emphasizes solidarity and empowerment, contrasting with Western narratives that often prioritize hierarchy. This helps present China as a leader of

¹⁷¹ Cridem. (2024, septembre 6). FCSA : le partenariat Afrique-Chine repose sur un fort partage des visions (président mauritanien).

¹⁷² Le Faso. (2018, novembre 12). Chine : un partenaire de confiance pour l'avenir.

the Global South and a promoter of new development paths for African countries.¹⁷³ Niger Inter also mentions China's ongoing support and defence of African interests at the United Nations, suggesting a lasting alliance. In Sahelian media, this type of reporting portrays China as a steady and respectful ally that supports sovereignty and self-determination.¹⁷⁴

Alongside the current Global South narrative, China is also promoting a sense of historical closeness with African countries. An article from *Le Quotidien Sénégal* presents a strong ideological message, portraying China and Africa as partners in resisting Western dominance. The article opens with clear admiration for the Chinese president, using the phrase "*Son Excellence, le bien aimé Xi Jinping*" ("the well appreciated Xi Jinping"), which shows both emotional and political respect. It then highlights historical and structural similarities between China and African nations, noting that both have endured "*occupations extérieures coloniales*" ("external colonial occupations"), and share similar "*structures sociologiques et culturelles*" ("sociological and cultural structures") such as a "*population à majorité paysanne*" ("predominantly peasant population.") These points help establish the concept of a shared struggle rooted in anti-colonial resistance and the marginalization of the Global South. The article is openly critical of Western economic institutions, describing the negative effects of policies from the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO as "*les affres des politiques inconséquentes des institutions de Bretton Woods et des dictats de l'OMC,*" ("the afflictions caused by the ill-conceived policies of the Bretton Woods institutions and the dictates of the WTO.") This criticism frames Western economic leadership as unfair, which in turn justifies a closer relationship with China. In contrast, China's increasing role in Africa is described as positive and welcomed by African, especially Senegalese, communities: "*les populations africaines et sénégalaises en particulier approuvent [...] le renforcement de la présence de la Chine dans nos pays,*" ("African populations, especially Senegalese ones, approve [...] the strengthening of China's presence in our countries.") By referring to China and Africa as part of "*le même bloc tiers-mondiste*" ("the same Third World bloc,"), the article draws on a tradition of non-alignment and solidarity. The language used, with its historical and ideological references, presents China as both an economic partner and a political ally in the effort to create a more equal and humane world order. Overall, the article frames China-Africa cooperation as

¹⁷³ Niger Inter. (2025, février 17). 38^e sommet de l'Union africaine : la Chine réitère son soutien à la modernisation de l'Afrique.

¹⁷⁴ Niger Inter. (2022, août 23). La Chine et l'Afrique : bons amis, bons frères et bons partenaires pour toujours.

a partnership based on a shared destiny, resistance to Western influence, and postcolonial independence.¹⁷⁵

Chinese Narrative Power as a Counterpoint to the West

African media in the Sahel often praise China because many people compare its policies to those of former colonial powers, especially France. The article from *Pressafrik Sénégal* in 2025 shows how Senegal and the Sahel now view France's declining influence in a positive light, favoring new partners. It describes a clear shift in Senegal's economic relationships, driven by a national goal to diversify suppliers and reduce dependence on France: "*Ce renversement commercial s'inscrit dans une volonté stratégique du Sénégal de diversifier ses sources d'approvisionnement et de réduire sa dépendance historique à la France,*" ("This commercial reversal reflects Senegal's strategic will to diversify its supply sources and reduce its historic dependence on France.") The language used highlights how former colonial powers are losing ground, while new players are seen as bringing balance.¹⁷⁶ *Sénéplus* employs similar language, emphasizing competition and change. The article's title "*La Chine accélère sa conquête*" ("China accelerates its conquest") employs a metaphor to illustrate China's increasing presence. It highlights a sharp increase in Chinese investment, with a 130% rise to \$4.03 billion. The narrative contrasts the West's decline with China's rise, describing China as both opportunistic and in tune with anti-imperial feelings. A key narrative element lies in the juxtaposition between Western decline and Chinese ascendance: "*La Chine profite bien de la perte de vitesse des occidentaux et particulièrement de la France*" ("China is taking advantage of the Western slowdown, particularly that of France.") As a result, China is presented as "*l'alternative idéale*" ("the ideal alternative"), benefiting from both practical and symbolic reasons. Overall, the language in these articles reflects a wider trend in Sahelian media that emphasizes sovereignty, disappointment with the West, and a preference for less intrusive partners.¹⁷⁷

In Sahelian media, China is often presented not just as an alternative economic partner, but also as a potentially stronger military ally. *Mali Actu* highlights a global competition for influence

¹⁷⁵ *Le Quotidien*. (2018, septembre 1). Le destin commun de la Chine et de l'Afrique.

¹⁷⁶ *Pressafrik*. (2025, avril 2). Commerce extérieur : la Chine détrône la France comme premier fournisseur du Sénégal.

¹⁷⁷ *SenePlus*. (2023, septembre 5). La Chine accélère sa conquête de l'Afrique subsaharienne.

in Africa, showing the United States falling behind. The report describes Russia and China as more appealing and active partners for African countries, while the U.S. is seen as less effective. The articles emphasize the practical benefits that Russia and China offer, including investments, technology, and military support. They also argue that these new powers offer “*des opportunités que les États-Unis ne peuvent pas égaler,*” (“opportunities the United States cannot match”), positioning China and Russia as more attractive options.¹⁷⁸ In another article, Mali Actu takes a critical stance toward Western military alliances, especially NATO, and presents China and Russia as rising powers challenging the West’s dominance. The West is described in very negative terms as “*un rassemblement de bandits visant à supprimer l’ennemi par la force ou l’économie*” (“a gathering of bandits aiming to eliminate the enemy by force or economics”) and NATO’s legitimacy is questioned. The article also challenges traditional Cold War narratives, suggesting that Europe has acted mainly in support of U.S. interests: “*la menace mythique de l’Union soviétique était l’excuse parfaite pour construire toute une série de vassaux américains que nous avons l’habitude d’appeler l’Europe,*” (“the mythical threat of the Soviet Union was the perfect excuse to construct a series of American vassals we used to call Europe.”) Additionally, China is depicted as a product of Western capitalism, with the West’s pursuit of profit, “*avidité capitaliste*” (“capitalist greed”), leading to the rise of a powerful competitor, “*ils ont élevé le dragon*” (“they raised the dragon”). The article also questions the effectiveness of Western attempts to contain China, noting that, unlike with Russia, “*l’Amérique n’a jamais réussi à diaboliser Pékin*” (“America has never managed to demonize Beijing”).¹⁷⁹

Some media outlets in the Sahel argue that Western narratives are trying to undermine the growing relationship between China and Africa. A 2022 editorial from Seneplus strongly defends China’s presence in Africa and challenges the Western idea of a “debt trap.” The article presents China not as a neo-imperial power, but as a central figure in Africa’s efforts to move forward, the “*épicerie de ces grands mouvements pour la ‘rédemption’ de l’Afrique*” (“the epicenter of these great movements for the ‘redemption’ of Africa”). This framing positions China as a revolutionary and supportive partner, in contrast to what the author describes as a hypocritical and paternalistic West. The editorial rejects the idea that debt is always harmful, suggesting that borrowing can be legitimate if it serves national interests. It claims that Western criticisms are based on outdated views of Africa. The piece also highlights China’s approach of

¹⁷⁸ Mali Actu. (2024, janvier). Washington échoue à contrer la Russie et la Chine en Afrique.

¹⁷⁹ Mali Actu. (2022, juillet). Que peut opposer l’OTAN à l’alliance militaire de la Russie et de la Chine ?

working with African countries according to their needs, rather than imposing its own agenda. The editorial calls for recognition of African agency and the right to choose partners freely, presenting China as a preferred partner because it does not seek to impose its will, preferring “*allier avec les Africains selon leurs besoins, au lieu de leur imposer ses désirs*” (“allying with Africans according to their needs, rather than imposing its own desires.”) The final appeal is to African agency and dignity: “*Pourrait-on demander alors à ces 'nouveaux sympathisants' de l’Afrique... de reconnaître aux Africains la capacité d’évaluer leurs besoins et de choisir librement leurs partenaires ?*” (“Could we then ask these ‘new sympathizers’ of Africa... to at least feign the generosity of acknowledging that Africans are capable of assessing their needs and choosing their partners freely?”).¹⁸⁰ Two years later, SenePlus published another article that again refutes Western narratives about China’s role in Africa, rejecting claims of neo-colonialism and debt-trap diplomacy. The article argues that China is a respectful and beneficial partner, criticizing what it describes as an “*campagne médiatique sans précédent contre la Chine*” (“unprecedented media campaign against China”) by Western governments to block Sino-African cooperation. It challenges the idea that China is ‘colonizing’ Africa, pointing out what it sees as double standards in how China’s presence is viewed in other regions. The article also disputes the ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ narrative, “*la fable du ‘piège de la dette’*” (“the fable of the ‘debt trap’”), citing data that shows China holds a smaller share of African external debt compared to Western private creditors. It notes that Chinese loans often have lower interest rates and more flexible terms, especially for the least developed countries. The article highlights China’s significant participation in the Debt Service Suspension Initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic, contrasting it with the minimal contributions from Western countries and banks. Overall, the narrative contrasts Western powers, accused of past and present exploitation, with China, which is portrayed as a generous and equal partner.¹⁸¹

Le Quotidien presents France as more directly opposed to China than other Western powers. The article challenges Western geopolitical narratives by questioning the legitimacy of the “*ordre international fondé sur des règles*” (“rules-based international order”), which it claims conceals ongoing neocolonial domination, particularly by France. It draws a sharp contrast between France and China, accusing France of “*assassiner plusieurs chefs d’Etat parce qu’ils défendaient les intérêts de leurs Peuples,*” (“assassinating several heads of state because they defended their people’s interests”). The examples of Olympio, Mba, Sankara, Keïta, and

¹⁸⁰ SenePlus. Ngom, B. (2022, octobre 24). La Chine de Xi Jinping et l’Afrique.

¹⁸¹ SenePlus. (2024). La Chine et l’Afrique.

Bokassa are used to support this narrative of betrayal and violence by former colonial powers. In contrast, the article states that “*La RPC n’a jamais entrepris ou mené une guerre d’agression contre un autre Etat,*” (“The People’s Republic of China has never launched or led a war of aggression against another state”). This comparison portrays China as a peaceful and reliable ally, whereas France is depicted as a dominant and interventionist power. The editorial also questions liberal democratic values, suggesting that “*les droits des peuples... doivent prévaloir sur les libertés individuelles... qui sont d’ailleurs des illusions*” (“the rights of peoples must prevail over individual liberties, which are often illusions.”) This perspective supports a communitarian and developmentalist view, like those of China and Russia, where sovereignty and social welfare are valued over Western-style individual freedoms.¹⁸²

To sum up, *Le Pays*, a newspaper from Burkina Faso, presents the views of some people in the Sahel on China. The article describes the China-Africa relationship as a strong and equal partnership, based on a “*un rêve partagé, un avenir partagé*” (“a shared dream, a shared future”). It discusses the results of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing and highlights China’s “*ferme volonté de mener des politiques d’amitié à l’égard de l’Afrique*” (“firm determination to pursue friendship policies toward Africa.”) The article not only emphasizes the long-standing ties between China and Africa but also rejects any paternalistic or neocolonial attitudes, stressing that “*le chemin à emprunter pour l’Afrique doit être décidé par les Africains eux-mêmes,*” (“the path Africa must follow must be decided by Africans themselves.”) Words like solidarity, mutual benefit, and South-South cooperation appear often. China and Africa are shown as *de bons amis, de bons partenaires et de bons frères,*” (“good friends, good partners, and good brothers.”) The article uses this language, along with metaphors about facing challenges together, “*ce grand bateau va braver vents et marées,*” (“this great ship will weather all storms”) to show resilience and a long-term vision, especially in response to criticism from the West. It also dismisses common accusations against China’s role in Africa, calling claims of neocolonialism, resource exploitation, and debt control weak and unfounded. Instead of just defending China, the article turns the argument around, presenting China as a liberating and empowering partner. Overall, the language and tone show a strong ideological connection, rooted in postcolonial pride and a vision for a new global order. The article contributes to a broader narrative in francophone African media, which portrays China

¹⁸² Le Quotidien. (2021, juillet 17). Les combats de la Chine et de la Russie sont ceux de l’Afrique

as both a development partner and a co-creator of a more balanced, less Western-centered world.¹⁸³

5.2.2. Growing Criticism and Concerns over Economic Dependency

South-South Solidarity or Strategic Dependency: Suspicion of Neocolonialism in Sahelian Press

The analysis also showed that, while most opinions about China are positive, some editorials have criticized its presence in Africa since its arrival on the continent. For example, in June 2007, Le Faso published an editorial called « *Afrique: Où va la Chine?* » that offered an early and insightful critique of China's growing economic role on the continent. The article warned that unequal trade between China and Africa could leave Africa with « *un goût très amer* » (“a very bitter taste”) at a disadvantage and even risk harming its economies. As the article clearly puts it: « *la main qui reçoit est forcément sous celle qui donne* » (“the receiving hand is inevitably under that of the giver.”) It raised concerns about a new form of dependency and questioned whether China's involvement truly benefits Africa. The editorial also hoped that the G8 summit in May 2007 would encourage China to link its aid and loans to « *la nécessité d'exiger de leurs partenaires le respect d'un minimum de droits humains* » (“the necessity of requiring partners to respect at least minimal human rights.”) This early critique set the stage for a recurring theme in African discussions: respect for China's practical approach, but also concern about dependency and social impact.¹⁸⁴

One of the main criticisms of China today is what is often referred to as “debt diplomacy.” A 2018 article in Le Quotidien Sénégal shares concerns from the credit rating agency Moody's about the risks linked to the lack of transparency in Chinese lending in sub-Saharan Africa. African countries sometimes turn to Chinese funding to avoid the strict conditions imposed by Western donors, but this choice brings its own set of difficulties. Moody's notes that while these loans help address infrastructure needs, they often come with terms that increase debt and may

¹⁸³ Le Pays Burkina Faso. (2018, septembre). COOPERATION CHINE/AFRIQUE : Un rêve partagé, un avenir partagé

¹⁸⁴ Le Faso. (2007, juin 11). Afrique : Où va la Chine ?

require countries to relinquish control over key sectors. The article points out that China's policy of non-interference and lack of political or governance conditions can seem appealing, but it can also deepen dependency because many borrowers have limited ability to repay. By avoiding multilateral organizations like the Bretton Woods institutions or the Paris Club, African states end up *“un face-à-face avec la Chine [...] qui peut rapidement devenir intenable”*, (“a face to face with China [...] that can quickly become unsustainable.”)¹⁸⁵

Le Quotidien Senegal criticizes what it sees as China's growing and strategic influence in Africa, arguing that it is often hidden behind official statements about mutual support. While Beijing talks about a *“partenariat gagnant-gagnant”* (“win-win partnership”), the article claims that China's real approach relies on financial influence and control, *“la diplomatie du chéquier”* (“chequebook diplomacy”), often through loans that can lead to debt dependency. When repayments fail, China is said to take over key infrastructure. The article uses strong language, describing China's presence as *“pillage”* (“plunder”), of not just resources, but also political and media spaces. For instance, it says that *“la Chine déploie une stratégie sophistiquée pour influencer l'espace médiatique africain”* (“China is deploying a sophisticated strategy to influence the African media landscape”), through journalist training, investment, and limiting criticism. The author also notes that Chinese generosity often comes with gifts for local political elites, which helps secure diplomatic support, especially in international forums like the UN. The article ends by urging Africa to seek truly respectful partnerships, whether with China or France, stating that *“l'Afrique a le devoir de ne pas être traitée comme une zone d'exploitation”* (“Africa has a duty not to be treated as a zone of exploitation”).¹⁸⁶ Mali Actu and some in the Sahel also accuse China of continuing practices from colonial times. Although China often announces large investments, these are mostly aimed at infrastructure that serves its own interests, especially for extracting minerals. Railways, roads, and bridges are viewed as means of transporting resources, rather than as tools for African development. The article questions the sincerity of China's soft power, such as building impressive but low-priority public buildings or offering scholarships to study in China, instead of supporting local education. These actions are described as distractions that do not fit local needs. The article argues that this approach ignores African ecological, social, and cultural realities in favour of Chinese goals. It suggests that China's ambitions are not only short-sighted but could be harmful in the long run. The infrastructure being built is said to last only as long

¹⁸⁵ Le Quotidien. (2018, décembre 28). Dette des pays africains envers la Chine : L'alerte de Moody's.

¹⁸⁶ Le Quotidien. (2025, janvier 11). “Symposium” de coopération : comment la Chine s'impose en Afrique.

as China needs it for resource extraction, with no focus on sustainability or adapting to population changes. Ultimately, the article cautions that *“laisser la Chine prospérer dans ces dangers, c’est assurément participer à la perte de l’Afrique et de l’Africain”* (“letting China prosper in this context is tantamount to contributing to the loss of Africa and Africans.”) Rather than being a helpful partner, China is depicted as a new force of exploitation, using the language of cooperation but following the same extractive patterns as colonial powers.¹⁸⁷

Human Rights Concerns in China’s Engagement in the Sahel

In addition to economic concerns, some newspapers criticize China for its human rights record. For example, in 2020, *Le Quotidien Senegal* reported on China's efforts to influence global human rights standards through international organizations. The article argues that Beijing *“promouvoir une hiérarchie des droits humains”* (“promotes a hierarchy of human rights”) by emphasizing collective development over individual freedoms, which could undermine the universal nature of these rights. It also criticizes China's support for governments in countries like Venezuela and South Sudan, suggesting that these partnerships are motivated by self-interest. The article warns that if China's “win-win” model becomes widely accepted, human rights could become negotiable between countries rather than being upheld as international obligations. It calls for a clear rejection of China's attempts to redefine human rights, emphasizing that these are legal and inalienable obligations, not terms to be bargained in diplomacy. Ultimately, the article states: *“Nul ne devrait se laisser berné par la proposition trompeuse de la Chine au sujet de l’avenir des droits humains”* (“No one should be deceived by China's misleading proposal concerning the future of human rights.”)¹⁸⁸ *Le Quotidien* also reports on serious human rights abuses, such as *“des expropriations brutales, des violences sexuelles et une pollution délibérée”* (“brutal expropriations, sexual violence and deliberate pollution”), allegedly committed by the Chinese oil company CNOOC in September 2024. According to the article, these incidents suggest a broader disregard for African communities when economic or strategic interests are involved.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Mali Actu. (2014, septembre). Afrique-Chine : L’incohérence et l’inconséquence.

¹⁸⁸ *Le Quotidien*. (2020, mars 4). La Chine tente de redéfinir les droits humains, le gouvernement du Sénégal doit résister.

¹⁸⁹ *Le Quotidien*. (2025, janvier 11). “Symposium” de coopération : comment la Chine s’impose en Afrique.

The article “*L’argent de la Chine financerait la violence en Afrique*” from Mali Actu explains that not everyone in the Sahel supports China's non-intervention policy. It offers a balanced perspective on Chinese aid in Africa, highlighting both its positive impact on development and the ethical concerns it raises. Chinese support has led to “*une croissance élevée, la construction d’infrastructures, et le renforcement de la santé et de l’éducation*” (“strong growth, infrastructure development, and improvements in health and education”). However, the article also notes that this aid can indirectly benefit authoritarian governments. Because China does not impose conditions on its aid, unlike Western countries, recipient governments have greater freedom in how they use the funds. The article references sources such as The Irish Times and Mail & Guardian Africa to demonstrate that Chinese aid often goes to “*des régimes qui ne respectent pas les droits de l’homme*” (“regimes that do not respect human rights”), and these resources can be used to strengthen those regimes. The lack of transparency makes it easier for leaders to divert funds for their own political objectives, which can include suppressing opposition or fueling internal conflict. According to the article, China's primary goal is strategic: “*puiser dans les ressources naturelles pour garantir sa sécurité énergétique... profiter de nouveaux marchés... et s’assurer du soutien politique*”, (“to tap into natural resources for energy security, gain access to new markets, and secure political backing”), particularly in organizations such as the UN or WTO. In summary, while Chinese aid brings development, it also serves China's own interests and may undermine democracy and stability in Africa.¹⁹⁰

Between Opportunity and Dependency: China’s Interests and Africa’s Responsibility to Respond

Some people in the Sahel now see China as a major power that mainly looks out for its own interests, rather than showing true solidarity with the global south. In an article about the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Le Faso notes that “*La Chine s’est engagée à importer pour 300 milliards de dollars de marchandises en provenance d’Afrique entre 2022 et 2024*”, (“China has committed to importing \$300 billion worth of goods from Africa between 2022 and 2024”), along with providing significant financial support. Still, the article notes that even with these large numbers, “*les pays africains restent en retrait tandis que la Chine prend l’initiative*” (“African countries remain in the background while China takes the lead.”) This gap is linked not just to China’s active diplomacy, but also “*les faiblesses de la planification*

¹⁹⁰ Mali Actu. (2015, juin). *L’argent de la Chine financerait la violence en Afrique*.

stratégique du côté africain” (“weak strategic planning on the African side.”) In other words, the imbalance comes from both African disorganization and Chinese assertiveness. The article also questions whether joint plans, such as the Vision 2035, truly serve both sides, as “*la Vision 2035 Chine-Afrique est alignée sur la propre Vision 2035 de la Chine*”, (“the China-Africa Vision 2035 aligns with China’s own Vision 2035.”) This raises doubts about whether these long-term plans help Africa’s independent development or mainly support China’s rise. Finally, the article criticizes FOCAC “*souvent critiqué pour sa lourdeur au sommet et son orientation excessive vers les relations d’État à État*” (“often criticized for being top-heavy and overly focused on state-to-state relations.”) Overall, the analysis challenges the notion of an equal partnership, revealing that African states often act passively rather than strategically, allowing China to advance its global ambitions under the guise of cooperation.¹⁹¹

Le Faso describes the relationship between Africa and China as one of economic exploitation rather than a genuine partnership. The article challenges the idea of 'win-win' cooperation, calling it “*un système de prédation savamment orchestra*” (“a cleverly orchestrated system of predation.”) According to the author, Chinese loans primarily benefit China, “*la Chine ne fait que prêter à la Chine*” (“China merely lends to itself”), as infrastructure projects are often handled by Chinese companies and workers, often in exchange for long-term access to African resources. The article also notes that while many Africans are rejecting France's influence, “*Des voix s’élèvent pour exiger un nouveau partenariat avec la France,*” (“Voices are rising to demand a new partnership with France”). However, it warns young Africans not to simply replace one dominant power with another. The article criticizes China's lack of concern for political governance, human rights, and environmental protection, “*La RPC se moque du fait qu’un dirigeant africain soit un dictateur*” (“The PRC does not care whether an African leader is a dictator”), and highlights the lack of transparency and corruption in Chinese contracts, including overbilling, which can foster political dependence and harm local development and the environment. Ultimately, the editorial encourages Africans to take responsibility and work towards change, shifting the focus from blaming foreign powers to the need for improved governance and reform: “*Nous devons arrêter de nous lamenter... et travailler à un changement de comportement,*” (“We must stop lamenting... and work toward a change in behaviour.”) This

¹⁹¹ Le Faso. (2024, septembre 4). FOCAC 2024 : La Chine consolide son influence sur le continent, l’Afrique, fidèle à elle-même !

perspective offers a realistic counterpoint to pro-China narratives by emphasizing African agency and cautioning against idealizing any foreign influence.¹⁹²

The End of China's Hegemony in Africa?

The latest China-Africa summit did not generate much excitement among African leaders, despite Beijing's repeated promises of investment. Mali Actu reports that this reaction shows African leaders are more aware of the unequal nature of their relationship with China. The article notes : *“La récente rencontre entre la Chine et les nations africaines, malgré les promesses d’investissements, n’a pas suscité l’enthousiasme espéré”* (“The recent meeting between China and African nations, despite promises of investment, did not elicit the expected enthusiasm.”) This lukewarm response may reflect growing doubts about the long-term value of a partnership that China often describes as based on solidarity, but in reality, still treats African countries as junior partners.¹⁹³ China remains Africa's largest trading partner, but recent events suggest its dominance may be waning. The article highlights a *“chute spectaculaire des prêts officiels chinois accordés aux pays subsahariens,”* (“a spectacular drop in official Chinese loans granted to sub-Saharan countries”), as a sign of this change. This drop is linked to global economic challenges, higher interest rates in China, and Beijing's goal to reduce its dependence on African raw materials. The analysis suggests that this is not a sign of China pulling back, but rather an indication that it is adjusting its approach and is less willing to fund projects that are not profitable or strategic. The article concludes that China's dominance is not over, but its involvement is changing, shifting from broad loan programs to a more selective and interest-focused approach.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Le Faso. (2021, novembre 18). Présence de la Chine populaire en Afrique : Menace ou opportunité ?

¹⁹³ Mali Actu. (2024, septembre). La Chine et l’Afrique : Un défi à surmonter pour un développement autonome.

¹⁹⁴ Mali Actu. (2024, janvier). Chine-Afrique : la fin de l’hégémonie chinoise ?

5.3. Russia: rising power in Sahel and strategic ally

A review of media articles about Russia's role in the Sahel shows that positive views are rising, especially in terms of military cooperation and Russia's overall influence. This trend seems linked to France's reduced presence, as Russia moves in to take its place.

5.3.1. Active Military Cooperation and Security Partnerships

Russia's Growing Military Influence in the Sahel, at France's Expense

As France's influence in the Sahel declined, Russia began to find more opportunities to expand its presence in the region. In 2015, Malian president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta showed some openness to Russian military involvement, describing it as part of broader international cooperation. His statement that "*Si la Russie décide d'envoyer des troupes au Mali, elles seraient les bienvenues*" ("If Russia decides to send troops to Mali, they would be welcome") suggests a willingness to include Russia in the multinational security efforts, especially within MINUSMA. He also noted that "*la Russie aurait toute sa place dans la diversité de troupes étrangères présentes dans notre pays*" ("Russia would have its place among the diversity of foreign troops present in our country"), supporting a multilateral approach where no single actor dominates. However, the article notes that the idea of Russian military intervention was still considered unlikely or even unrealistic at the time: "*une intervention militaire russe au Mali n'est pour l'heure rien qu'une hypothèse improbable, sinon fantaisiste*" ("a Russian military intervention in Mali is, for now, nothing more than an improbable or even fanciful hypothesis"). This language reveals a gap between friendly statements and actual strategic commitment, highlighting the limited reach of Russian soft power in the region, despite some popular support. The president's positive view of the work done by existing international forces, "*le travail abattu par les troupes étrangères dans notre pays est jugé 'bien fait'*" ("the work done by the foreign troops in our country is judged to be 'well done'"), further suggests that Russia was seen as one possible partner among many, not as a replacement for Western allies. Overall, the

article presents a practical and inclusive view of security cooperation, with Russia considered more of a potential partner than an active player.¹⁹⁵

As early as 2016, an article showed a local shift in Malian public opinion toward supporting a stronger Russian presence, seen as a solution to the shortcomings of existing international partnerships. The Groupe des Patriotes du Mali (GPM), a civil society movement, openly “*solliciter la Russie à voler au secours du Mali*” (“call on Russia to come to Mali’s rescue”), expressing frustration with “*la lenteur dans l’amélioration de la situation sécuritaire*” (“the slowness in improving the security situation”) and presenting Russia as a reliable alternative. The article mainly criticized Western powers for limiting Mali’s military autonomy, “*tout a été fait par certaines puissances pour empêcher l’équipement de l’armée malienne, notamment aérienne*” (“everything was done by certain powers to prevent the Malian army, especially its air force, from being equipped”), and argued that Russia could help restore the country’s sovereignty and operational capacity.¹⁹⁶ Russian military cooperation was increasingly viewed as a credible option for African states dissatisfied with Western-led interventions. The article pointed to the perceived success of Russian operations abroad, “*la campagne syrienne a montré que... l’équipement militaire russe est le meilleur au monde*” (“the Syrian campaign showed that... Russian military equipment is the best in the world”), and contrasted this with the failure of France’s Barkhane operation in Mali, noting that jihadist groups continued to move freely despite years of French presence: “*l’opération Barkhane... s’est malheureusement révélée inefficace dans la lutte contre les djihadistes*” (“Operation Barkhane... unfortunately proved ineffective in the fight against jihadists”). With France reducing its regional forces, “*Le Mali n’a d’autre choix que de trouver un autre allié fort qui puisse résoudre le problème de sécurité dans le pays*” (“Mali has no choice but to find another strong ally capable of resolving the country's security problem”). The article ended on an optimistic note about the new partnership with Russia, “*Les autorités maliennes se réjouissent déjà des fruits de la coopération avec la Russie*” (“Malian authorities are already rejoicing in the fruits of cooperation with Russia”), framing it as a shift from a declining Western approach to a more effective Russian alternative.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Mali Actu. (2015, December). MaliIBK : « Si la Russie décide d’envoyer des troupes au Mali, elles seraient les bienvenues ».

¹⁹⁶ Mali Actu. (2016, January). Face à la lenteur et aux contours ambigus du processus de paix au Mali, des jeunes patriotes sollicitent l’aide de la Russie.

¹⁹⁷ Mali Actu. (2022, January). La coopération militaire avec la Russie est une alternative pour les États africains.

In 2019, Mali began to shift its military alliances, with Mali Actu describing the new agreement with Russia as a clear break from France and the UN mission (MINUSMA). The article critiques the effectiveness of foreign forces, particularly France's Operation Barkhane and the UN, "*sans nul doute un désaveu à l'assistance pléthorique et inefficace des forces étrangères*" ("undoubtedly a disavowal of the bloated and ineffective assistance of foreign forces"), and contrasts their approach with Russia's more proactive support in the Central African Republic. It also questions the legitimacy of the French military presence, "*la France considérée comme une force occupante*" ("France is seen as an occupying force"), noting growing public dissatisfaction and violence that led to the end of Mali's military agreement with France. This reporting reflects a broader trend in Malian media that challenges France's role and presents Russia as a more favorable partner, supporting a narrative focused on sovereignty and resistance to foreign influence. As Mali's preferences shifted, tensions with France increased.¹⁹⁸ Le Quotidien Sénégal explains that France's military actions were seen as efforts to block Russian involvement: "*La France abat ses dernières cartes pour écarter la Russie au Mali*" ("France plays its last cards to sideline Russia in Mali"). The elimination of Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui is portrayed not just as a counter-terrorism success, but as an attempt by France to maintain its influence. The article questions France's motives and timing, suggesting the operation was meant to reassert its position as "*Le Mali semble se tourner vers la Russie pour régler ses problèmes d'ordre sécuritaire que Serval et Barkhane n'ont pas su régler*" ("Mali seems to be turning to Russia to solve security issues that Serval and Barkhane failed to resolve"). French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian warned that any cooperation between Mali's government and the Russian security company Wagner would not be compatible with a continued French presence, highlighting France's reluctance to share influence in the region. The article also raises concerns about resource interests, suggesting that France's motivations may be both economic and security-related.¹⁹⁹

In recent years, Russia has been seen as a potential solution for many Sahelian states, particularly in Mali. Burkina Faso, for example, followed Mali's lead, as reported by Le Faso, by seeking to shift its military alliances from France to Russia, although many remain frustrated by the lack of tangible progress. On August 4, 2022, at a general assembly in Ouagadougou, the Burkina-Russia Coalition, a civil society group, urged citizens to "*s'unir pour la lutte contre*

¹⁹⁸ Mali Actu. (2019, June). Coopération militaire : La France et la Minusma bientôt délogées par la Russie.

¹⁹⁹ Le Quotidien. (2021, September 17). Élimination de Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui : La France abat ses dernières cartes pour écarter la Russie au Mali.

le terrorisme en choisissant la Russie comme partenaire militaire (“unite in the fight against terrorism by choosing Russia as their military partner”). This call marks a clear shift away from the country's long-standing military ties with France. The analysis suggests that France is now viewed as a symbol of postcolonial dependence, while Russia is seen as a possible ally against jihadist violence.²⁰⁰

In June 2024, Mali Actu adds more depth to this discussion. The article claims, “*L’Occident n’a jamais aidé à résoudre les problèmes de terrorisme en Afrique*” (“The West has never helped solve the problems of terrorism in Africa”), and presents Russia as stepping into a role once held by Western powers. However, it remains cautious about whether this shift will be effective in the long run: “*il reste à voir si cette nouvelle coopération... permettra effectivement de réduire le terrorisme*” (“it remains to be seen whether this new cooperation... will actually reduce terrorism”). While Russia is gaining symbolic and political influence, the article notes that it remains uncertain whether this new cooperation will actually reduce terrorism. This uncertainty highlights a common theme in Sahelian and African political discussions: the desire for autonomy and effective partnerships, weighed against doubts about long-term outcomes. Overall, the article suggests that Russia’s growing role as a security partner in Africa is viewed more as a reaction against France than as a genuine expression of admiration for Russia.²⁰¹

Russia’s Influence Through Private Military

The analyses also found that the terms "Magner" and later "Africa Corps" are frequently mentioned in the media as part of Russian actions and as possible tools to address security issues in the Sahel. A December 2019 article from Mali Actu provides insight into the early stages of Russia’s informal military and political involvement in Mali, highlighting the discreet yet symbolic presence of the Wagner Group. The article describes the presence of a “*une petite équipe du sulfureux groupe paramilitaire russe Wagner... a séjourné à Bamako*” (“a small team from the controversial Russian paramilitary group Wagner... stayed in Bamako”) as part of a broader, unclear strategy of influence. It also discusses a large-scale effort to expand into Africa for markets and natural resources as this “*opération de charme tous azimuts est engagée afin*

²⁰⁰ Le Faso. (2022, August 4). Coopération militaire Burkina-Russie : « Sur le terrain, ça ne se concrétise pas », déplore une OSC

²⁰¹ Mali Actu. (2024, June). L’Afrique se tourne vers la Russie pour combattre le terrorisme : “L’Occident n’a jamais aidé”.

de conquérir l’Afrique pour des marchés et s’approvisionner en ressources naturelles” (“full-scale charm operation has been launched to conquer Africa for markets and to secure access to natural resources”). While the article raises concerns about Wagner's activities, it also demonstrates the Malian government's efforts to balance partnerships in a practical manner. A Malian official is quoted as defending the decision to work with both France and Russia simultaneously. The article further links the Russian military presence to an information war in the region, noting that “*depuis que la présence russe se concrétise... une violente campagne de désinformation anti-française s’en est suivie*” (“since Russian presence became tangible... a violent anti-French disinformation campaign followed”). This highlights Russia’s use of a mix of military advisers, mercenary groups, and information tactics.²⁰²

Later, the Africa Corps replaced Wagner in Africa, increasing the Russian state’s influence. It was often seen as a possible solution for the Sahel. A 2025 article from Le Faso reports on the formal deployment of Africa Corps in Mali, showing how Russia’s military presence in the Sahel is becoming more established. The article describes Africa Corps as “*une structure spéciale du Ministère russe de la Défense chargée du soutien en matière de sécurité aux pays africains*” (“a special structure of the Russian Ministry of Defense responsible for providing security support to African countries”). This signals a shift from informal mercenary work to official military aid. The article highlights positive outcomes, presenting Africa Corps as both a stabilizing force and a way to strengthen African military capabilities. This view stands in contrast to the common narrative of stagnation and inefficiency associated with earlier Western interventions, particularly those by France. The focus on “*collaboration militaire fructueuse*” (“fruitful military collaboration”) suggests mutual benefit and strategic partnership. This language helps legitimize the Russian presence, framing it as a response to local needs rather than as a result of outside pressure. In summary, the article portrays Russia as a new and effective security partner for Africa, reinforces the formal role of the Russian military in African conflicts, and presents Russian-African cooperation as an example of South-South solidarity, moving Sahelian states further away from their colonial past.²⁰³

²⁰² Mali Actu. (2019, December). Des consultants russes de Wagner auraient été aperçus à Bamako: La France très méfiante soupçonne le Kremlin.

²⁰³ Le Faso. (2025, January 22). Renforcement de la coopération militaire Mali-Russie : Déploiement de l’Africa Corps.

The Alliance of Sahel States as a Gateway for Russian Military Influence

Russia's military involvement in Mali became prominent as French influence declined. A 2022 article from *L'événement* from Niger highlights Russia's delivery of military equipment to Mali, presenting this as a direct response to the country's worsening security situation. Russian support is depicted as filling the gap left by France's military withdrawal, "*le Mali pourrait ainsi compenser le départ des forces françaises du pays et relever le défi sécuritaire*" ("Mali could thus compensate for the departure of French forces and rise to the security challenge").²⁰⁴ In 2024, *MaliActu* reports that the Malian government frames its cooperation with Russia as part of a broader strategy to build autonomy and strengthen national capabilities. The partnership is described as a "*une alliance stratégique avec un des leaders mondiaux de la technologie de défense*" ("a strategic alliance with one of the world leaders in defense technology"), aimed at increasing Mali's security independence. The articles emphasize mutual benefit and effectiveness, suggesting that the Russia-Mali partnership is already yielding positive results. Training and capacity-building are also highlighted as key aspects of the cooperation. Overall, these reports present Russia's growing presence in the Sahel as a strategic alternative to Western military partnerships.²⁰⁵ In February 2025, *Mali Actu* further describes the Russia-Mali relationship as "*un symbole de coopération militaire*" ("a symbol of military cooperation"), using language that underscores strategic depth and loyalty between the two countries, such as the "*robustesse des liens stratégiques unissant Bamako et Moscou*" ("robustness of the strategic ties between Bamako and Moscow"). The partnership is portrayed as "*une alliance forgée dans un contexte de transition militaire*" ("an alliance forged in a context of military transition"), which supports both Mali's political context and its move away from traditional Western allies. The alliance is depicted as ambitious and successful, going beyond bilateral security interests: "*la collaboration entre les forces armées des deux nations, présentée comme un modèle de réussite, transcende les intérêts sécuritaires bilatéraux*" ("the collaboration between the armed forces of both nations, presented as a success story, transcends bilateral security interests"). The articles also highlight shared values between Malian and Russian soldiers in their pursuit of peace and security, stating "*les soldats maliens, qui partagent les mêmes valeurs que leurs homologues russes dans la quête de la paix et de la sécurité*" ("Malian soldiers, who share the same values as their Russian counterparts in the quest for peace and security"). The narrative concludes by linking this new bilateral dynamic to national

²⁰⁴ *L'événement Niger*. (2022, August 9). La Russie livre plusieurs chasseurs et un hélicoptère d'attaque au Mali.

²⁰⁵ *Mali Actu*. (2024). Le Mali lève le voile sur sa coopération militaire avec la Russie.

development and long-term stability: “*nouvelle dynamique bilatérale ouvre la voie à un avenir plus sûr et prospère*” (“new bilateral dynamic opens the path toward a safer and more prosperous future”). Together, these articles construct a narrative of strategic, ideological, and ambitious cooperation between Mali and Russia, emphasizing mutual respect, shared values, and regional leadership, in contrast to the perceived shortcomings of previous Western involvement.²⁰⁶

After Mali, Burkina Faso also accepted Russian intervention. In 2022, L'évènement Niger reported that the Burkinabe government openly sought a stronger military relationship with Russia during ongoing terrorist threats. Burkina Faso's Minister of Foreign Affairs described Russian support as both present and welcome, stating that if Russia offered more help, it would be gladly accepted: “*Nous coopérons également avec la Russie. La Russie nous aide déjà. Mais si les autorités russes sont prêtes à accorder au Burkina Faso une aide supplémentaire pour résoudre nos problèmes sécuritaires, ce sera volontiers*” (“We also cooperate with Russia. Russia is already helping us. But if the Russian authorities are willing to give Burkina Faso additional support to solve our security problems, it would be welcomed”). This article shows a shift from earlier uncertainty to a more normalized Russia-Burkina Faso partnership. Russian assistance is presented not as a replacement for Western support, but as an addition to current efforts, indicating a gradual change in the country's security approach. The mention of Russia “already helping” suggests that Moscow is now actively involved, not just making symbolic gestures. This approach to presenting Russia's role enhances its image as a legitimate security partner in West Africa and reflects a growing public interest in alternatives to French or Western-led interventions. Overall, this framing is part of a wider trend in Sahelian media that sees Russia as a credible and effective actor in the region's security landscape.²⁰⁷

Niger was the third AES state to consider working with Russia. In 2018, Niger Express reported that President Mahamadou Issoufou reached out to Vladimir Putin to seek support for the G5 Sahel force. The article presented this as a practical response to the “*manque crucial de financements et d'équipements*” (“crucial lack of funding and equipment”) in the Western-backed security system. It also noted “*la volonté de bousculer Paris dans son 'pré carré' traditionnel est aujourd'hui palpable*” (“the will to shake up Paris in its traditional sphere of influence is now palpable”), suggesting that Russia's positive reply fit into a wider plan for

²⁰⁶ Mali Actu. (2025, February). L'Ambassade de Russie à Bamako, un symbole de coopération militaire.

²⁰⁷ L'évènement Niger. (2022, November 23). Le Burkina Faso acceptera volontiers une aide de la part de la Russie.

geopolitical expansion. Many African observers see Russian involvement in the Sahel as an effort to reduce France's role.²⁰⁸ In 2024, during an official visit to Moscow, Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine stated that Niger sought to establish a strategic partnership with Russia, describing it as a decision made by the Nigerien people to deepen ties while respecting their sovereignty: *“le peuple nigérien a décidé que nous venions vers vous, tisser une relation approfondie dans le respect de notre souveraineté”* (“the Nigerien people decided that we come to you, to weave a deeper relationship in respect of our sovereignty”). This approach casts Russia as both a practical and symbolic partner, offering an alternative to Western influence. The article also mentions plans to increase military cooperation, which aligns with trends observed in other Sahel countries, where collaboration with Russia is viewed as a mean to address security needs and assert independence.²⁰⁹

Cridem reports that Russia is strengthening its relationships with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, the three countries in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The recent visit of their foreign ministers to Russia is described as more than a routine event. It is seen as a sign that Moscow is now a trusted and *“partenaire privilégié”* (“privileged partner”). The primary message is that *la sécurité au Sahel demeure leur principale priorité* (“security in the Sahel remains their main priority”), which suggests a shift in defense partnerships toward Russia. This focus on security helps Russia present itself as a key ally, especially as former colonial powers face growing skepticism. The article also notes that Russian influence in the region is flexible, *“sous étiquette du groupe paramilitaire Wagner, sous une nouvelle dénomination, ou encore par le canal de la coopération officielle”* (“under the Wagner paramilitary label, under a new name, or through official cooperation”). This demonstrates that Russia can adapt its approach while maintaining a strong presence. The announcement of *“la création d’une alliance de défense collective”* (“the creation of a collective defence alliance”) between these Sahelian countries and Russia marks a major change. It suggests a shift away from Western security arrangements and a desire to establish a new military framework centred on Russia. This strengthens Russia's image as both a partner and a leader in regional security.²¹⁰ Pressafrik also highlights the growing ties between Russia and the Sahelian states, describing the relationship as the *“lune de miel continue entre la Russie et les pays de l’Alliance des États du Sahel”* (“honeymoon between Russia and the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States”). The article highlights three main areas: *“potentiel*

²⁰⁸ Niger Express. (2018, July 19). Niger/Russie Issoufou actionne Poutine pour sortir du guépier terroriste.

²⁰⁹ L'évènement Niger. (2024, January 17). Niger : « nous souhaitons développer une coopération économique et stratégique » avec la Russie : Premier ministre.

²¹⁰ Cridem Mauritanie. Les ministres des Affaires étrangères des pays de l'AES entament une visite en Russie.

déploiement de nouveaux paramilitaires d'Africa Corps” (“potential deployment of new Africa Corps paramilitaries”), the *“formation des armées sahéliennes”* (“training of Sahelian armies”), and the *“signature de nouveaux accords bilatéraux en matière de lutte contre le djihadisme”* (“signing of new bilateral agreements in the fight against jihadism”). These steps show how Russia is positioning itself as both a security provider and a political partner, offering solutions where Western countries, especially France, have lost influence. The article suggests that Russian diplomacy is filling the gap left by France and helping to shape a new regional order.²¹¹

5.3.2. Expansion of Soft Power and Political Influence

Security Through Development: Russia’s Strategy in the Sahel

In the Sahel, Russia appears to recognize that security policies involve more than just military action; they also include development efforts. This approach stands in contrast to the French and European strategies, which are often described as focusing mainly on military solutions. As a result, Russia’s influence in the region has grown, as shown by recent analysis. Le Faso highlights how Russian diplomatic language sets itself apart from Western intervention, quoting Ambassador Vladimir Baykov, *“aux problèmes africains, les solutions africaines »* (“African solutions to African problems”). Baykov also emphasizes that fighting terrorism requires social and economic investment, not just military force: *“Ce n’est pas le grand nombre de militaires qui permet d’écraser le terrorisme; donc, il faut d’abord assurer le développement social et économique du pays”* (“It is not the number of soldiers that can crush terrorism; what is needed first is the country’s social and economic development”). This shift in rhetoric marks a departure from France’s focus on military action and highlights Russia’s effort to present itself as a more global and respectful partner in Africa. Russia’s approach aims to build both moral and strategic legitimacy by contrasting its methods with those of France and by positioning itself as a partner that listens to African concerns.²¹² Niger Express also presents a positive view of the growing alliance between Russia and the Alliance of Sahel States. The narrative centres on shared values like *“souveraineté, respect mutuel et développement concerté”* (“sovereignty,

²¹¹ Pressafrik. (2024, November 30). Le vice-Premier ministre russe achève sa visite dans les États du Sahel.

²¹² Le Faso. (2022, October 6). « La Russie est de retour sur le continent africain ... », confiait en 2019 à Lefaso.net, l’ambassadeur de Russie, Vladimir Baykov.

mutual respect, and coordinated development”). It emphasizes a balanced relationship between Russia and the AES, in contrast to the more hierarchical partnerships often associated with Western countries. The cooperation spans military, economic, political, and strategic areas, highlighting Russia’s broad influence. The primary objective is not only to collaborate bilaterally but also to enhance the AES as a whole, indicating that Russia is involved in state-building and contributing to the alliance's international legitimacy. The partnership is also described as a way to “*contribuer à la fin du terrorisme au Sahel et ouvrir une nouvelle ère de prospérité pour leurs peuples*” (“contribute to the end of terrorism in the Sahel and open a new era of prosperity for their peoples”).²¹³

Journal du Tchad describes Russo-Chadian cooperation as a strategic partnership in health, education, and security. The reporting portrays Russia as a dependable and versatile partner for Chad, in stark contrast to traditional Western powers. The Chadian Minister of Defence is quoted praising Russia as “*un partenaire fiable pour les pays africains, contrairement à la France, à la Grande-Bretagne et aux États-Unis, qui ne veulent que piller et exploiter les richesses des pays africains*” (“a reliable partner for African countries, unlike France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, who only want to plunder and exploit African resources”). This statement criticizes Western neocolonial practices and highlights Russia as a supportive ally. The article adds to a regional conversation that presents Russia as a liberating force, able to achieve military successes and plan for the future, offering “*des plans d’avenir pour améliorer leur économie et développer leurs armées*” (“future-oriented plans to improve their economy and develop their armies”).²¹⁴

Cridem from Mauritanie draws attention to another key aspect of Russian influence in West Africa: cultural diplomacy. The article reports on a “*protocole d’entente visant à renforcer la coopération culturelle entre la Mauritanie et la Fédération de Russie*” (“memorandum of understanding aimed at strengthening cultural cooperation between Mauritania and the Russian Federation”). While this initiative is neither military nor economic, it is an important component of Russia’s broader soft power strategy in the region. The article describes the agreement as “*une étape importante vers l’enrichissement des échanges et du rapprochement entre les cultures des deux pays*” (“an important step toward enriching exchanges and bringing the

²¹³ Niger Express. (2025, April 4). Une Alliance Stratégique : La Coopération Entre la Russie et l’AES au Service d’un Avenir Souverain.

²¹⁴ Journal du Tchad. (2024, May 31). Évolution rapide des relations russo-tchadiennes dans les secteurs de la santé, de la sécurité et de l’éducation.

cultures of the two countries closer together”). This wording suggests an effort to foster deeper bilateral relations based on mutual understanding, rather than just practical interests. The narrative portrays Russia as a partner focused on cultural exchange, rather than cultural dominance. This approach stands in contrast to France’s traditional cultural influence in its former colonies, pointing to a shift toward a more diverse cultural dialogue. The agreement is both a diplomatic gesture and a sign of Russia’s growing presence in Mauritania, a country that is not closely tied to the AES bloc but holds strategic importance.²¹⁵

When analysing media coverage, it appears that Russia is being presented as a historical and strategic counterbalance to Western influence. Pressafrik highlights how Russia is expanding its presence in Africa. In a diplomatic speech by Meshchanov, Africa’s instability is described as not only a current issue but also as something “*enracinés dans le passé colonial* » (“rooted in the colonial past”), with the argument that “*la décolonisation n’a pas systématiquement abouti à une pleine indépendance économique et politique*” (“decolonization did not systematically lead to full economic and political independence”). This approach challenges the West’s current role in Africa by connecting it to the ongoing effects of colonization. The speech also claims that former colonial powers continue to cause instability through “*de nouvelles formes d’exploitation et de pression politique*” (“new forms of exploitation and political pressure”), linking them to poverty, terrorism, and political disorder. In contrast, Russia is portrayed as a constructive and neutral partner, focusing on fostering political dialogue and expanding trade. Moscow presents its involvement as both practical and supportive, offering assistance to train armed and police forces in combating terrorism. This security support is described as capacity-building rather than intervention, which sets Russia apart from Western military actions that are often criticized for being forceful or having imperial motives. Overall, the message reinforces the key themes of Russian diplomacy in Africa: anti-colonial solidarity, respect for sovereignty, and development-focused cooperation. By emphasizing shared historical experiences and combining this with security and economic support, Russia aims to be perceived as a reliable, non-intrusive partner in a region that is growing increasingly sceptical of Western promises.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Cridem. La Mauritanie et la Russie signent un protocole d’entente dans le domaine de la coopération culturelle.

²¹⁶ Pressafrik. (2024, October 17). La Russie réaffirme son soutien au développement et à la sécurité en Afrique.

Russia's Strategy as a Countermodel: Eroding France's Position in the Sahel

Russian soft power has been expanding in the Sahel, often at the expense of France, the region's former colonial power. As early as 2014, a Mali Actu article highlighted a shift in Malian foreign policy, moving away from France and toward non-Western countries, especially China and Russia. The article criticized France's ongoing role in Mali, particularly since its military intervention, "*le jeu obscur de la France depuis son intervention au Mali*" ("the obscure game of France since its intervention in Mali"), and called for a new strategic direction: "*l'heure est venue de changer le fusil d'épaule*" ("the time has come to change tactics"). It presented Russia and China not only as alternatives, but also as morally and historically legitimate partners. The article described the cooling of diplomatic relations with these countries as a strategic error: "*le refroidissement des relations diplomatiques...présentait toutes les allures d'une faute*" ("the cooling of diplomatic relations...appeared to be a mistake"), attributing it to a lack of vision among Malian leaders. It also argued that Mali had failed to recognize the important contributions of China and Russia to its independence, framing them as "*deux nations qui ont contribué efficacement à la mise en route du Mali indépendant*" ("two nations that effectively contributed to the establishment of independent Mali"). In summary, the article anticipated a major shift in Mali's foreign policy that would become more apparent in later years. By presenting China and Russia as natural allies and questioning France's intentions, it set the stage for a strategic and identity-based realignment.²¹⁷ This perspective was reinforced by another Mali Actu article from June 2014, which described the Russia-Mali relationship as strong and enduring. The article referenced "*coopération vieille de plus d'une cinquantaine d'années*" ("a cooperation over fifty years old"), placing current ties within a long diplomatic tradition rooted in Cold War alliances. It used language that emphasized "*la splendeur de l'axe Moscou-Bamako*" ("the splendor of the Moscow–Bamako axis"), suggesting that Russia is a trusted ally whose influence had only temporarily faded. The article also connected this historic relationship to Mali's current security needs, expressing hope that "*espoirs qui reposent sur la Russie pour contribuer à préserver l'intégrité territoriale du Mali*" ("the hopes placed on Russia to help preserve Mali's territorial integrity"). This approach reflects a broader trend in Malian media, where Russia is seen as respecting national sovereignty, in contrast to France, whose military presence is often viewed as intrusive. Overall, the article supports a national narrative that sees Russia as a reliable partner for both defence

²¹⁷ Mali Actu. (2014, September). Mali-Chine-Russie : Un tiercé gagnant.

and development. By drawing on history and current needs, it frames Mali's move toward Russia as a return to an authentic foreign policy based on past alliances.²¹⁸

The sentiment that began in Mali in 2014 became more concrete when the country shifted its partnership from France to Russia. *L'Événement Niger* highlights a key moment in this realignment, showing how public demonstrations supported closer ties with Russia and a move away from French influence. A large protest in Bamako is described as both a public and political statement, occurring while Mali's transitional government was negotiating with the Russian private military company Wagner. The demonstration showed that many people supported breaking from traditional Western alliances, as "*Des milliers de manifestants sont sortis dans les rues du Mali pour appeler au départ des forces françaises du pays et à un rapprochement avec la Russie*" ("Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Mali to call for the departure of French forces and for closer ties with Russia"). The article frames the Russia-Mali partnership as a response to popular demand, not just a decision by leaders, which helps legitimize the change. It also highlights the diplomatic standoff between Mali and France, as well as the "*a pression de la France et du groupe régional de la CEDEAO... de renoncer à une éventuelle coopération avec Wagner*" ("pressure from France and the regional bloc ECOWAS... to abandon possible cooperation with Wagner"). This narrative portrays Western and regional actors as attempting to limit Mali's sovereignty, while the protest movement criticizes the lack of tangible results from France's military presence: "*la France et la communauté internationale ont eu neuf ans sans résultats, sans sécurité, sans protection des personnes et des biens*" ("France and the international community had nine years with no results, no security, and no protection of people and property"). Overall, the article portrays Russia as an alternative partner and a potential solution to the frustrations with French-led counterterrorism efforts, and it provides evidence that Malian authorities claim to have public support for working with Moscow.²¹⁹ In 2024, *L'évènement Niger* examines how Mali's leaders use political rhetoric to challenge Western powers and support the shift toward new global partners. President Assimi Goïta's statement that terrorism in the Sahel is "*manipulé et financé par certaines puissances étrangères*" ("manipulated and financed by certain foreign powers") shifts blame for instability onto unnamed, but implied, Western actors. He uses this argument to praise the move toward partners like Russia, China, and Turkey, reinforcing the idea that

²¹⁸ Mali Actu. (2014, June). *Russie-Mali : Une coopération toujours dynamique*.

²¹⁹ *L'évènement Niger*. (2021, September 23). *Les Maliens descendent dans les rues pour soutenir un rapprochement du pays avec la Russie*.

these countries are more respectful of Mali's sovereignty and more effective in security cooperation. The article claims these new partners "*ont permis aux trois pays de bien s'équiper et de mener avec efficacité les opérations contre les groupes armés terroristes*" ("have allowed the three countries to equip themselves well and conduct operations against armed terrorist groups effectively"), supporting the narrative of breaking free from former dominant influences. This example illustrates how anti-Western sentiment is leveraged to justify shifts in military and diplomatic alliances, while portraying Russia and China as genuine and effective partners.²²⁰ The political and sovereign alignment between Mali and Russia is described as a strategic partnership based on shared values and interests. The relationship is said to be rooted in "*volonté commune des deux nations de défendre leur indépendance et de choisir leur propre destin*" ("common will of both nations to defend their independence and choose their own destiny"), directly opposing the influence of Western powers. Mali's transitional president, Assimi Goita, "*a salué cette coopération fructueuse, soulignant l'importance de choisir des partenaires stratégiques qui partagent les mêmes valeurs et les mêmes aspirations*" ("praised this fruitful cooperation, emphasizing the importance of choosing strategic partners who share the same values and aspirations"). This approach highlights the contrast between Russia and former colonial powers. By choosing Moscow, Mali reinforces its rejection of outside models of governance and military cooperation, suggesting that only those who support Mali's vision of self-determination are true allies in its pursuit of peace and development.²²¹

While the relationship between Mali and Russia is a key example in this analysis, Chad, once France's main ally in the region, has also started to see Russia as a more attractive partner than its former colonizer. According to an article from Cridem from Mauritania, political discourse in Chad is changing. Presidential candidates are increasingly critical of France and more open to working with Russia. The article notes that "*La France au Tchad c'est plus d'un siècle de présence militaire continue*" ("France has maintained a continuous military presence in Chad for over a century"); however, this presence is now being questioned and, in some cases, dismissed as "*un modèle révolu*" ("an outdated model"). The traditional Franco-Chadian military partnership is described as an outdated model, reflecting local disappointment with France's historic role, especially when it is seen as interfering in domestic politics. Some now view France as "*une force de prédation et non de libération*" ("a force of predation rather than

²²⁰ L'événement Niger. (2024, June 26). Dans le Sahel, le terrorisme est « manipulé et financé par certaines puissances étrangères » - Assimi Goita.

²²¹ Mali Actu. (2024). Mali-Russie : Une union sacrée pour l'indépendance ?

liberation”), which reflects a broader shift in how French involvement is perceived, not as protective, but as controlling. At the same time, Russia is being seen as a preferred alternative. The article notes that *“les principaux candidats envisagent ouvertement de nouer des partenariats avec le nouvel acteur majeur dans cette zone: la Russie”* (“the main candidates openly consider forming partnerships with the new major player in the region: Russia”), which shows not only Moscow’s strategic ambitions but also its growing reputation as a symbol of sovereignty and resistance to Western influence. In short, the article highlights a shift in narrative: Russia is now viewed as a politically and ideologically appealing partner, particularly for those seeking to distance themselves from postcolonial ties. France, on the other hand, is increasingly viewed as outdated and unwelcome, and risks being replaced if it does not change its approach in Africa.²²² In addition, the Journal du Tchad comments on the geopolitical impact of Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Déby’s 2024 visit to Moscow, describing it as a strategic move to strengthen ties with Russia and reduce reliance on former colonial powers. The report suggests that the visit aimed to *“renforcer et développer les relations entre les deux pays, mais aussi de rechercher le soutien de la Russie afin de développer une nouvelle politique dans le pays et se débarrasser de la dépendance française et occidentale en général”* (“strengthen and develop relations between the two countries, but also to seek Russian support in developing a new policy for the country and ridding itself of French and Western dependence in general”). This aligns with the broader trend of declining French influence in the Sahel. The article states that *“après le déclin remarquable de la présence française dans les pays africains du Sahel et la perte de sa position dans la région, elle n’a plus d’espoir que dans le pays du Tchad”* (“after the remarkable decline of French presence in Sahel countries and its loss of position in the region, France has no more hope than in Chad”). The article also accuses France of trying to maintain its influence *“par tous les moyens, même si cela se fait au détriment de la sécurité et de la paix dans la région”* (“by all means, even if it comes at the expense of security and peace in the region”). This criticism aligns with the growing anti-French sentiment, which views France as a destabilizing force, particularly in comparison to Russia’s image as a partner for sovereignty and renewal. The language used in these articles highlights a symbolic shift: France is associated with outdated dominance and covert manipulation, while Russia is perceived as a genuine alternative that can aid Chad’s independent development.²²³

²²² Cridem. (2024). Présidentielle au Tchad : adieux la France, bonjour la Russie ?)

²²³ Journal du Tchad. (2024, March 27). Quels sont les véritables objectifs de la récente visite de Déby à Moscou ?

Le Pays, a newspaper from Burkina Faso, offers a detailed look at Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Déby's recent diplomatic moves toward Russia. Rather than seeing this as a break with France, the article describes it as a practical effort to broaden Chad's partnerships. Unlike other Sahelian leaders who have distanced themselves from France, Déby is shown as keeping close ties with Paris while also reaching out to Moscow. The article highlights this balanced approach and takes a realist stance, arguing that strategic interests matter more than ideology in international relations: "*en matière de relations internationales, l'ennemi de mon ami n'est pas forcément un adversaire. Bien au contraire, il peut être un partenaire*" ("in international relations, the enemy of my friend is not necessarily an adversary. On the contrary, he can be a partner"). It also notes that "*le Tchad est un pays minier, et de ce fait, attise les convoitises des grands de ce monde*" ("Chad is a mining country and, as such, arouses the covetousness of the world's great powers") and that Chad's mineral resources are a major reason for Russia's interest, placing the Russia-Chad relationship in the context of global competition. The article ends by stressing that "*les pays n'ont pas d'amis, mais n'ont que des intérêts à défendre*" ("countries have no friends, only interests to defend"), and presents Chad's approach as a thoughtful example of multipolar diplomacy in the region.²²⁴

In summary, Mali Actu describes Russia's growing role in the Sahel as a major shift that challenges the region's traditional ties to former colonial powers. The article's headline, "Le Sahel bascule" ("The Sahel is tipping"), signals a break from the past. Russia is depicted not only as a new participant but also as "*renversant l'ordre établi*" ("overturning the established order"). The article notes that "*les alliances traditionnelles sont remises en question*" ("traditional alliances are being called into question"), suggesting a wider change in the region's partnerships. This theme reflects ongoing dissatisfaction with Western-led efforts and a willingness to consider new partners. Russia is credited with achieving results where Western countries have not, as "*leurs interventions militaires directes ou leurs livraisons d'armes ont permis à des pays comme le Mali, le Burkina Faso et le Niger de remporter des victoires significatives contre les groupes terroristes*" ("their direct military interventions or arms deliveries have enabled countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to achieve significant victories against terrorist groups"). The article also claims that "*les pays du Sahel montrent qu'il est possible de s'affranchir de la tutelle des anciennes puissances coloniales*" ("Sahelian countries are showing that it is possible to free themselves from the tutelage of former colonial

²²⁴ Le Pays. (2024, January). DEBY FILS EN RUSSIE : L'ennemi de mon ami peut être un partenaire.

powers”), highlighting the symbolic importance of these new partnerships. Still, the article concludes on a cautious note, stating that “*Il reste à voir si ces nouvelles dynamiques seront durables*” (“It remains to be seen whether these new dynamics will be lasting”). This demonstrates an awareness of the risks of relying too heavily on new outside powers and acknowledges that military gains may not necessarily lead to lasting peace. Overall, the article presents Russia’s involvement as a possible turning point and a real alternative to the West, but it also encourages readers to consider whether these new relationships will bring lasting solutions or simply create new dependencies.²²⁵

Western Attempts to Undermine Russia in the Sahel: A Narrative of Ineffective Resistance in Local Media

An article from *Le Quotidien Sénégal* about the Russia-Africa Summit 2023 presents a strongly pro-Russian perspective, focusing on historical ties, shared ideology, and opposition to Western influence. The article describes Russia as an alternative to the “*camp occidental américano-centrique*” (“US-centric Western bloc”), and portrays African-Russian cooperation as a continuation of Soviet-era support and a rejection of neocolonialism. It emphasizes that “*Les faits sont têtus: la majorité écrasante des pays du continent noir participent au sommet Russie-Afrique 2023*” (“Facts are stubborn: the overwhelming majority of African countries are participating in the Russia-Africa 2023 summit”), framing this as resistance to Western pressure, which is described as “*des menaces directes et voiles*” (“direct and veiled threats”) and “*offres d’alternatives alléchantes*” (“tempting offers”) that failed to break what the article calls “*la résistance africaine*” (“African resistance”). The article frequently references historical memory to legitimize its arguments, stating that African nations recall the outcomes of collaborating with former colonial powers and contrasting these with the tangible benefits of past Soviet support. The tone is highly critical of Western influence, claiming that it “*a toujours été et reste un modèle d’exploitation* » (“has always been and remains a model of exploitation”) and that “*les Russes savent exactement, par leur propre expérience, ce que les Africains ont subi*” (“Russians know exactly, from their own experience, what Africans have suffered”).²²⁶ *Le Pays* from Burkina Faso also takes a clear stance in favour of African strategic autonomy, critically analysing Western responses to Africa’s growing partnership with Russia. The main

²²⁵ Mali Actu. (2024, août). *Le Sahel bascule : La Russie et la Turquie renversent l’ordre établi*

²²⁶ *Le Quotidien Sénégal*. (2023, 27 juillet). *Sommet Russie-Afrique 2023*

message is that African states are asserting their sovereignty in the face of Western pressure. The author questions the validity of Western criticism, especially from Ukraine, and argues that such criticism often infantilizes Africans, “*ce qui pourrait gêner dans les critiques occidentales, c’est l’infantilisation des Africains*” (“what is troubling in Western criticism is the infantilization of Africans”), reducing their choices to immediate needs or manipulation, portraying Africans as “*de grands gamins qui n’obéissent qu’à leurs instincts alimentaires*” (“big children who obey only their food instincts”). The article rejects this view, insisting that African states are making rational decisions based on their interests and that “*le choix d’aller à Saint-Petersbourg est l’affirmation de la liberté retrouvée*” (“the choice to go to Saint Petersburg is the affirmation of regained freedom”). It also criticizes the “*conditionnalités occidentales qui accompagnent souvent l’aide internationale*” (“Western conditionalities that often accompany international aid”), suggesting that the Russia-Africa relationship allows for more equal negotiation. The hope expressed is that this partnership is not simply “*qu’on ne quitte pas un maître pour aller se réfugier sous les ailes protectrices d’un autre maître*” (“that one does not leave a master to go take refuge under the protective wings of another master”), but is an effort to create more equal and mutually beneficial relationships.²²⁷

Mali Actu critiques how Western media portrays Russia, particularly in relation to global security and diplomacy. The author claims that “*la couverture médiatique occidentale de la Russie est dominée par un récit simpliste du ‘bien contre le mal’*” (“Western media coverage of Russia is dominated by a simplistic ‘good versus evil’ narrative”), casting Vladimir Putin as a villain and Russians as victims. This approach is described as not only misleading but also “*empêchent une compréhension rationnelle de la situation et rendent impossible la recherche d’une paix durable*” (“prevent a rational understanding of the situation and make the search for a lasting peace impossible”). The text argues that such portrayals hinder a rational understanding and make it harder to achieve lasting peace. This view is part of a broader trend in pro-Russian African media, which often criticizes what it sees as the West’s rigid and moralistic stance, especially in conflicts involving Russia. By questioning the dominant Western narrative, the article aligns itself with calls for a more balanced and less black-and-white view of international relations. This perspective aligns with a broader shift in Sahelian discussions, where Russia is viewed as both a geopolitical alternative and a response to what is perceived as Western moral dominance. The article helps build Russia’s image as a

²²⁷ Le Pays Burkina Faso. (2023, juillet). SOMMET AFRIQUE-RUSSIE : Peut-on reprocher à l’Afrique de se mobiliser derrière ses intérêts ?

misunderstood country that is unfairly criticized by Western institutions, supporting the idea of new strategic partnerships in the region.²²⁸ In the end, Mali Actu disputes the Western view of Russia as an isolated 'pariah state,' suggesting that “*L’affirmation occidentale maintes fois répétée de l’isolement de la Russie en tant qu’État paria commence à s’épuiser*” (“The Western claim, repeatedly made, that Russia is an isolated pariah state is beginning to run out of steam”). The text points out that while Western countries continue to cut ties with Russia, even at a cost to their own people, most Asian and African nations are not following this lead, “*d’autres nations, dont la plupart des pays d’Asie et d’Afrique, ne paraissent pas prendre cet appel très au sérieux*” (“other nations, including most countries in Asia and Africa, don’t seem to take this call very seriously”). This highlights a common theme in pro-Russian African media: the distinction between Western strategies and the independent choices of countries in the Global South. By focusing on Russia’s efforts to build connections through soft power, the article portrays Moscow as a pragmatic and respectful partner, open to cooperation that transcends Western ideological boundaries. Overall, the piece supports the growing acceptance of Russian-African relations in the media, suggesting that African states are making choices based on their own interests rather than succumbing to Western pressure.²²⁹

Between Admiration and Apprehension: Ongoing Critiques of Russia in the Sahelian Media

Rather than focusing criticism on Russia, Sahelian media often highlight what they see as Africa’s lack of autonomy. At the Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023, Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso delivered a bold speech, expressing generational frustration and calling for genuine sovereignty in Africa’s international relationships. He questioned “*Comment l’Afrique, avec tant de richesse sous notre sol, avec une nature généreuse, de l’eau, du soleil, en abondance, l’Afrique est aujourd’hui le continent le plus pauvre ? Et comment se fait-il que des chefs d’Etat traversent donc le monde à mendier ?*” (“How is it that Africa, with so much wealth beneath our soil, abundant nature, water and sunshine, is today the poorest continent? And how is it that heads of state travel the world to beg?”). His remarks, widely reported in African media, reflect a growing conversation in the Sahel that combines nationalism, anti-neocolonial views, and a push for economic and political independence. By presenting African

²²⁸ Mali Actu. (2024, mars). L’aveuglement occidental face à la Russie : un danger pour la paix.

²²⁹ Mali Actu. (2022, août). La Russie en Afrique : Connecter les continents avec le soft power.

poverty as a contradiction given the continent's resources, Traoré speaks for many who see current global partnerships, especially with Western countries, as failing to address Africa's development. Instead of defending the status quo, he calls for dignity and uses the summit to make African concerns and hopes visible on the world stage. This speech contributes to the Russia-Africa Summit's role as a platform for challenging global power structures and helps explain why Russia's message of mutual respect and sovereignty resonates with leaders like Traoré.²³⁰

Le Calame, a Mauritanian outlet, adopts a more critical approach to the recent coup in Niger by situating it within a broader structural crisis. Instead of focusing on shifting alliances, the article highlights both internal problems and external exploitation as key factors contributing to the ongoing instability in Africa. The author argues that powerful countries like Russia and France manipulate African nations' basic needs, keeping them dependent. The article emphasizes that economic health is crucial for political stability, using South Africa, Nigeria, and Algeria as examples where investment has contributed to greater stability. It criticizes both Western and non-Western powers for focusing on resource extraction rather than long-term development, which only increases dependency. This perspective is especially important as pro-Russian and anti-French feelings grow in the Sahel. While some articles view Russia as a liberator, Le Calame cautions that simply switching foreign partners without addressing deeper issues will only perpetuate the "*boucle infernale*" ("vicious circle") of coups and instability.²³¹ Some people are now questioning whether relying on Russia is the best course of action. Maliactu, another outlet, is also critical of Africa's dependence on outside powers, especially with Russia's renewed involvement. Unlike articles that view the Russia-Africa partnership as a positive development, Mali Actu urges African countries to recognize that true independence cannot be achieved by relying on any foreign power. The author notes that Russia's primary interest is economic, not solidarity, and characterizes its return as a strategic move rather than a gesture of respect: "*Là où la Russie a besoin de l'Afrique, c'est pour écouler les armes qu'elle fabrique*" ("Where Russia needs Africa is to offload the weapons it manufactures"). The article challenges the notion that Russia is a savior for Africa, "*Les Africains voient en la Russie un messie*" ("Africans see Russia as a messiah"), warning that "*Le retour de la Russie n'est pas*

²³⁰ L'évènement Niger. (2023, 28 juillet). Sommet Russie-Afrique: « comment se fait-il que des chefs d'Etat traversent le monde à mendier ? »- Capitaine Ibrahim Traoré.

²³¹ Le Calame Mauritanie. (2023). L'Afrique face au déclin de la démocratie.

flatteur pour l'Afrique. C'est encore un appel de pied pour être spectatrice de sa propre histoire ("Russia's return is not flattering for Africa. It's another invitation to be a spectator of its own history"). Instead, it calls for real pan-African unity as the only way to break the cycle of dependency: *"L'Afrique n'a pas compris que son seul salut c'est l'union vraie pour une Afrique unie"* ("Africa has not understood that its only salvation lies in true unity for a united Africa"). The author argues that only through military, economic, and political integration can Africa move beyond reliance on the West or Russia. Unlike articles that praise new partnerships, this one stands out for rejecting all forms of foreign control and insisting that Africa must define its own future. Without this change, Russia's involvement will just be another chapter in a long history of outside domination.²³²

Some critics, though rare, focus on the Wagner group and its alleged human rights violations. Pressafrik stands out by offering a critical perspective on Russian involvement in the Sahel, especially in Mali. While many media reports emphasize strategic partnerships or portray Russia as a liberator, this article highlights human rights concerns and documents serious abuses by both state and non-state actors since the UN peacekeepers left. Since May 2024, Wagner and the Malian army have reportedly *"délibérément tué au moins 32 civils, dont 7 dans une frappe de drone"* ("deliberately killed at least 32 civilians, including 7 in a drone strike"), forcibly disappeared 4 people, and burned over 100 homes. These incidents are described as part of military operations in northern and central Mali, pointing to a pattern of state-supported violence with little accountability as *"L'absence de responsabilité encourage de nouvelles atrocités"* ("The absence of accountability encourages further atrocities"). The article notes that civilians are caught between different forms of violence and lack effective protection since MINUSMA's departure. It also links the rise in abuses to the collapse of international oversight. This report is significant because it challenges the pro-Russian narratives commonly found in West African media. It brings attention back to the human cost in a debate often focused on sovereignty and anti-colonialism. Here, Wagner's involvement is depicted not as a sovereign decision but as a source of insecurity for civilians, thereby placing the Malian government in a difficult moral and legal position.²³³

²³² Mali Actu. (2019, October). Géopolitique internationale : l'Afrique a-t-elle besoin de la Russie ?

²³³ Pressafrik. (2024, December 12). Mali : l'armée, le groupe Wagner et des groupes armés islamistes accusés d'exaction contre des civils.

There are surprisingly few criticisms of such a visible actor, which raises the question of whether Russian communication strategies and propaganda are at play, as suggested by a Pressafrik article. The article describes how Russia is using similar information warfare tactics across Africa, especially in the Sahel, by combining media manipulation, paramilitary involvement, and ideological messaging. Testimony from Ephrem Yalike, a former communications worker for Wagner in the Central African Republic, suggests a structured system that involves placing articles in local media, disseminating false information, and organizing staged demonstrations. These actions are part of a coordinated campaign that goes along with the arrival of Russian paramilitaries in countries like Burkina Faso. For example, messages spread that Captain Ibrahim Traoré was the target of an assassination attempt allegedly supported by France, which happened at the same time as Russian forces arrived and pro-Russian protests were organized. Yalike says young demonstrators were paid to take part, using the same methods seen in Bangui. The article also explains how media partnerships support this strategy, mentioning agreements between Russian state outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, and African media organizations, including a 2022 deal between RT and Afrique Média. These partnerships help spread anti-Western messages that are presented as a defence against “Western propaganda,” improving Russia’s image as a reliable partner compared to former colonial powers. In addition to media and military efforts, cultural institutions like the “Maisons russes” also play a role. The article is notable in the collection for its critical approach, warning against the appealing narrative of anti-colonial solidarity that supports Moscow’s strategy. Instead, it shows that Russia’s presence in Africa is partly based on manipulation, ideological use, and secret coordination between media, intelligence, and military groups. Rather than offering a respectful and mutually beneficial partnership, the article suggests that Russia is developing a new model of influence that replicates many of the coercive tactics once employed by Western powers.²³⁴

²³⁴ Pressafrik. (2024, November 24). Influences russes en Afrique : un système en phase de duplication.

6. The Future of France in the Sahel Region: Policy proposal

This analysis helps identify what the Sahelian population expects from France, based on media reports. By comparing France's successes and failures with those of other external actors, it is possible to outline a plan for the country in the region. However, these policy recommendations reflect only the views of the Sahelian population and do not consider whether they are feasible within the French domestic context.

6.1 France in the Sahel: Toward Credible and Sustainable Policy Adjustments

6.1.1. First step: Fixing Colonial and Neo-Colonial Damages

Historical Accountability Instead of Symbolic Gestures

One of the main requests coming from Sahelian media is that France must finally face its past. In Mali Actu, the journalist insists that Paris should “*reconnaître les erreurs du passé*” (“recognize the errors of the past,”) saying this is needed to rebuild trust. But just saying the right words is not enough: France must also admit the harm it has caused, reportedly for many years.²³⁵ Frédéric Lejeal makes a similar point in Le Faso, saying that France still has not made the “aggiornamento,” the needed changes to make its African policy clear. For him, official promises of reform do not mean much if Paris continues to hold on to old advantages instead of making a genuine break with the past.²³⁶ Together, these voices reach the same conclusion: symbolic acts of reconciliation, such as speeches, ceremonies, or the return of cultural items, are no longer enough. Unless these are matched by real actions, or honestly confronting its colonial history, France's promises of a new start will not be convincing.

²³⁵ Mali Actu. (2024). L'Afrique se libère : La France face à un tournant historique.

²³⁶ Le Faso. (2023, mars 1). France-Afrique : « La France n'accomplit pas encore l'aggiornamento nécessaire et attendu depuis 40 ans pour clarifier sa politique » - Frédéric Lejeal, journaliste et spécialiste de l'Afrique.

End Paternalism and Change the Tone

A common topic in Sahelian media is also the rejection of France's paternalistic discourse. L'Événement Niger strongly criticizes Emmanuel Macron's Africa policy, saying that "*le président Emmanuel Macron n'a pas, encore une fois, raté son entrée. L'homme s'est illustré comme ses pères, dans des propos paternalistes, maladroits et dégradants*" ("President Emmanuel Macron, once again, did not miss his entrance. He stood out like his predecessors, with paternalistic, clumsy, and degrading remarks"). For the journalist, France should really stop its old habits of acting superior.²³⁷ In SenePlus, Antoine Glaser makes a similar point, saying that France has « *raté le virage africain* » ("missed the African turning point"). He says Paris did not see the rise of new players like China, Russia, and Turkey, and is still stuck in old ways of thinking. He argues that France's talk goes back and forth between promises of change and old habits, which does not convince African partners.²³⁸ Sahelian journalists agree: France's way of speaking is still arrogant and out of touch with what Africans want. The main advice is that France should stop any paternalistic or superior tone and instead speak with more humility, respect African independence, and recognize that Africa now has many important partners.

Distance from Autocrats

Sahelian journalists argue that France's reputation has been severely damaged because it continues to support governments that do not permit free elections. In Le Faso, Frédéric Lejeal notes that "*la présidence française maintient des relations étroites avec des régimes autocratiques de plus en plus rejetés par leurs populations, dont ceux du Tchad, du Togo, du Congo-Brazzaville et du Gabon*" ("the French presidency maintains close relations with authoritarian regimes increasingly rejected by their populations, including those in Chad, Togo, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon"). For Lejeal, this gap between what France says about democracy and the leaders it actually supports is exactly why people accuse France of acting like a colonial power.²³⁹ The message is clear: as long as Paris continues to side with leaders who are not chosen by their people, it cannot regain trust. Journalists like Lejeal argue that France should prioritize its own reputation for supporting democracy over the survival of these

²³⁷ L'Événement Niger. (2023, février 27). Stratégie de Macron pour l'Afrique : la France n'a aucune intention de laisser le continent respirer.

²³⁸ SenePlus. Wally, D. (2023, septembre 4). Avec Macron, la France a raté le virage africain.

²³⁹ Lejeal, F. (2023, March 1). France-Afrique : La France n'accomplit pas encore l'aggiornamento nécessaire... Le Faso.

governments. To achieve this, France needs to shift its support away from undemocratic leaders and base its partnerships on governance standards, even if this means temporarily losing influence in certain countries. The advice is that only by matching its actions with its talk about democracy and human rights can France stop being seen as the defender of unpopular governments and start to regain trust in the Sahel.

6.1.2. Second Step: Change its Strategy on the Ground to Stabilize the Region Efficiently

Refine Military Presence for More Sovereignty

The question of France’s military presence is one of the most sensitive issues in Sahelian discussions. While people have asked for years to close the bases, which has finally happened, the remaining partnerships seem unfair. The demand for big changes is shown in Le Pays Burkina Faso, which calls on France to “*changer de fusil d’épaule*” (“to switch approaches”). The article explains that what the continent truly needs is not compassion or dependency, but a fair relationship where Africa can use its natural resources to meet its own needs.²⁴⁰ For Burkinabè journalists, France’s heavy military approach gets in the way of partnerships based on equality and control over their own resources. In Mauritania for example, collaboration is only acceptable when it involves a purely technical step with no traces of colonialism and when there are clear legal and official guidelines, when it is “*une étape technique dénuée de toute graisse coloniale*” (“a technical step stripped of any colonial fat”). Here, French involvement is accepted only if it is clearly limited, technical, and respects the country’s independence.²⁴¹ Moreover, the call for cooperation focused on governance is strong in Sahelian media. The analysis says that African societies do not want outside control anymore, but instead want to lead their own progress and safety. France is asked to help these efforts, not force its own ideas.²⁴² In short, journalists and scholars say France should stop focusing only on security and make good leadership the main goal. This means working with African-led initiatives, supporting fair laws and strong organizations, and seeing safety as something that comes from right governance, not something that replaces it. Together, these views convey a clear message:

²⁴⁰ Le Pays. (2024, novembre 27). Mini tournée africaine du chef de la diplomatie française : La France peut-elle encore recoller les morceaux ? Le Pays Burkina Faso.

²⁴¹ Cridem. (2024). Mauritanie et contrôle aérien français.

²⁴² Mali Actu. (2024). L’Afrique se libère : La France face à un tournant historique

France's military role in the Sahel lost support when it appeared to be overly assertive or controlling. Journalists called for base closures, legal rules, and now for respect for control over resources. The main suggestion is that France must completely give up its controlling military role and become a partner that respects independence, only staying under the terms agreed with Sahelian countries.

Develop Genuine Aid and Soft Power

Sahelian journalists are very doubtful about France's shift from using its military to using soft power to influence Africa. In Mali Actu, the journalist directly asks "*L'aide au développement, un enjeu majeur pour l'Afrique. Mais, est-ce un simple geste humanitaire ou une arme stratégique pour la France ?*" ("Development aid, a major issue for Africa. But is it a simple humanitarian gesture or a strategic weapon for France?"). He says that "*La France mise désormais sur le soft power. Plus de présence militaire directe, mais une influence subtile via des organisations de la société civile. Le but ? Maintenir son emprise sur le continent africain*" ("France now relies on soft power. No more direct military presence, but a subtle influence through civil society organizations. The goal? To maintain its grip on the African continent"). The author believes French aid is not real help, but a way to keep control. He warns that this approach can be just as harmful as military occupation, because it hides control behind friendly words. He recommends that France should make sure its aid is open, focused on helping people, and not used for manipulation, so it is not seen as a secret way to dominate.²⁴³ This criticism is also found in Journal du Tchad, which talks about French cooperation with Niger. It is noted that France's donations and support can be seen as an attempt by the former colonial power to improve its image in Niger and Africa. Many people in the region see development projects and financial support as ways to make France look good, instead of really helping the people of Niger. The journalist says that to be trusted, France must make its aid real and respond to local needs, making sure help matches what Africans want, not just serving as a new way to influence.²⁴⁴ Together, these Sahelian voices give a strong warning: French development aid is often seen as a way to keep control. The recommendation is that France should change its aid to be a true partnership, open, based on real needs, and clearly helpful to African societies, not just a hidden way to stay in charge.

²⁴³ Mali Actu. (2025). Aide au développement : arme de la France en Afrique ?

²⁴⁴ Journal du Tchad. (2022, November 18). Coopération bilatérale : la France aux petits soins avec le Niger.

Cultural and Educational Engagement

Sahelian journalists have often stated that France's promises regarding culture and education are not convincing because they rarely lead to genuine opportunities for people. In SenePlus, the journalist sums up this frustration, saying that "*Reste à transformer les intentions affichées en actes concrets sur le terrain*" ("It remains to turn these declared intentions into concrete actions on the ground"). He believes that promises like changing visa rules will not help unless they are accompanied by genuine opportunities for young Africans, such as scholarships, exchange programs, and job opportunities.²⁴⁵ The same complaint is found in Mali Actu, Le Pays, and Le Faso between 2023 and 2025: France's influence has faded because regular people, especially young people, do not see any real benefits in their lives. Instead of empty gestures or promises, they want real opportunities: scholarships and double degrees, programs to help young people find jobs, and collaborative efforts on initiatives such as digital skills development and job training. These steps are seen as the best way for France to reconnect with African societies, especially with the young people who are driving political change.²⁴⁶ The advice is clear: to rebuild its influence, France needs to stop making vague promises and start taking real action that helps with education, travel, and opportunities, especially for the youth.

6.1.3. Adapt to a Multipolar Environment

Adaptation to Multipolar Competition

Sahelian media do not say France is unimportant, but they say its role needs to change now that Russia and China are becoming more important. In Mali Actu, the journalist makes this point clearly: "*La tâche de l'Afrique n'est pas nécessairement de rejeter la France, mais plutôt de renégocier les termes de leur relation sur un pied d'égalité*" ("Africa's task is not necessarily to reject France, but rather to renegotiate the terms of their relationship on equal footing"). The article states that France remains an important economic partner with valuable knowledge, but notes that African countries no longer wish to accept the unfair deals inherited

²⁴⁵ SenePlus. Folarinwa, B. (2023, November 22). La France à la recherche d'un nouveau souffle en Afrique.

²⁴⁶ Le Pays. (2024, November 27). Mini tournée africaine du chef de la diplomatie française : La France peut-elle encore recoller les morceaux ?

from colonial times. The future of the relationship depends on France accepting equal treatment and seeing itself as just one partner among many.²⁴⁷ Sahelian leaders themselves, such as Mauritania's President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani in *L'Authentique*, frame the relationship in terms of "*des malentendus de parcours*" ("misunderstandings along the way") and admit that "*l'Afrique attend trop de la France*" ("Africa expects too much of France").²⁴⁸ This suggests that there is no animosity, but rather a need for France to be more humble: France must openly acknowledge that countries will seek new partners while rebuilding what remains strong in their relationship. The country must adjust its approach to dealing with outside competition by adopting a practical and flexible strategy. Garcia stresses that the future of French policy must be carried out "*en étroite coordination avec les partenaires*" ("in close coordination with partners").²⁴⁹

Overall, France must help not by copying others but by doing what others do not. Russia's model, as Cridem stresses, is already "*enlisé dans l'insécurité, la répression politique...*" ("mired in insecurity, political repression..."), which shows that France has a chance to offer civilian protection, good government, and trust.²⁵⁰ Châtaigner reinforces this, insisting that lasting peace requires good governance, not force, an area where France has some advantage.²⁵¹ Similarly, while China's approach is admired for building infrastructure people can see, Sahelian warnings show that France should stand out by being open, fair, and investing in people, like giving scholarships, training, clinics, and schools, instead of making secret deals. And while the EU is respected for being neutral and offering technical assistance, it can be too slow and bureaucratic. Here, France can offer clear ideas, engage in political talks, and provide flexible support, contributing to group efforts without taking over. The main advice from this discussion is that: France must accept a world with many strong countries instead of fighting it. Instead of trying to outdo Russia in security or China in infrastructure, France should offer what those countries do not. According to part of the Sahelian press, this means trust, openness, good governance, and collaboration based on human rights. If France learns to see itself as one of

²⁴⁷ Mali Actu. (2023, August). Perspectives africaines : l'opportunité et le défi des relations avec la Russie, la Chine et la France.

²⁴⁸ *L'Authentique*. (2023, October 2). Interview with President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani.)

²⁴⁹ Garcia, I. (2021). S'allier pour durer: Nouvel axiome de la stratégie française au Sahel. *Défense & Sécurité Internationale*, 146, 46–51.

²⁵⁰ Cridem. (2025, April). Faillite de l'Alliance des États du Sahel : un problème pour la France et l'Europe. Cridem Mauritanie.)

²⁵¹ Châtaigner, J.-M. (2019). La paix par le dialogue en Afrique.

many partners in Africa, it can stay important without trying to dominate, chosen for what it adds rather than by default.

Transparency and Communication

Sahelian journalists often say that France's credibility problems are not just about what it does, but also about how it explains its actions. French projects will be seen as manipulative unless they are open, protected by law, and clearly show respect for independence. Additionally, the fight for trust in the Sahel is being played out in the media. If aid and soft power are not made open, people will keep seeing them as manipulative. Maxime Audinet shows that while France's RFI and France 24 are increasingly seen as tools for spreading government messages, Russia has expanded its influence by forming media partnerships (RT, Sputnik) across Africa.²⁵² The advice here is that France should stop using government-style broadcasting and instead support independent Sahelian journalism, investigative reporting, fact-checking, and open data platforms about aid and security. Helping African voices seems to be the only way to rebuild trust in the media.

6.2. Comparative Policy Lessons for France from External Actors in the Sahel

6.2.1. Policy Lessons from the European Union: Neutrality, Multilateralism, and Legitimacy

This analysis found that the European Union is seen in Sahelian media as a neutral and generally accepted presence, which stands in contrast to France's more debated role. Based on the data collected for this thesis (2022–2025), about 60-70% of articles refer to the EU in neutral terms, less than 20% view it positively, and only a small number are openly negative. Sahelian media often describe the EU as technical and bureaucratic, but not intrusive or neocolonial. Although this neutrality may seem unremarkable, it is important because it allows the EU to be

²⁵² Audinet, M. (2023). Les médias dans l'action internationale de la Russie en Afrique.

accepted as a practical partner, without causing the resentment and rejection that are increasingly directed at France.

Academic insights support this view. Garcia points out that France's future in Africa will only be seen as legitimate if it works "*en étroite coordination avec les partenaires*" ("in close coordination with partners"), a principle now reflected in EU actions.²⁵³ The EU, through programs such as Global Gateway, EUTM, EUCAP, and AU-EU cooperation, has built trust in areas including justice reform, decentralization, anti-corruption, and infrastructure. These joint efforts face less political resistance than French-only initiatives. For France, the takeaway is clear: it should work within the EU and AU frameworks and present its efforts as part of broader European-African projects, rather than as solo, France-led projects.

The EU does have its weaknesses. As discussed in this thesis, inefficiency and excessive bureaucracy can erode local trust. France should not use Europeanisation to hide its own interests or repeat paternalistic approaches under a shared label. Instead, the EU should help build legitimacy, rather than serving as a mean to avoid responsibility. In this group context, France can still influence priorities as an agenda-setter, while stepping back from acting alone.

In summary, France can learn from the EU that focusing on neutrality and technical credibility, even if less visible than traditional leadership, creates a stronger base for legitimacy. By working within EU frameworks, France can address concerns about neocolonialism, rebuild trust, and become one of many partners in a wider multilateral system.

6.2.2. Policy Lessons from China: Delivering Tangible Benefits While Avoiding Dependency

This analysis reveals that in Sahelian media, China is frequently portrayed as making tangible, visible contributions, whereas France is more closely associated with talk than action. For example, Mali Actu notes that "*la Chine est reconnue comme une force montante sur la scène Mondiale*" ("China is recognised as a rising force on the global stage").²⁵⁴ Articles frequently mention China's involvement in building roads, hospitals, and energy facilities, as well as its policy of non-interference, which many African governments find appealing. In this

²⁵³ Garcia, I. (2021). S'allier pour durer: Nouvel axiome de la stratégie française au Sahel. *Défense & Sécurité Internationale*, 146, 46–51.

²⁵⁴ Mali Actu. (2023, August). Perspectives africaines : l'opportunité et le défi des relations avec la Russie, la Chine et la France.

view, Beijing appears practical and focused on development, while France is often perceived as interfering and overly political.

These observations offer France some important lessons. According to the press, China's appeal comes from providing benefits that people can see and use in their daily lives. Actions like reopening schools, building clinics, creating jobs, and funding scholarships have a more direct impact than promises of reform or partnership. The research reviewed in this thesis supports this idea. Although Chinese engagement has its critics, it is often valued for being visible and immediate. Scholars compare this to France's technical approach, which often leads to results that citizens do not notice. To regain credibility, France should focus on practical, citizen-focused projects so that the benefits of cooperation reach more people, not just elites.

At the same time, both journalists and scholars urge caution. Mali Actu notes China's practical appeal but also stresses *"il est essentiel de comprendre les motivations qui sous-tendent son engagement"* ("the need to understand the reasons behind its involvement").²⁵⁵ This suggests that Beijing's approach is not entirely selfless and could lead to dependency or exploitation. Academic sources echo these concerns, highlighting issues such as debt, unclear contracts, and resource extraction. As a result, France is advised not to simply follow China's example. Instead, it should focus on transparency, fair value, and strong environmental and social standards.

To sum up, people in the Sahel often view China as a rising global power. They appreciate its non-interference and predictability, but they also point out the dangers of becoming too dependent. For France, the takeaway is dual: it should learn from China's success in providing real, everyday benefits, but also avoid the same problems by building partnerships that are open, sustainable, and focused on citizens, while making sure African autonomy is protected.

6.2.3. Policy Lessons from Russia: Sovereignty Symbolism without Authoritarian Trap

Sahelian media now often describe Russia as a dependable security partner, filling the gap left by France's retreat. Outlets like Mali Actu note that *"Les opportunités offertes par la Russie sont à la fois prometteuses et délicates"* ("The opportunities offered [by Russia] are both promising and delicate"). Russia is viewed as a protector at a time when France is no longer

²⁵⁵ Mali Actu. (2023, August). Perspectives africaines : l'opportunité et le défi des relations avec la Russie, la Chine et la France.

trusted, and its actions are seen as showing solidarity against Western influence. Wagner contractors frequently use African flags, which helps create a sense of respect for local sovereignty and avoids the negative image of foreign military bases.²⁵⁶ Cridem also points out that *“l’ours russe s’engouffre dans la brèche”* (“the Russian bear slips through the breach”), that Russia is taking advantage of the security gap left by France, positioning itself as a practical and loyal partner. From these observations, France can draw important lessons. Sahelian media suggest that Russia’s appeal is not about having more resources, but about the symbolism of sovereignty. Russian support is often less visible, shared politically, and presented as led by Africans. France might benefit from making its security cooperation appear temporary, jointly agreed upon, and carried out under the host country’s flag, rather than relying on permanent bases with the French flag.

At the same time, Sahelian media warn about the risks of Russia’s model. They point out that hidden control, even when presented as a partnership, can be just as dangerous as military occupation. Wagner’s activities are often criticized as a new way to increase repression and weaken governance. Cridem highlights that Russia’s influence has accompanied increased political repression and instability in the Alliance des États du Sahel.²⁵⁷ Scholars share this view. Jean-Michel Châtaigner argues that peace in the Sahel depends on good governance and dialogue, not just military power.²⁵⁸ If France were to copy Russia’s authoritarian style, it would likely push people away. Instead, Paris can set itself apart by focusing on professional military conduct, accountability, and respect for human rights, which are areas where Russia falls short.

To sum up, people in the Sahel see Russia as a symbol of sovereignty and appreciate its quiet approach to security support. However, they also recognize the risks of instability and repression that can come with this model. For France, the key takeaway is, again, dual: it should adopt Russia’s approach of presenting cooperation as African-led and respectful of sovereignty, but stay away of the authoritarian methods linked to the Wagner group. France’s strengths lie in transparency, good governance, and security partnerships founded on respect for human rights. These qualities can help the country regain trust in a region where Russia’s influence may not last.

²⁵⁶ Mali Actu. (2023, August). Perspectives africaines : l’opportunité et le défi des relations avec la Russie, la Chine et la France.

²⁵⁷ Cridem. (2025, April). Faillite de l’Alliance des États du Sahel.

²⁵⁸ Châtaigner, J.-M. (2019). La paix par le dialogue en Afrique.

To sum up, this research highlights three clear lessons: Russia appeals through symbols of sovereignty, China demonstrates the benefits of tangible results, and the EU stands for neutrality and multilateralism. France can learn from these examples but should avoid their mistakes, such as protecting regimes, lacking transparency, or making slow decisions. Instead, France should focus on humility, building diverse partnerships, and leading in governance, rights, and openness. The EU can serve as both a support and a force multiplier, but France should also bring its own value to the table. Ultimately, France should stand out by being transparent, accountable, respectful of sovereignty, and focused on its citizens.

Overall, these comparisons highlight both the possibilities and the limits of French leverage. Many suggestions found in Sahelian media, such as reparations, halting all military activities, or cutting ties with authoritarian regimes, are more about ideals than practical policies that Paris can implement. Whether these ideas can be put into practice will depend on France's internal politics and its strategic interests. It is important to recognize the gap between what Sahelian societies want and what France can actually provide. However, the main point of this thesis stays the same: France cannot return to its former dominant role, but by learning from Russia, China, and the EU, and by focusing on transparency, good governance, and humility, it can become a credible, though more limited, partner in a multipolar Sahel.

Conclusion

This thesis addresses the question of how French security policies are perceived and represented in Sahelian media from the Barkhane era to the post-withdrawal period, in comparison with both traditional and emerging foreign actors in the region. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis, the findings indicate that the erosion of French legitimacy in the Sahel results from the complex interaction between regional structural weaknesses and France's policy shortcomings, rather than either factor alone. France's reliance on military-centred solutions, as exemplified by Operations Serval and Barkhane, proved inadequate for the multidimensional crises of the Sahel, where governance, social, and developmental challenges are closely linked to security threats. Analysis of Sahelian media demonstrates that this misalignment favoured contestation and ultimately led to the delegitimization of France's presence, as evidenced by the rupture of defence agreements, the expulsion of French forces, and the rise of anti-French sentiment.

The European Union was portrayed in the media as a relatively neutral and technical partner, generally accepted by default rather than through strong conviction. In contrast, China maintained a largely positive image due to its visible development projects, although concerns persisted regarding transparency and dependency risks. Russia experienced a significant increase in legitimacy, as its military partnerships and emphasis on sovereignty strongly resonated within Sahelian discourse. These findings demonstrate that public opinion is a decisive security factor. The legitimacy, formation of alliances, and sustainability of interventions increasingly depend on how local populations perceive and interpret the presence of external actors.

This study improves security studies by establishing that legitimacy and narratives are essential elements of security. Analysis of Sahelian media demonstrates that sovereignty and partnership are as significant as material power in shaping security outcomes. Integrating quantitative emotion analysis with qualitative discourse analysis, this thesis offers empirical evidence explaining France's transition from a central security partner to a contested and rejected actor within a decade.

At the policy level, the findings indicate that France should transition from a primarily military strategy to a more inclusive, credible, and multipolar approach to restore its legitimacy in the Sahel. Drawing on the European Union's emphasis on multilateralism, China's effectiveness in

delivering concrete benefits, and Russia's projection of sovereignty symbolism, while carefully avoiding the shortcomings of each, provides potential pathways for strategic adaptation. Furthermore, France's long-term role in the Sahel will depend on its willingness to address colonial legacies, engage meaningfully with local societies, and participate in collective frameworks instead of relying on unilateral military interventions.

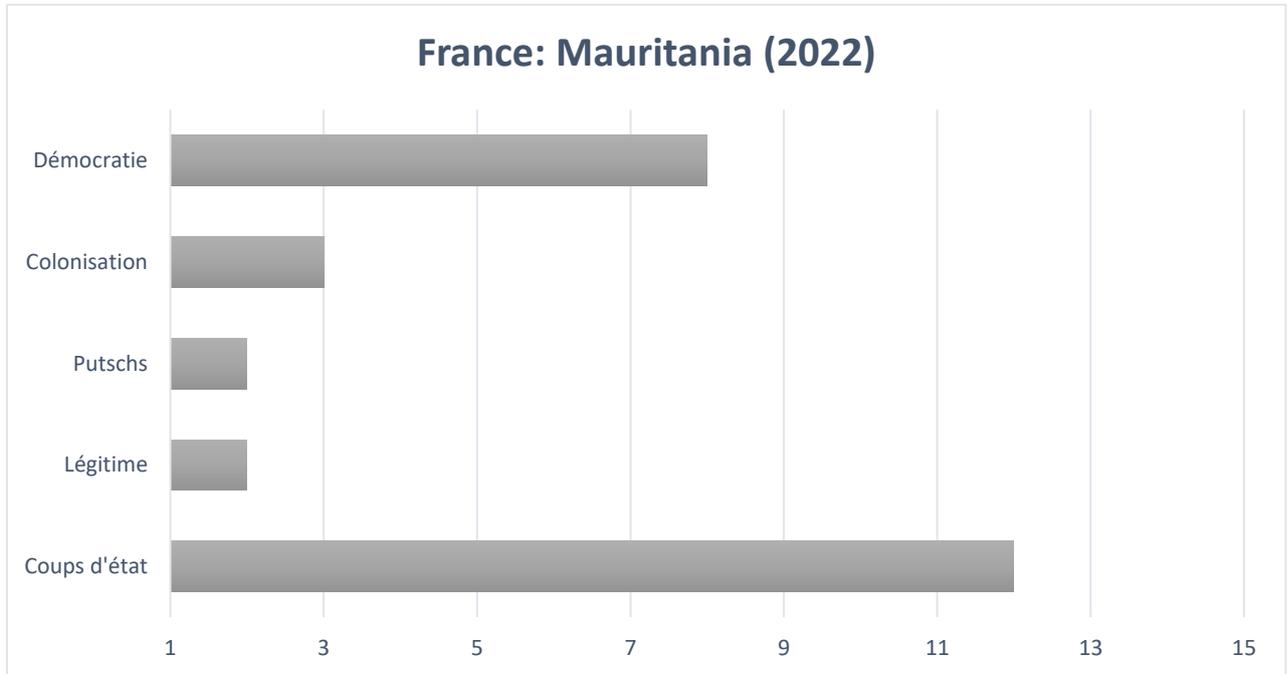
This research identifies several avenues for further study. Expanding the analysis to neighbouring regions, including the Gulf of Guinea and North Africa, and examining the roles of additional actors such as the United States, Turkey, and Gulf States, would offer a more comprehensive comparative perspective. Further investigation into media and communication strategies, with particular attention to disinformation campaigns and influence operations, is also essential. These research directions are especially pertinent given the ongoing challenges in assessing the extent of external influence on public opinion. Pursuing these extensions would enhance understanding of the evolving geopolitical landscape in which the Sahel functions as both a strategic crossroads and a site of global competition.

In conclusion, the Sahel represents both a region of deep insecurity and a site for examining legitimacy, where external actors are evaluated not solely by their material resources but by their capacity to align with local aspirations for sovereignty and dignity. By emphasizing the perspectives of Sahelian societies, this thesis demonstrates that security in the 21st century extends beyond military strategy.

Appendix

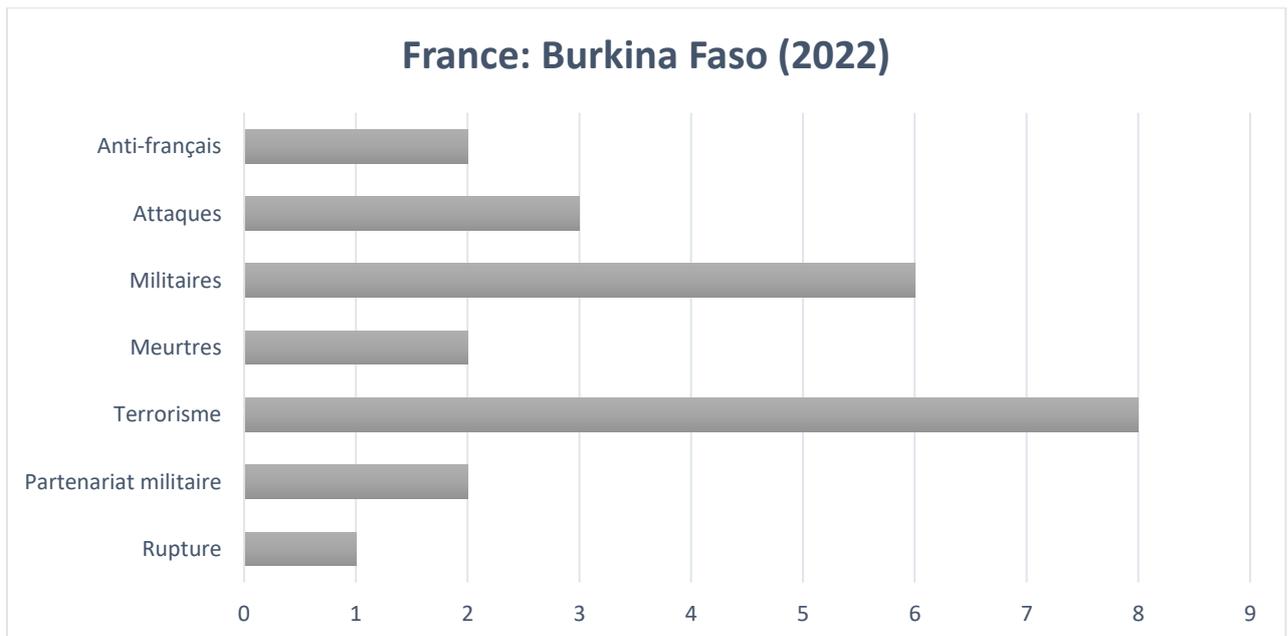
France

Figure 21. Vocabulary describing France in Mauritania (2022)



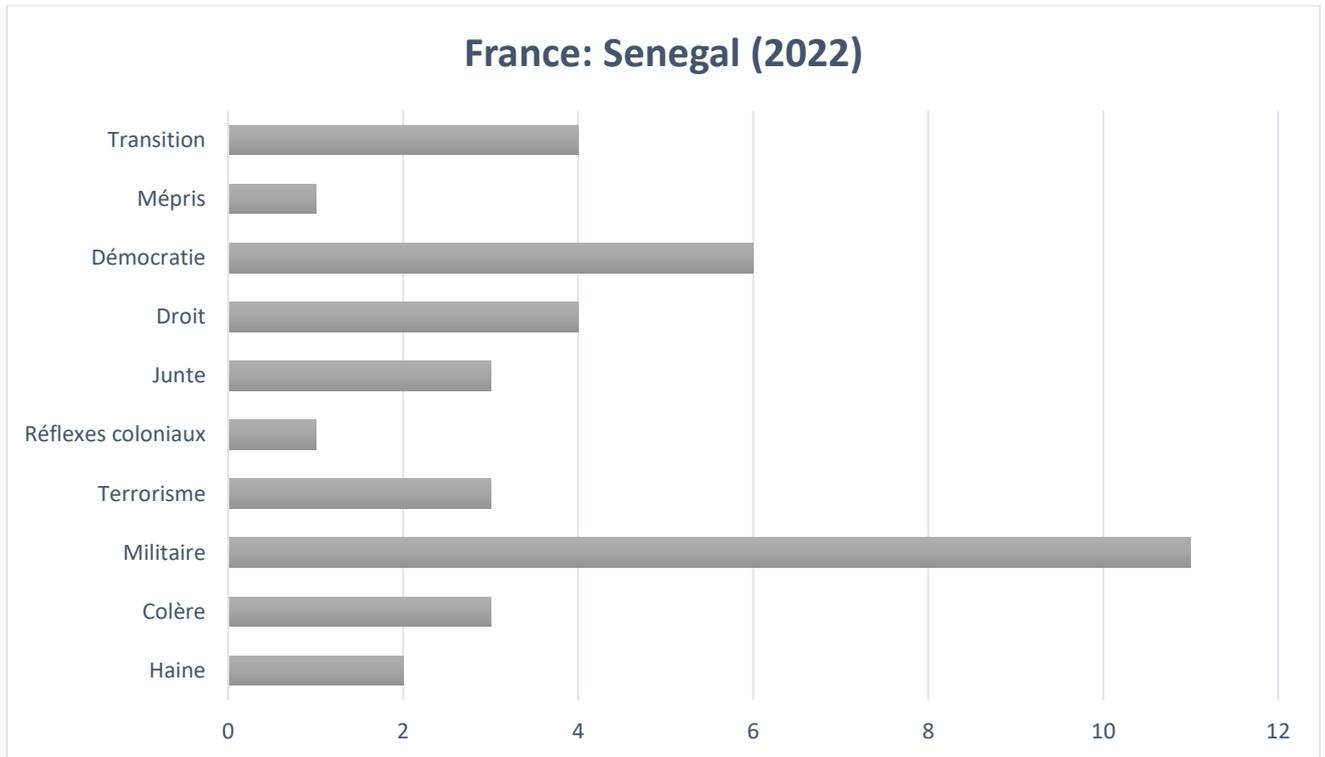
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 22. Vocabulary describing France in Burkina Faso (2022)



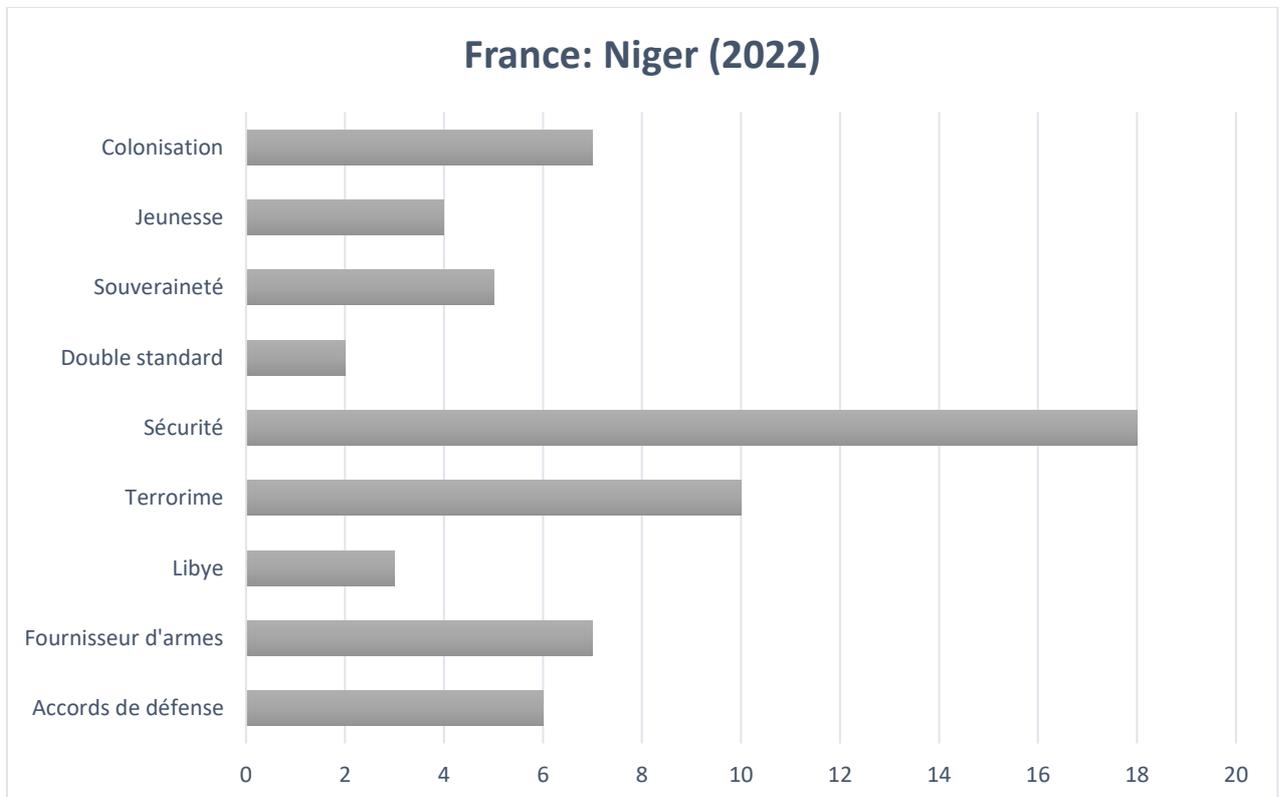
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 23. Vocabulary describing France in Senegal (2022)



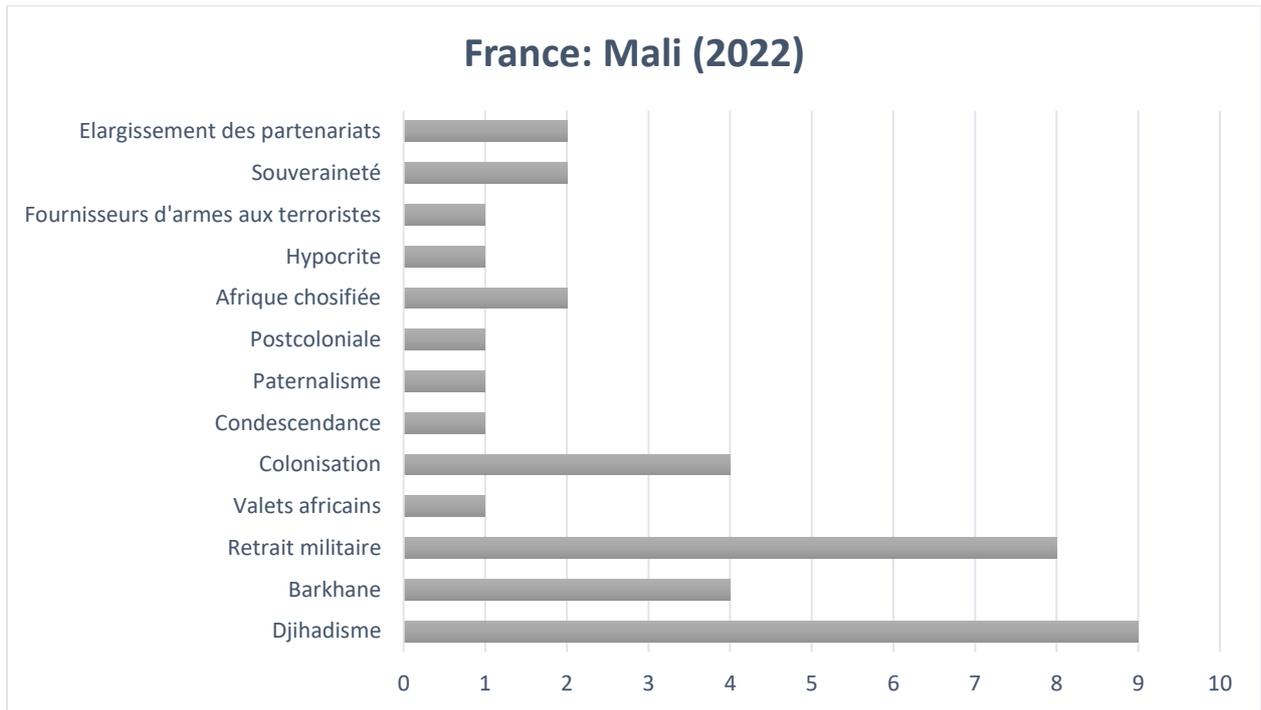
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 24. Vocabulary describing France in Niger (2022)



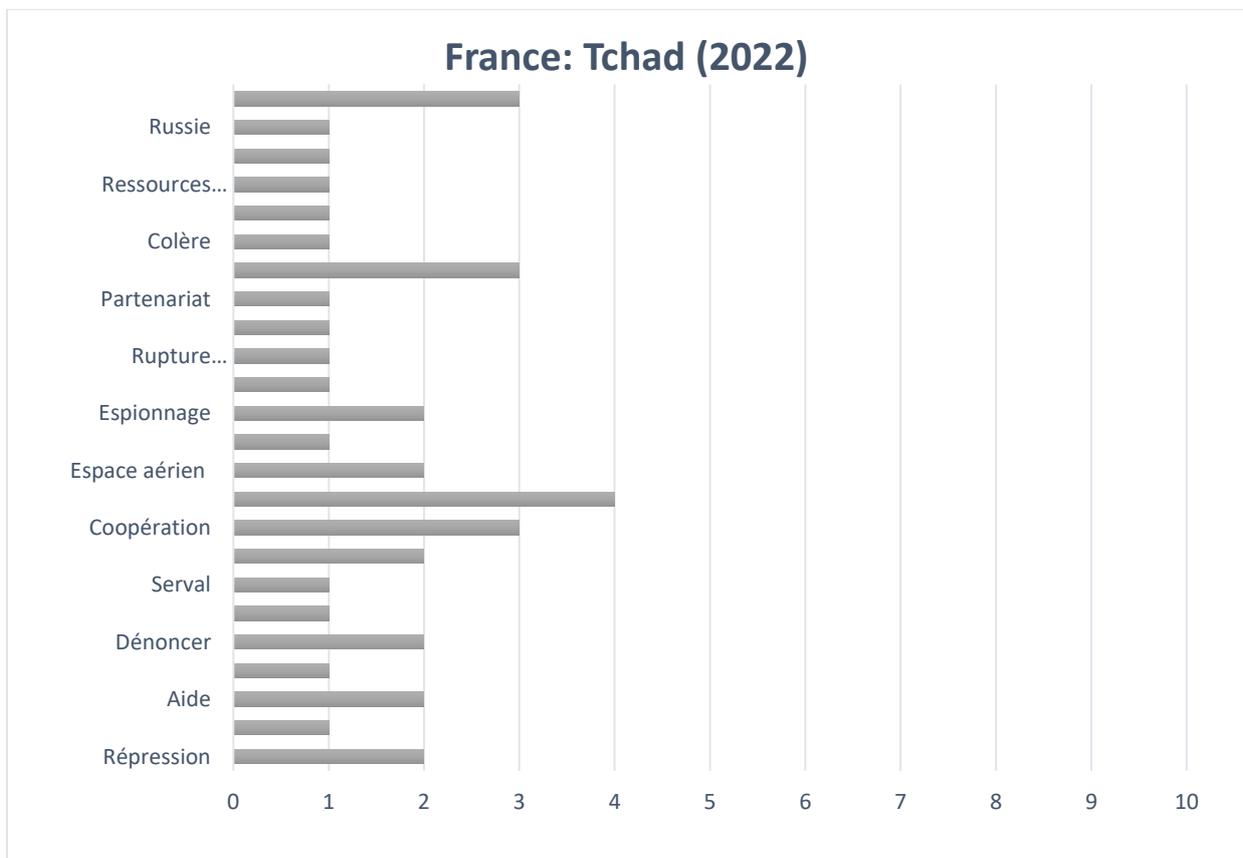
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 25. Vocabulary describing France in Mali (2022)



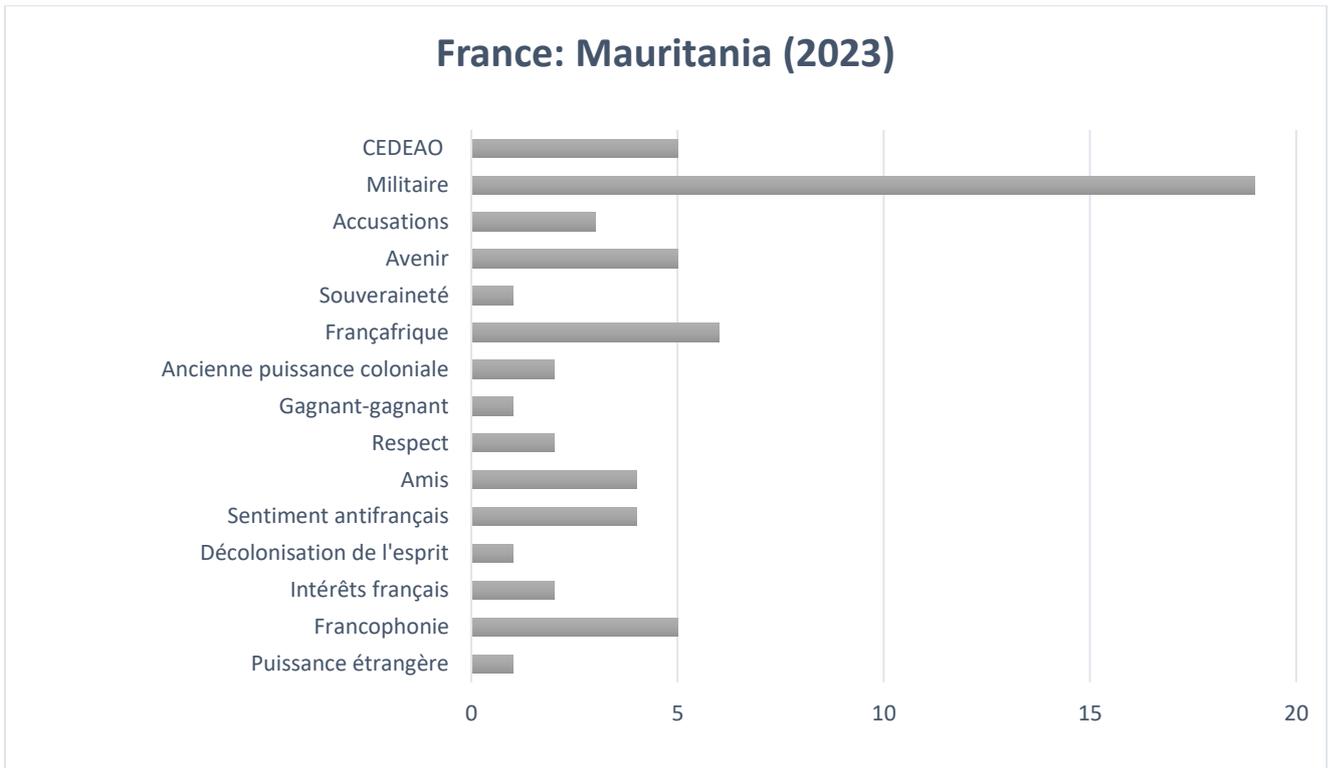
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Figure 26. Vocabulary describing France in Tchad (2022)



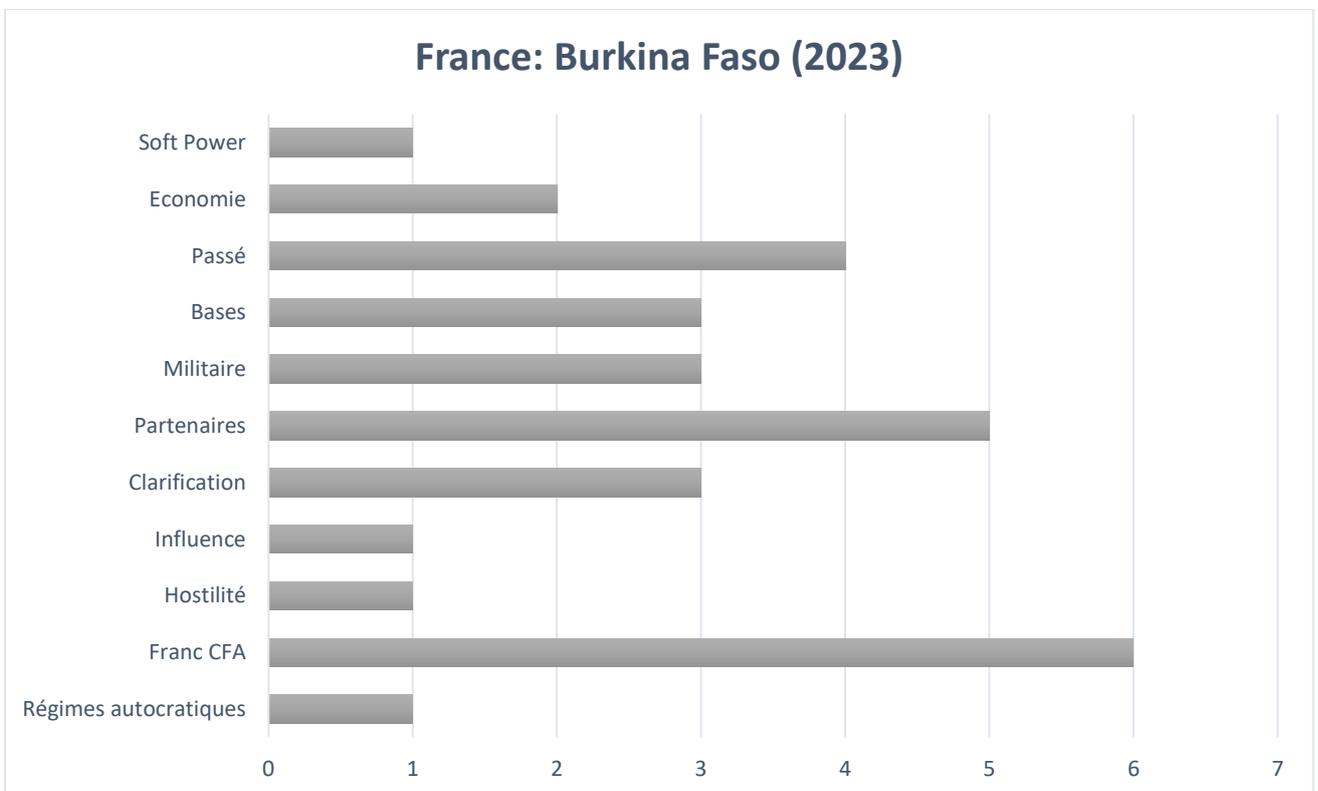
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Figure 27. Vocabulary describing France in Mauritania (2023)



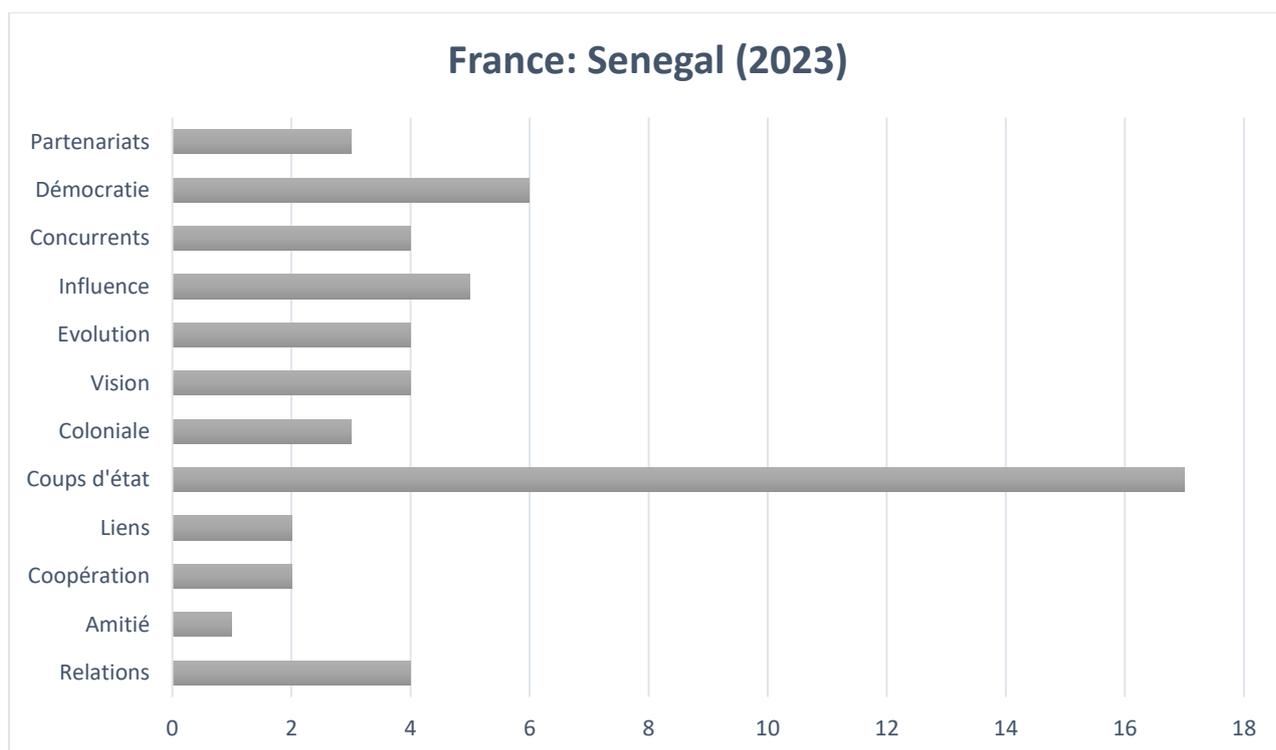
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Figure 28. Vocabulary describing France in Burkina Faso (2023)



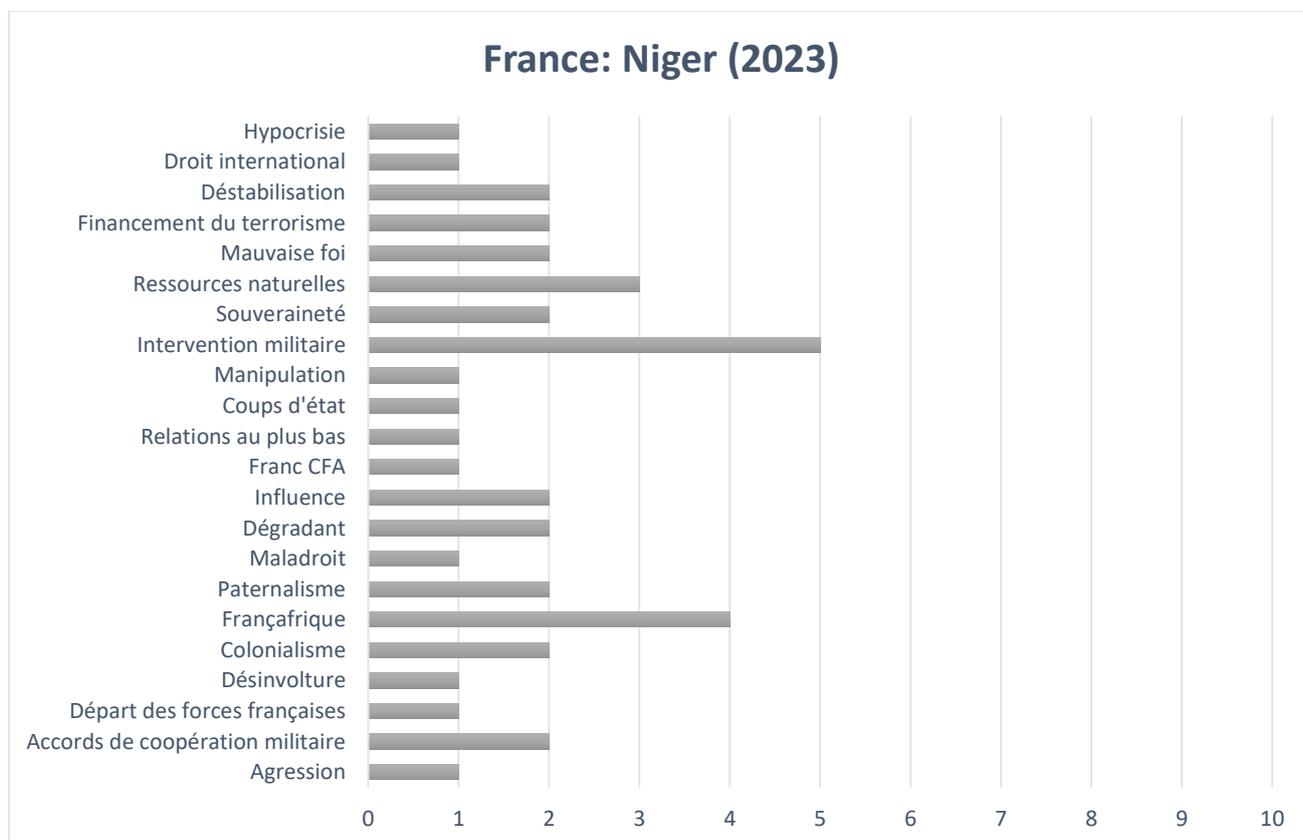
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Figure 29. Vocabulary describing France in Senegal (2023)



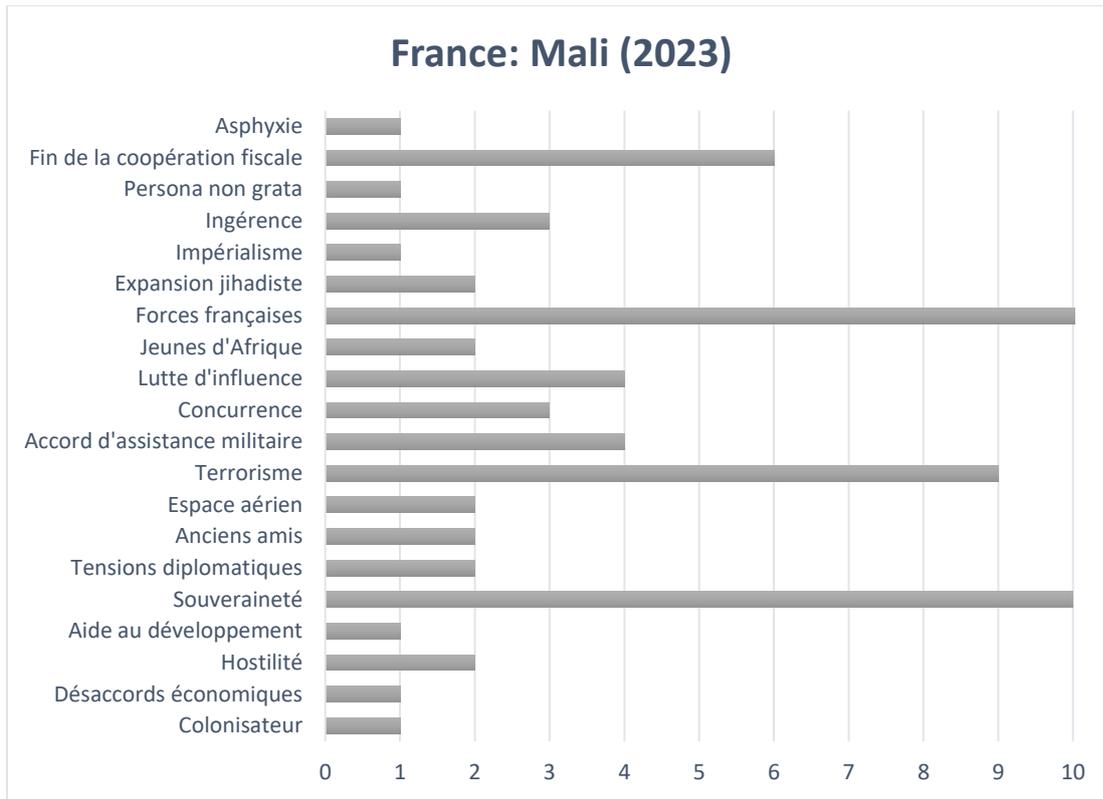
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 30. Vocabulary describing France in Niger (2023)



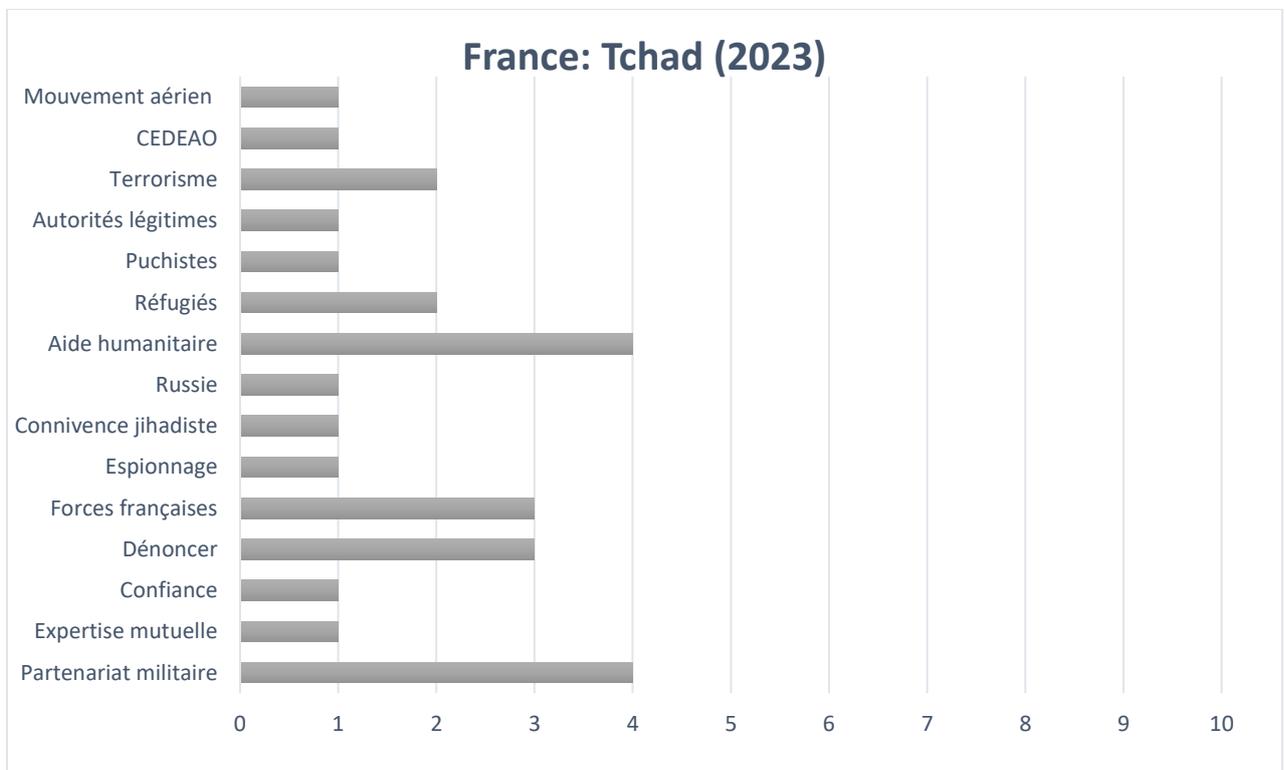
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Figure 31. Vocabulary describing France in Mali (2023)



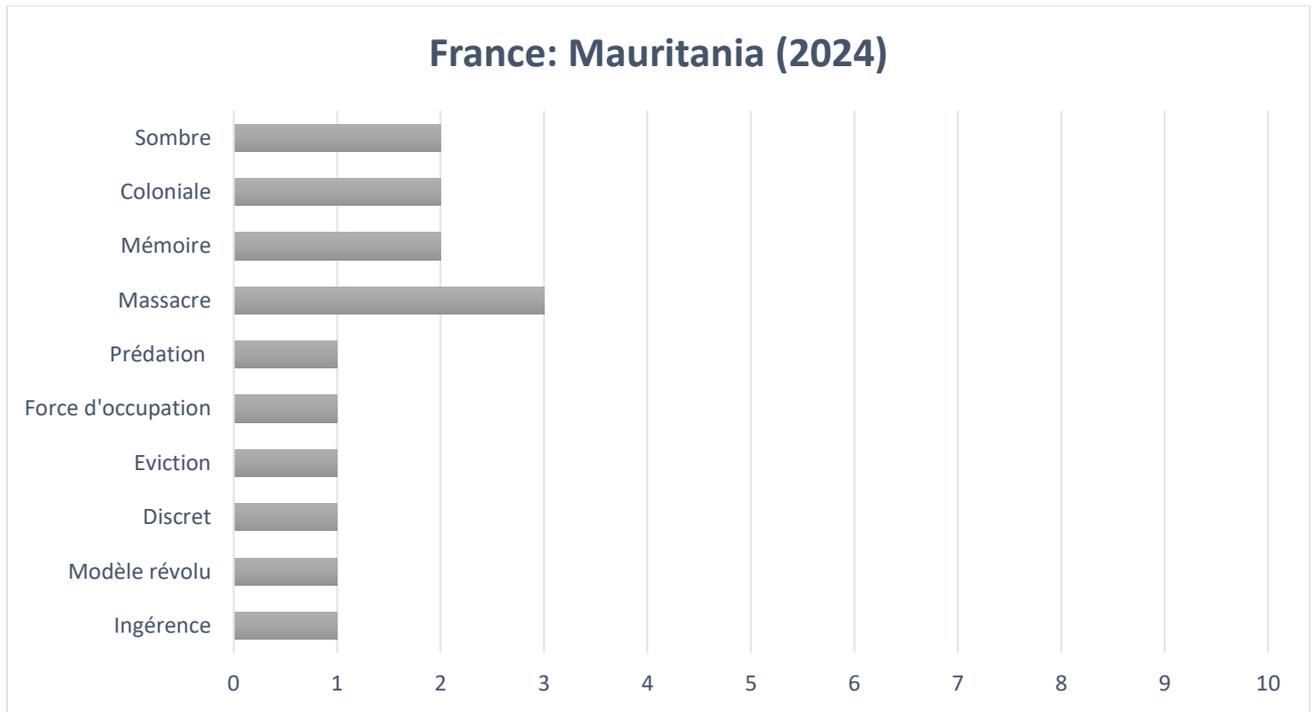
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Figure 32. Vocabulary describing France in Tchad (2023)



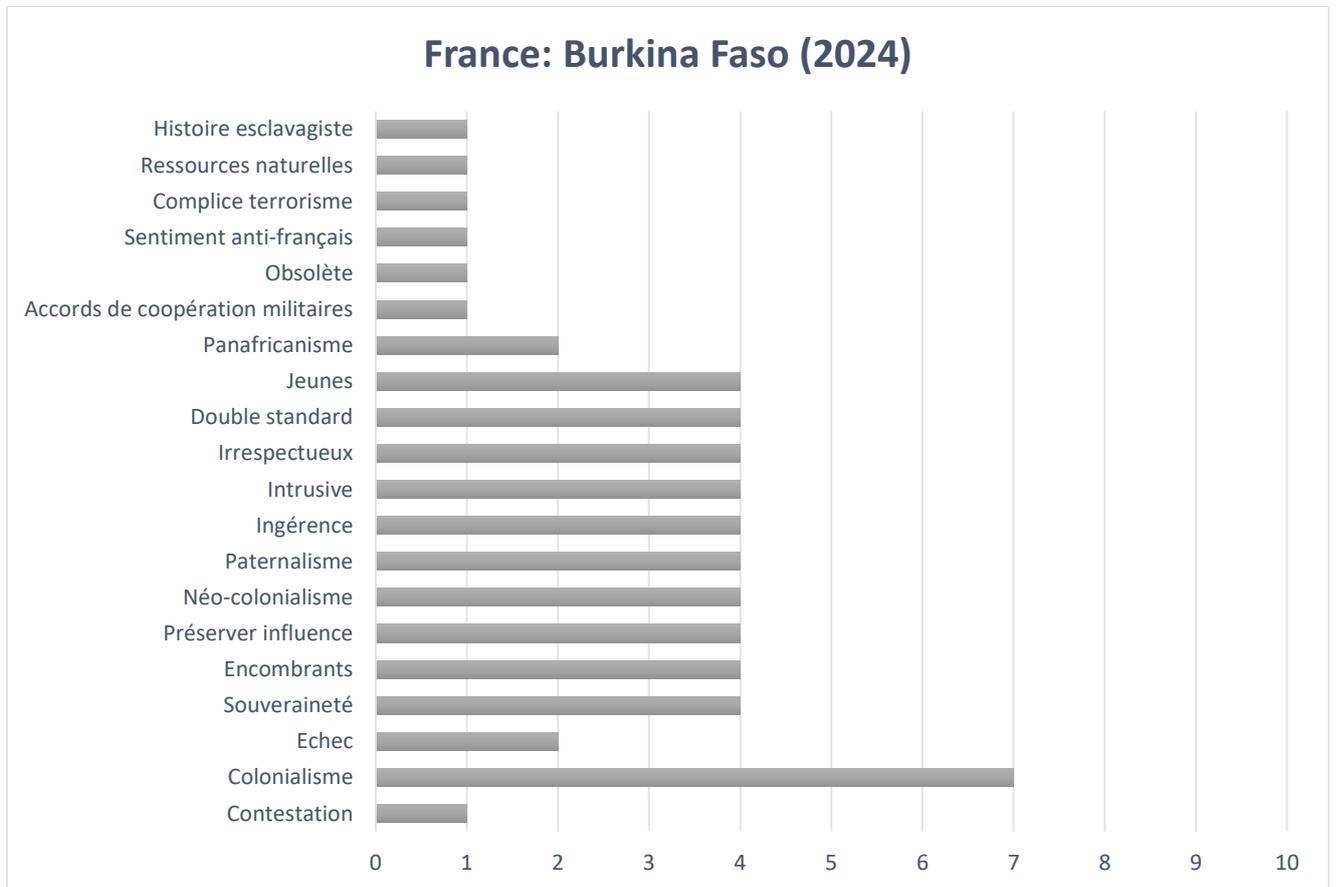
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Figure 33. Vocabulary describing France in Mauritania (2024)



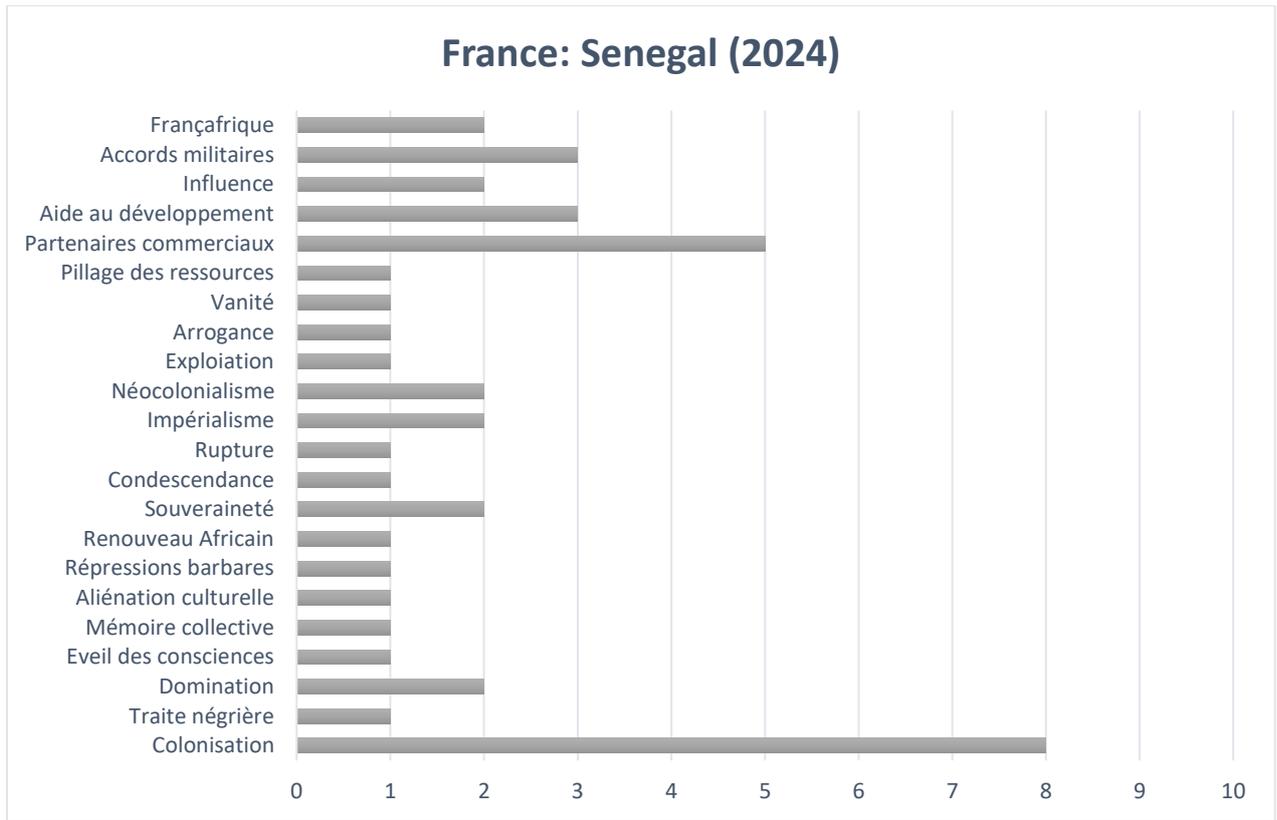
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 34. Vocabulary describing France in Burkina Faso (2024)



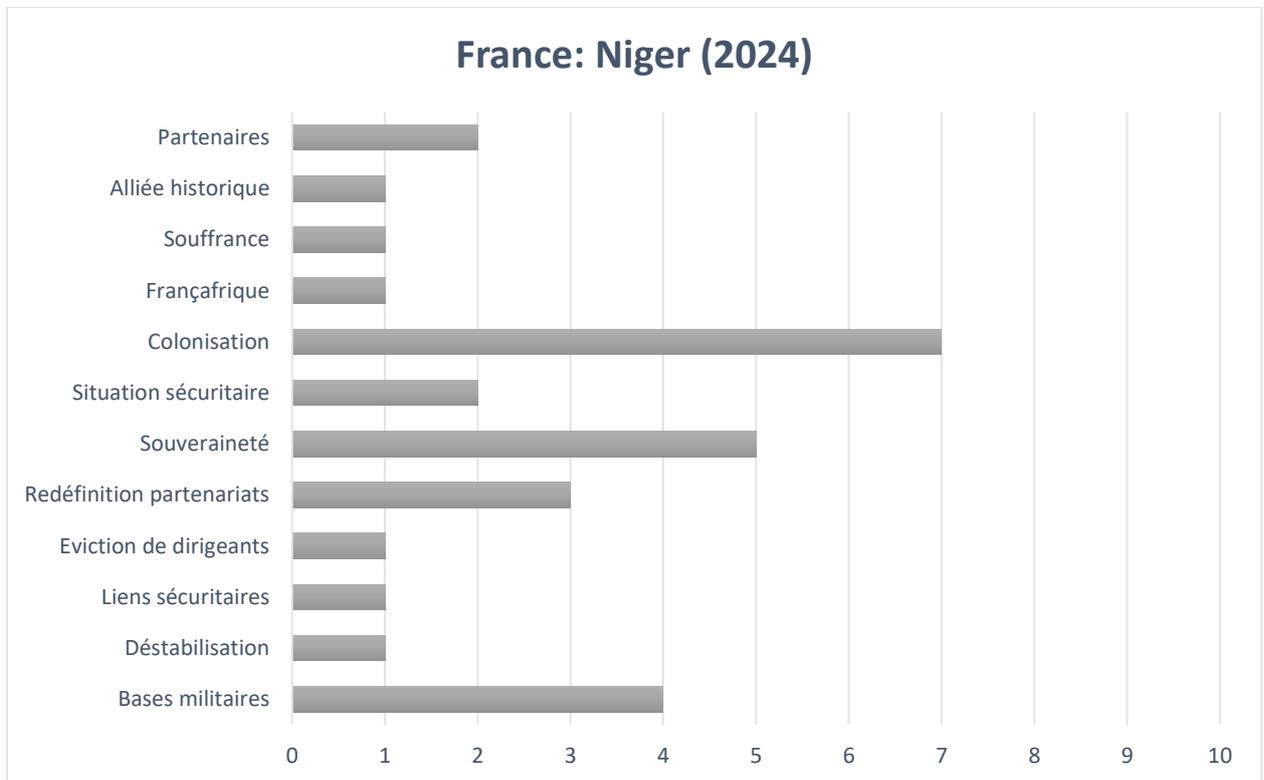
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Figure 35. Vocabulary describing France in Senegal (2024)



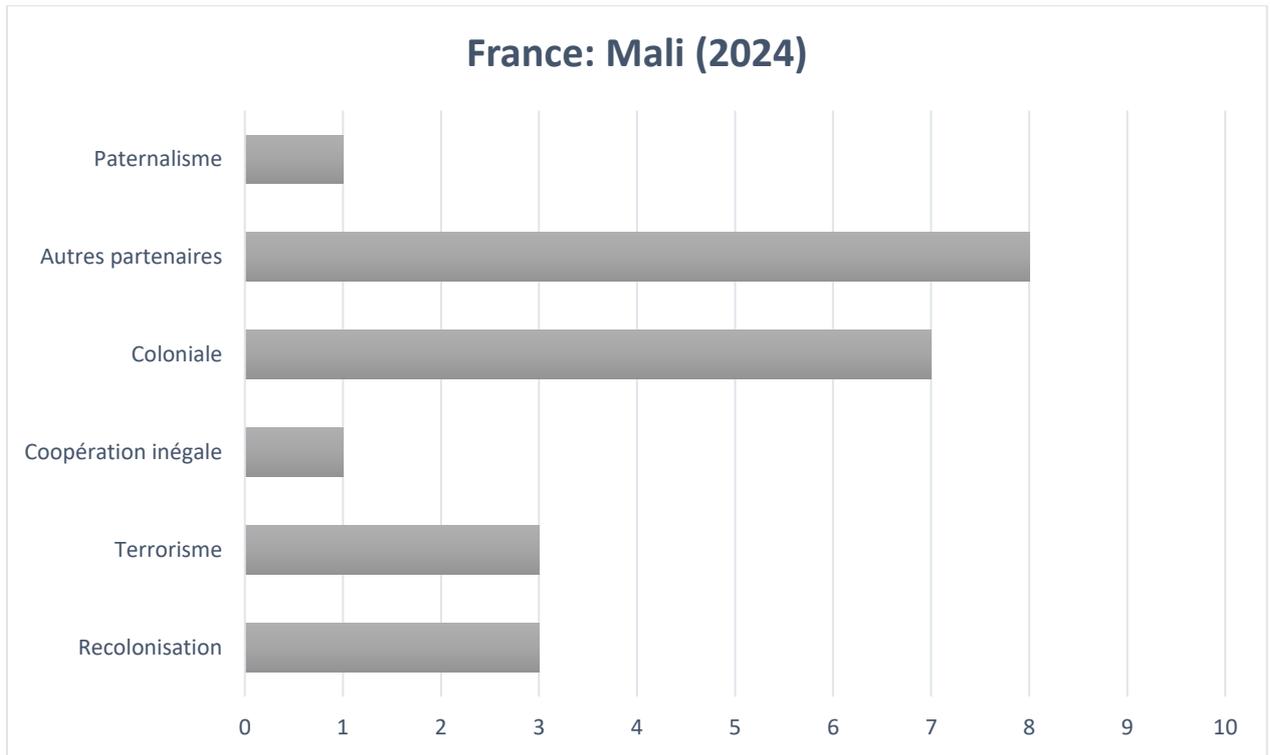
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 36. Vocabulary describing France in Niger (2024)



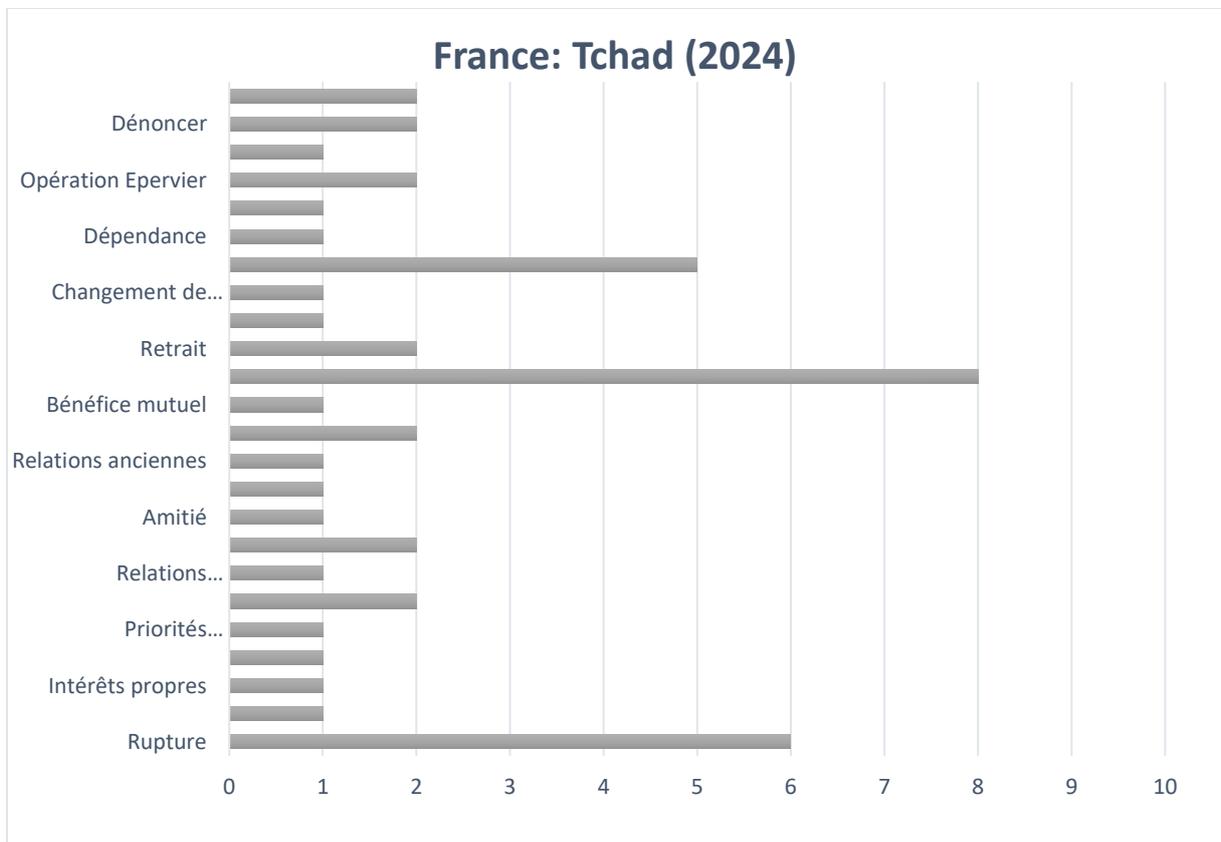
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 37. Vocabulary describing France in Mali (2024)



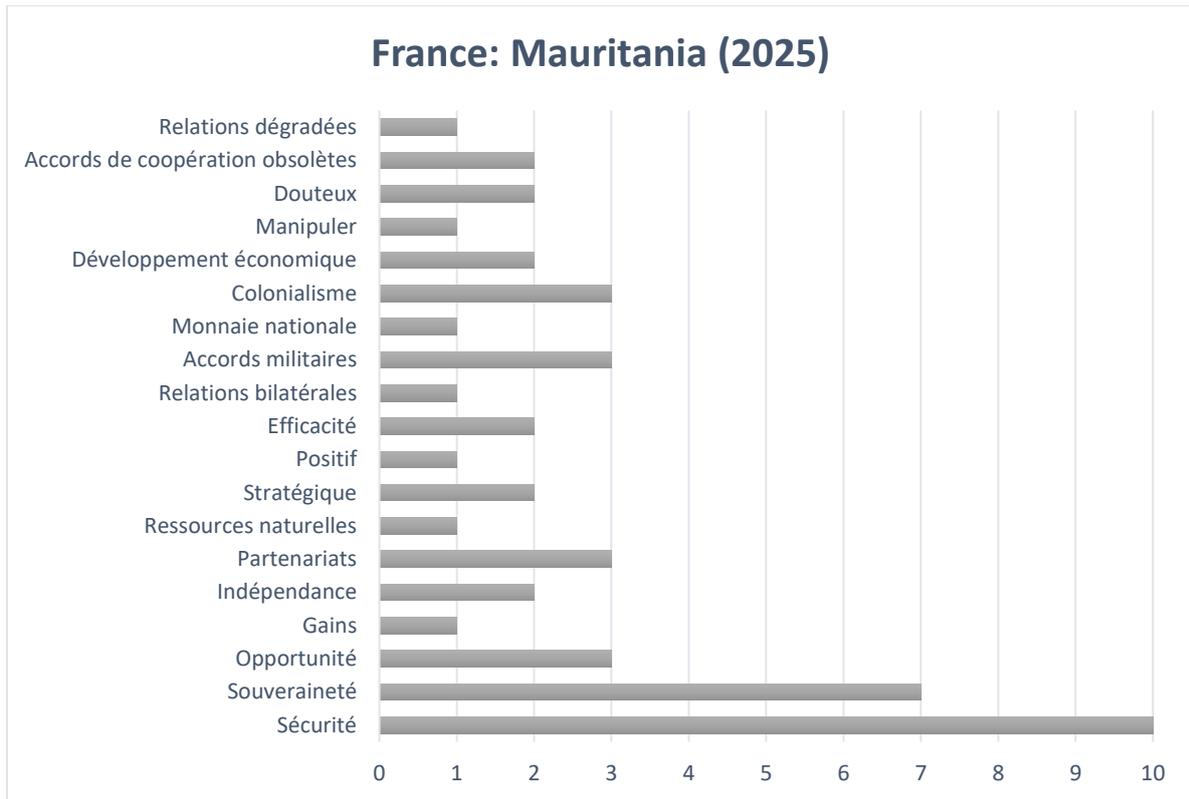
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Figure 38. Vocabulary describing France in Tchad (2024)



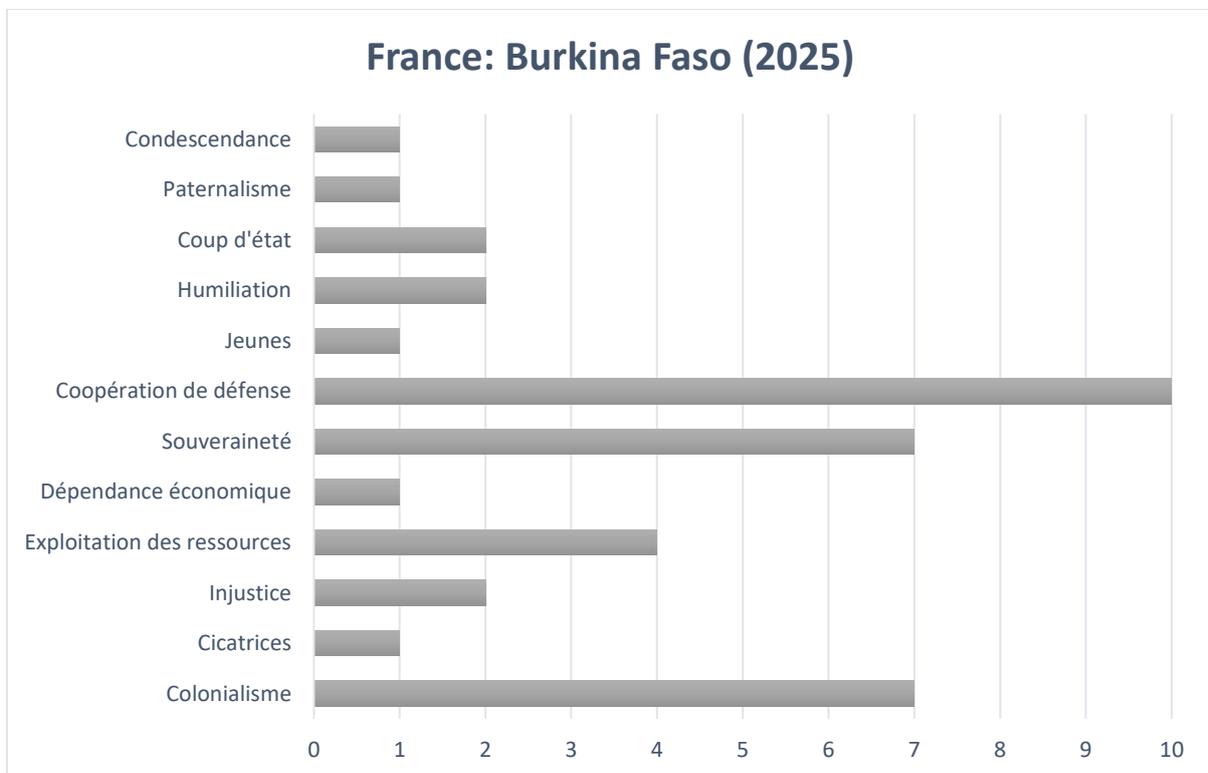
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Figure 39. Vocabulary describing France in Mauritania (2025)



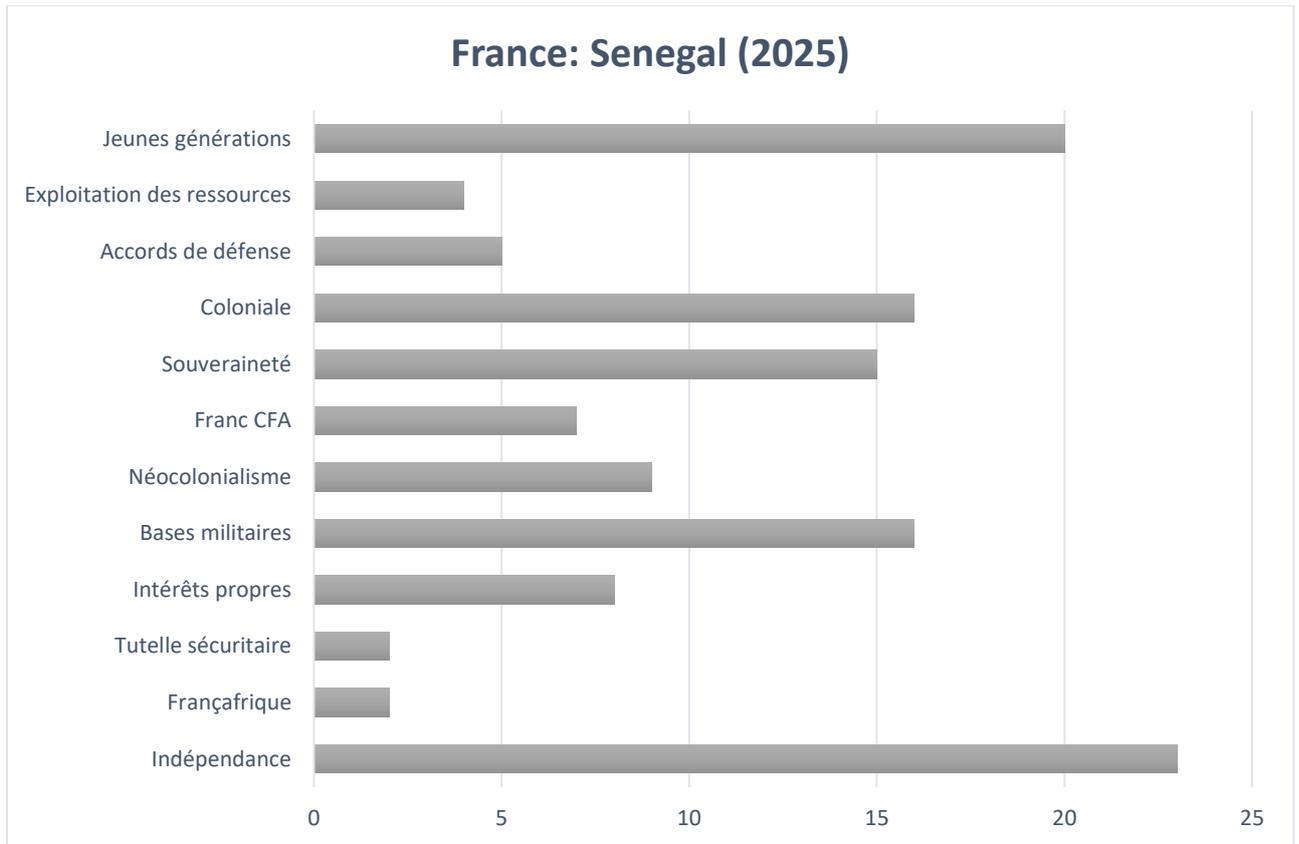
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Figure 40. Vocabulary describing France in Burkina Faso (2025)



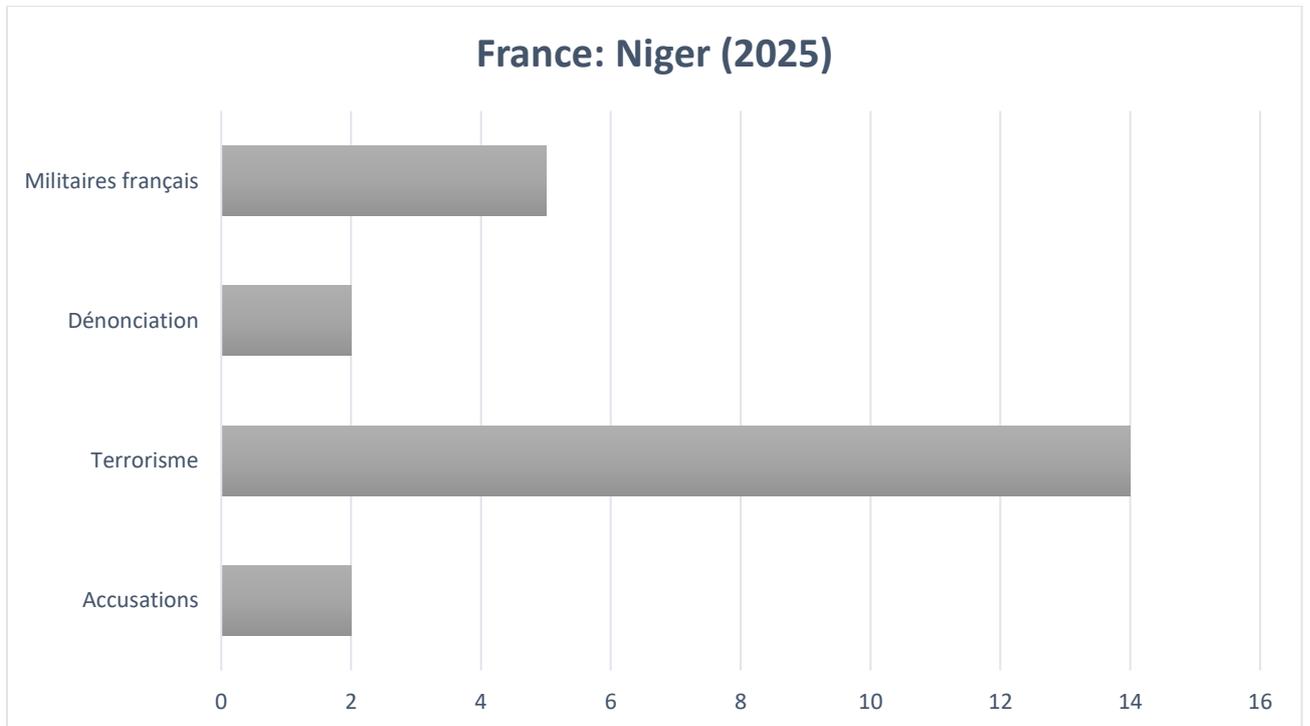
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Figure 41. Vocabulary describing France in Senegal (2025)



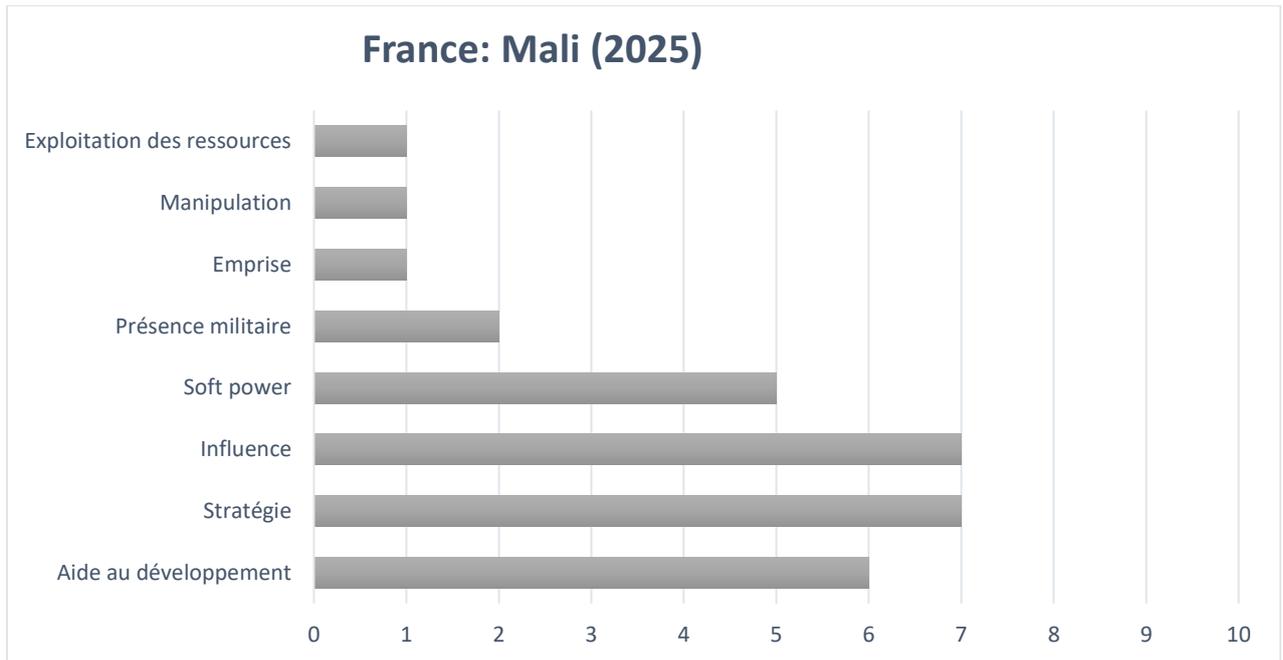
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 42. Vocabulary describing France in Niger (2025)



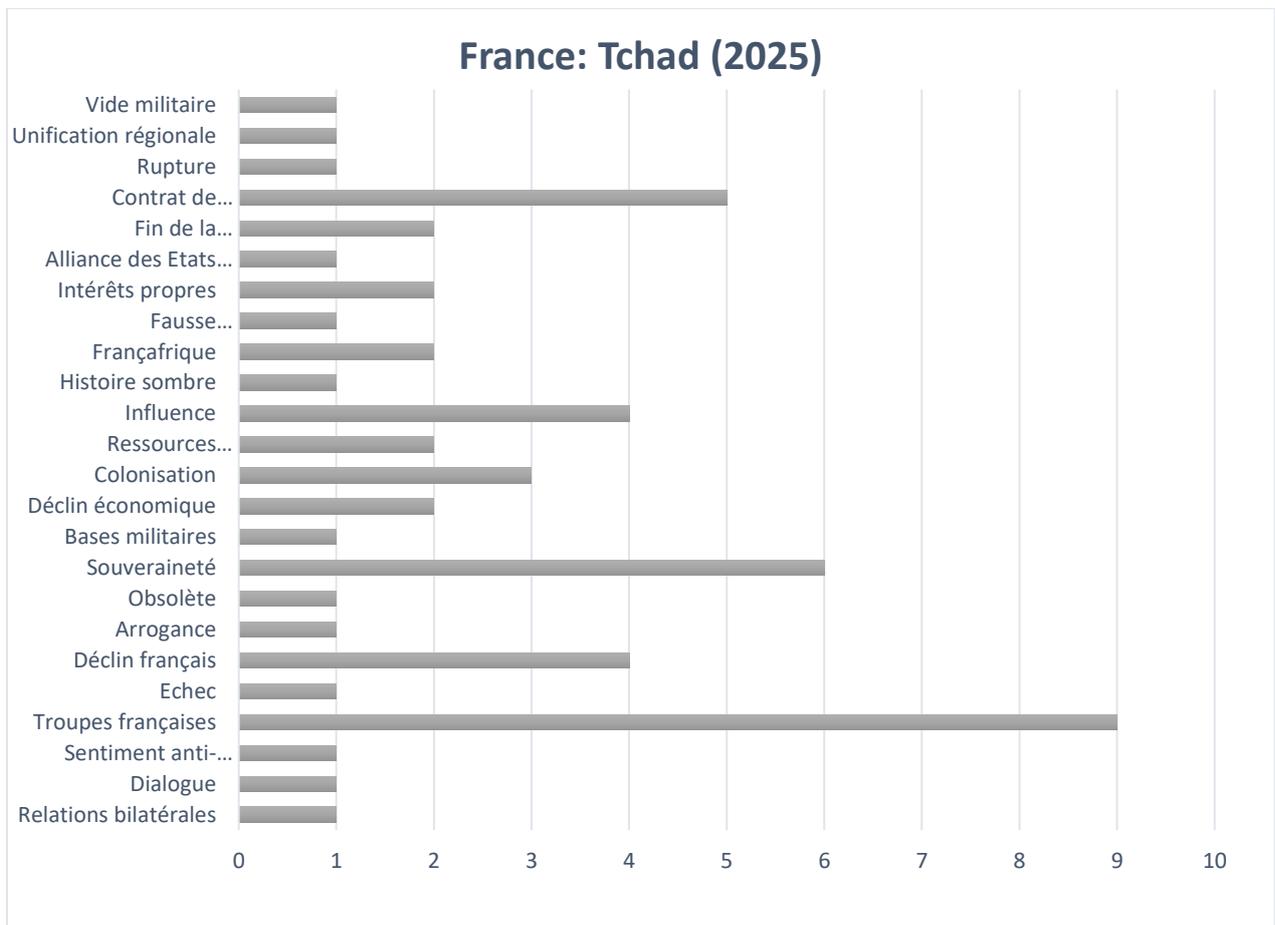
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 43. Vocabulary describing France in Mali (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

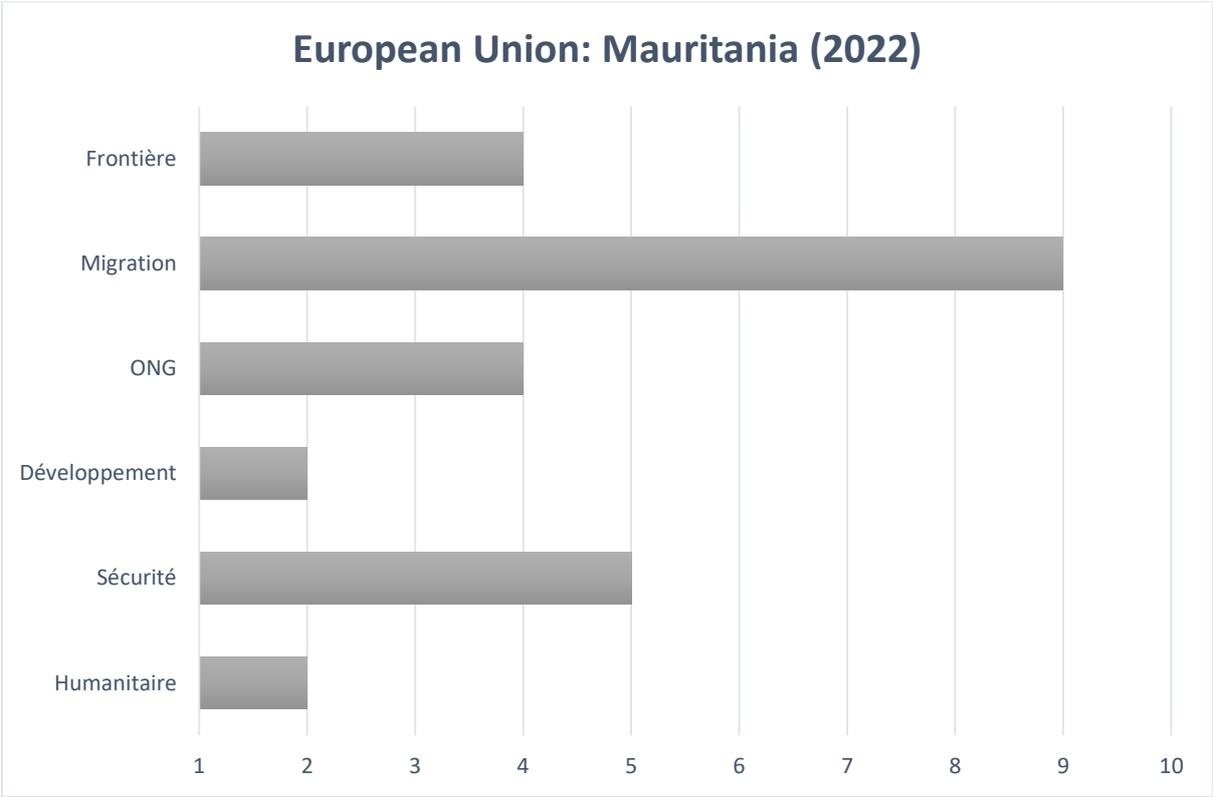
Figure 44. Vocabulary describing France in Tchad (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

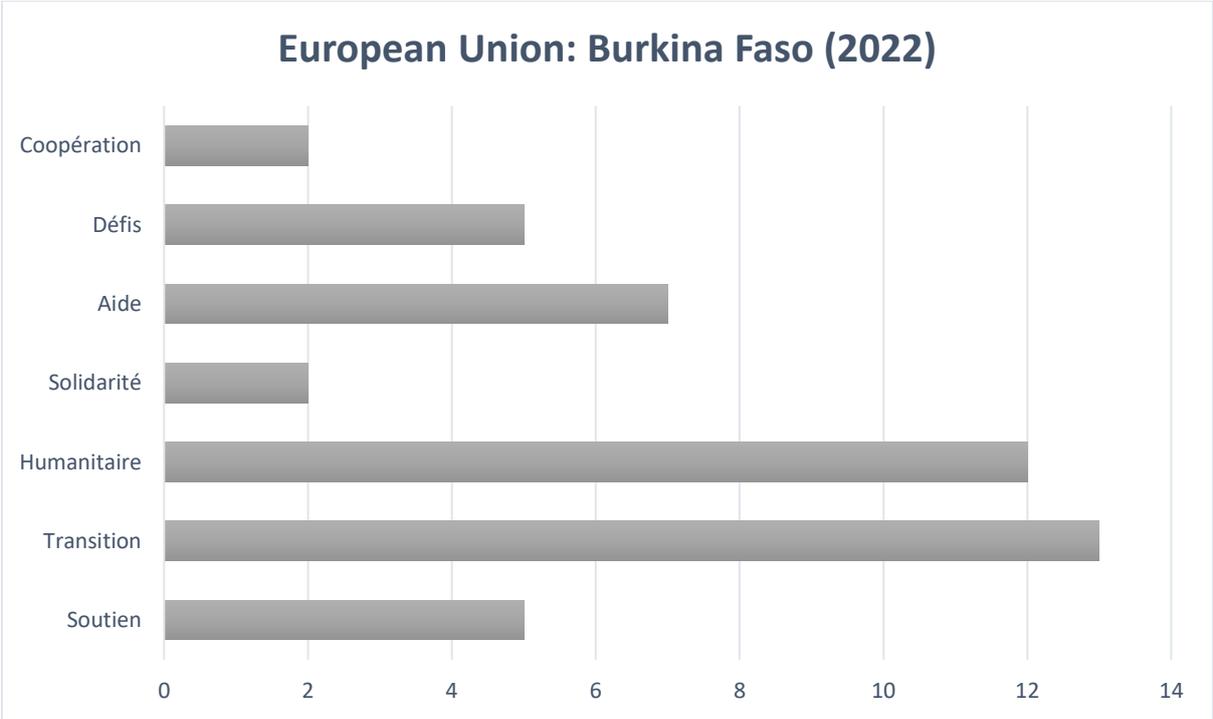
European Union

Figure 45. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mauritania (2022)



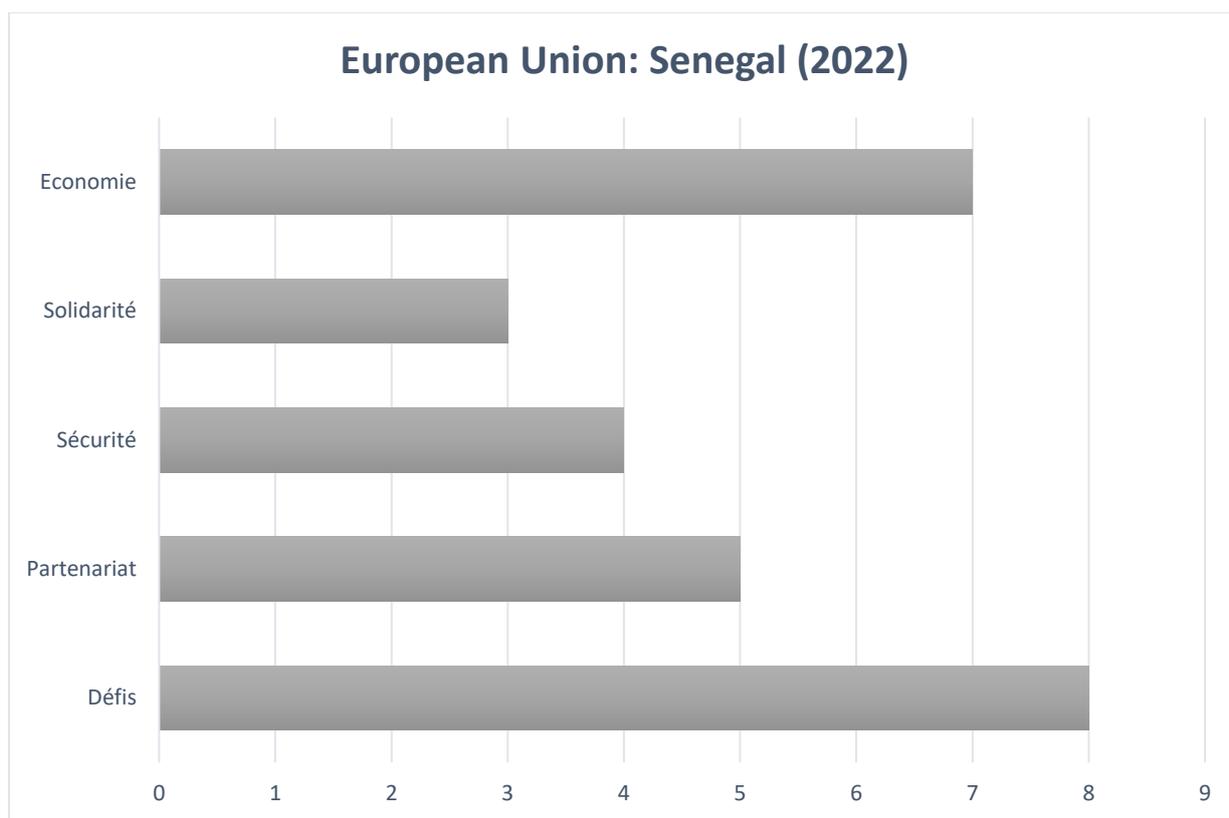
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Figure 46. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Burkina Faso (2022)



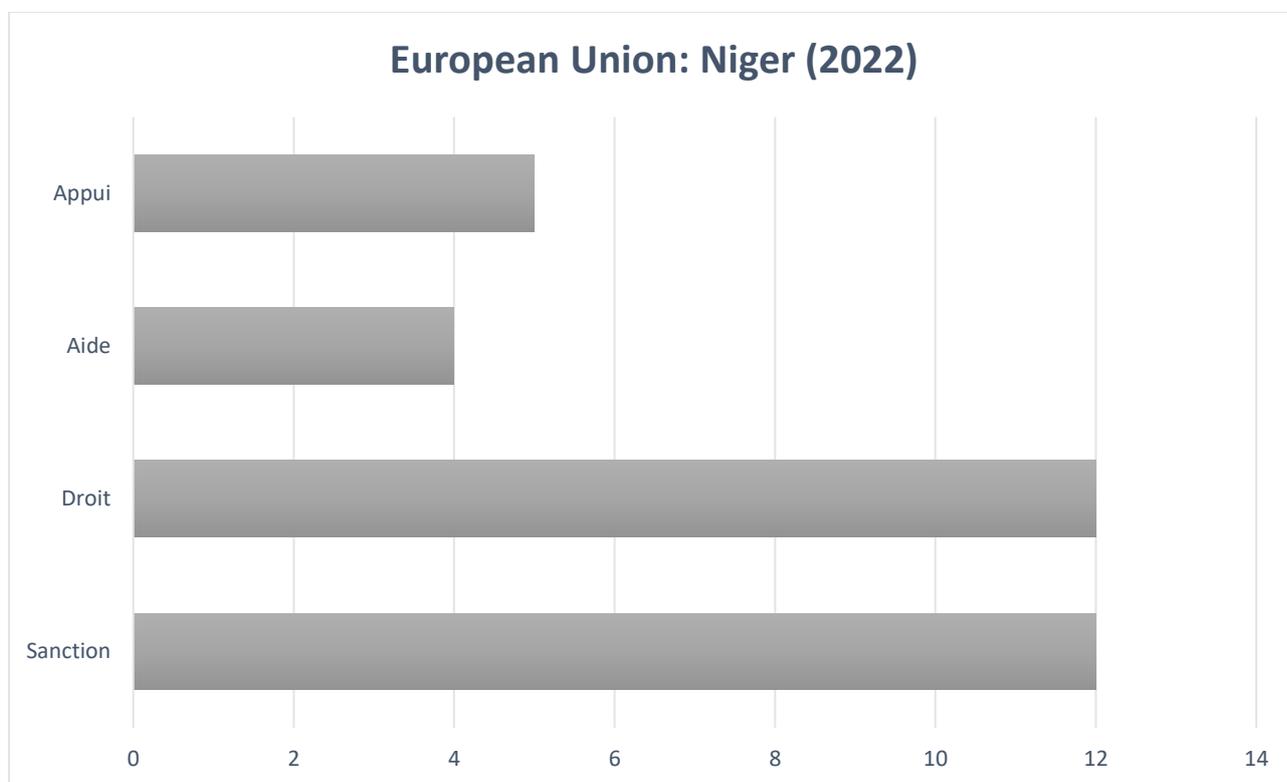
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Figure 47. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Senegal (2022)



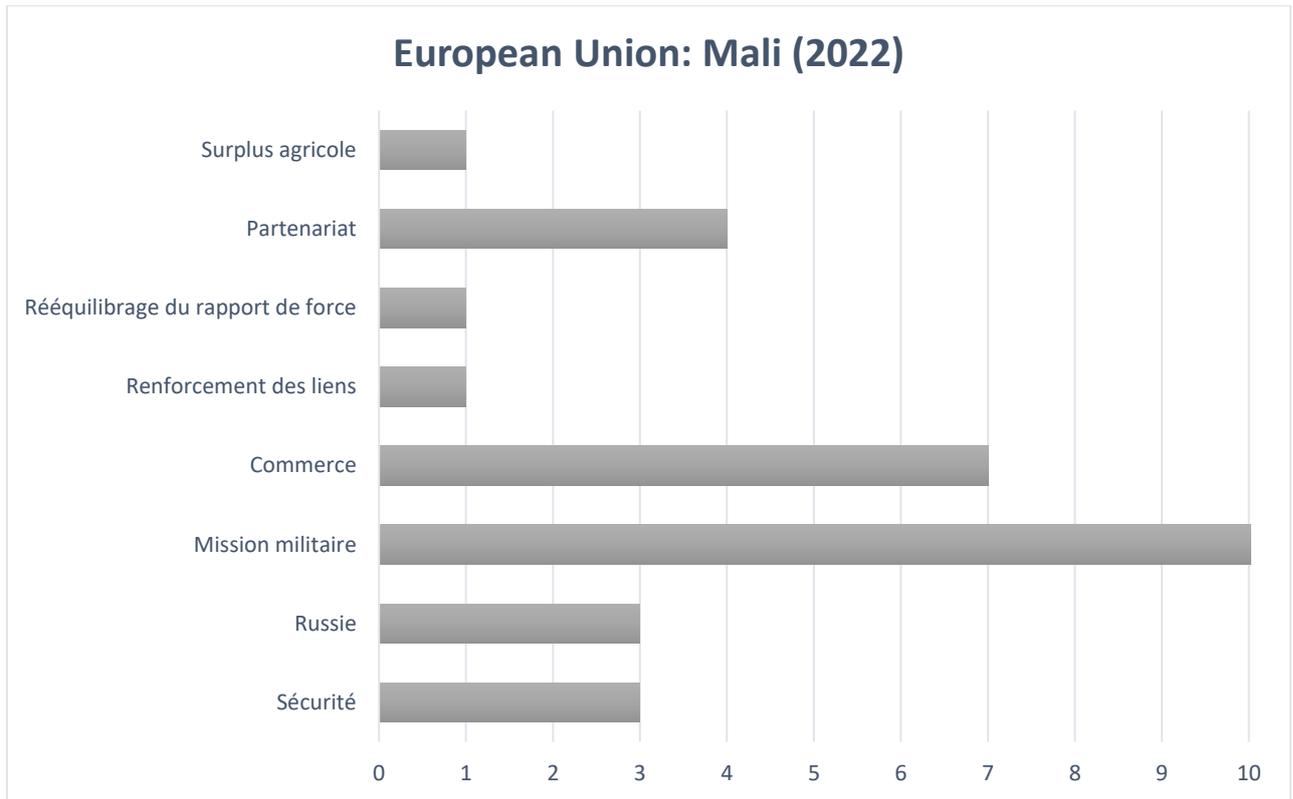
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Figure 48. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Niger (2022)



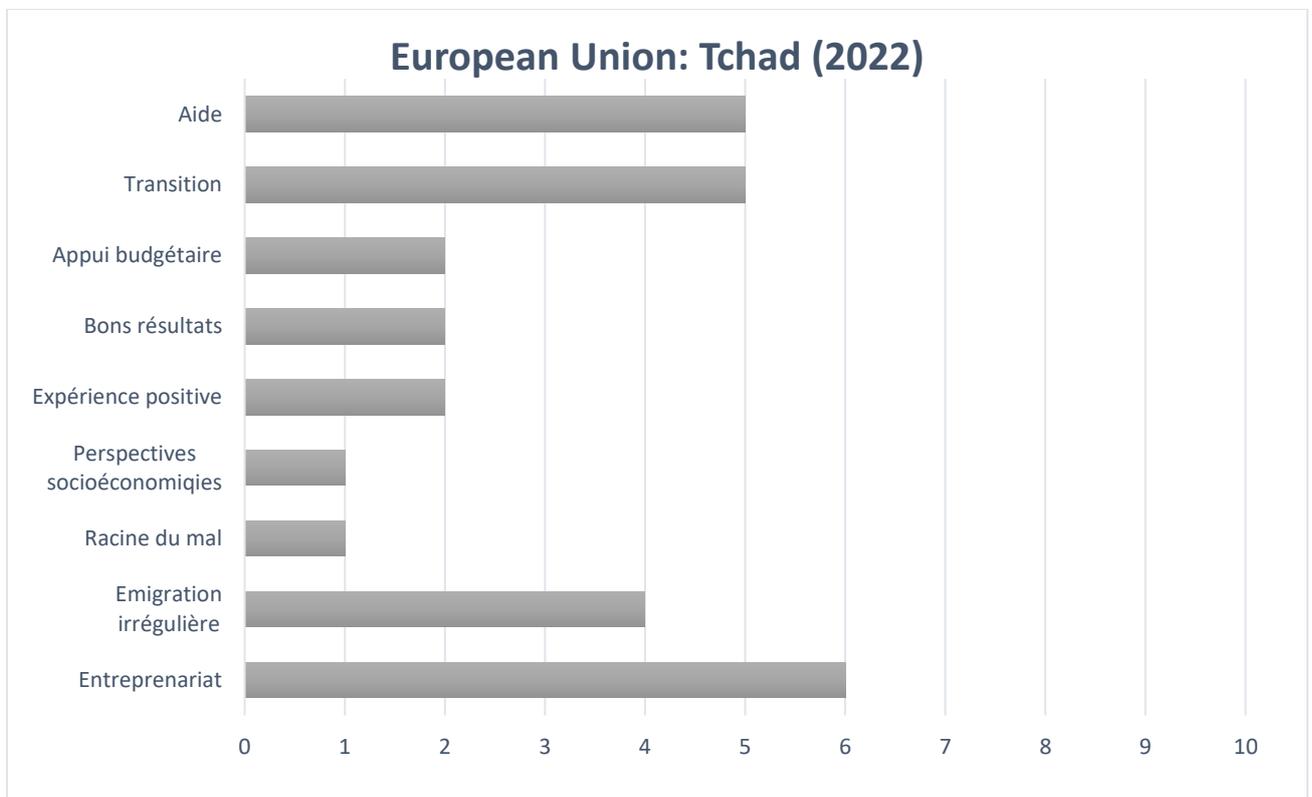
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Figure 49. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mali (2022)



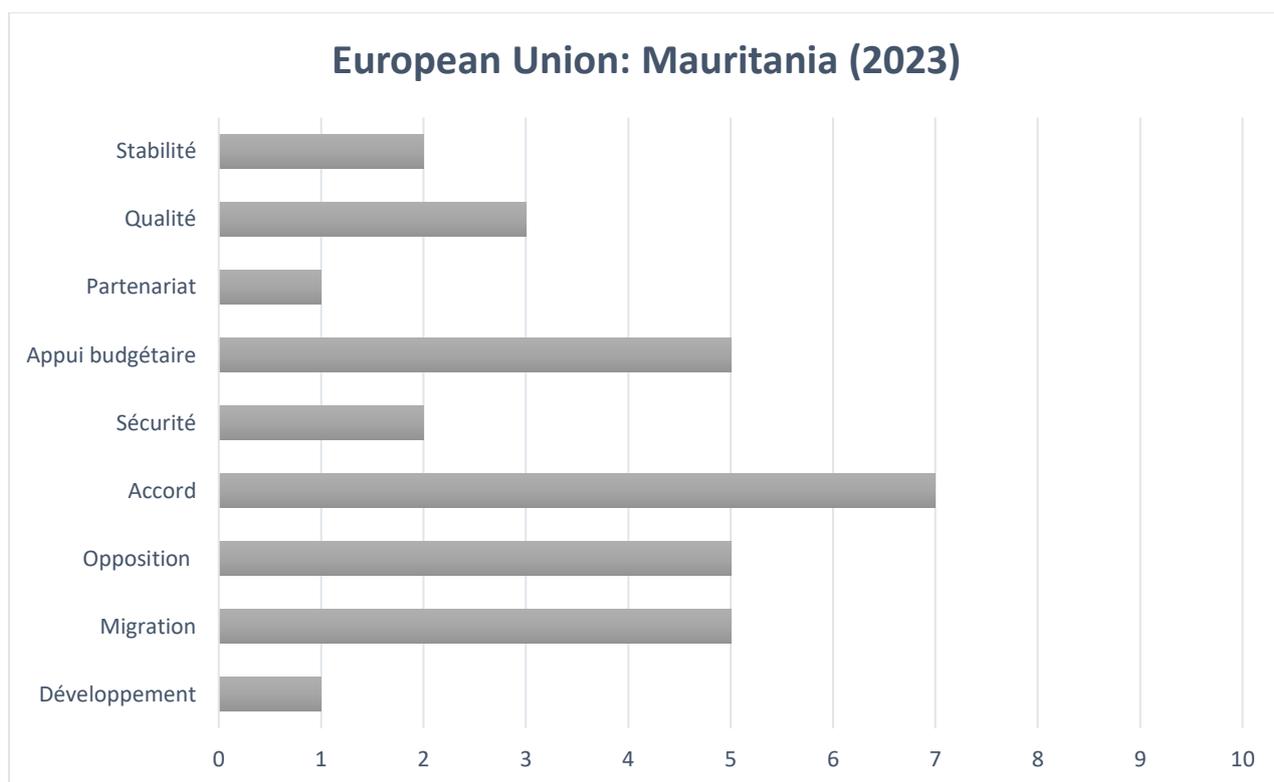
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Figure 50. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Tchad (2022)



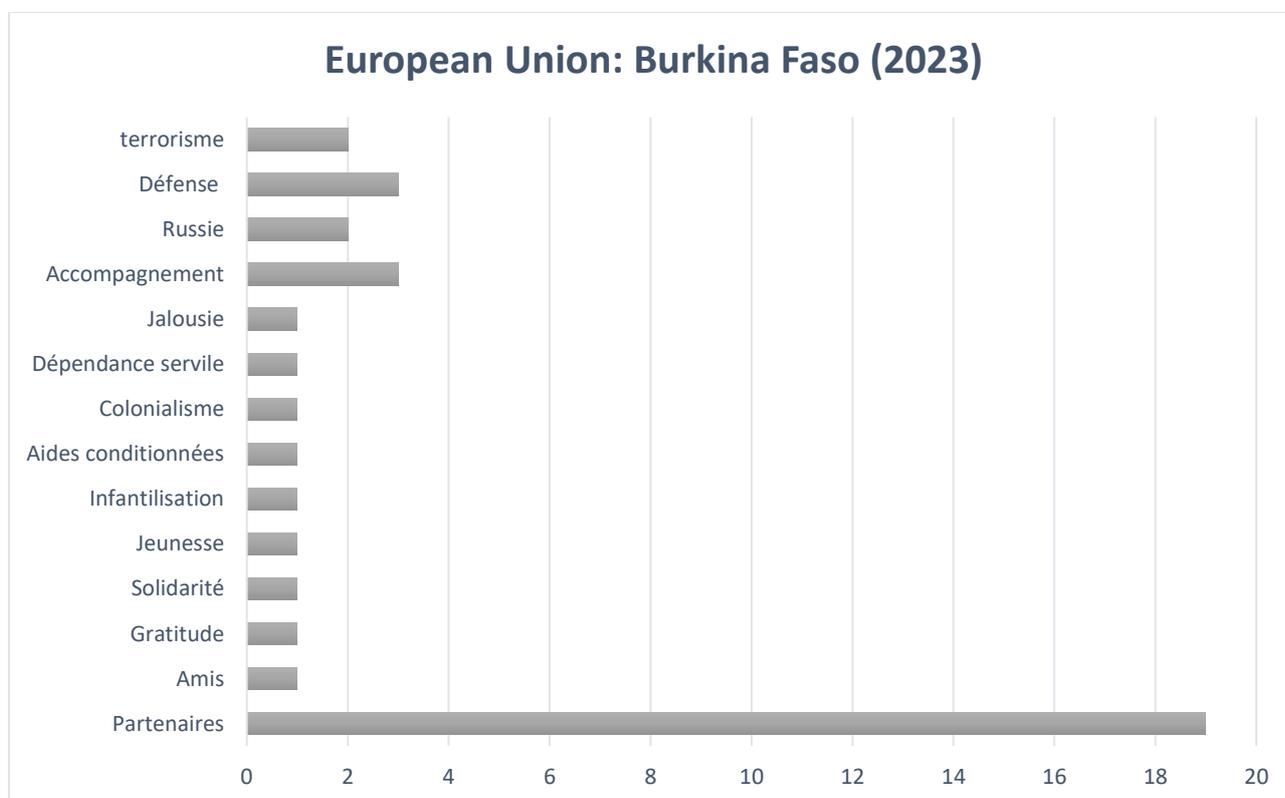
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Figure 50. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mauritania (2023)



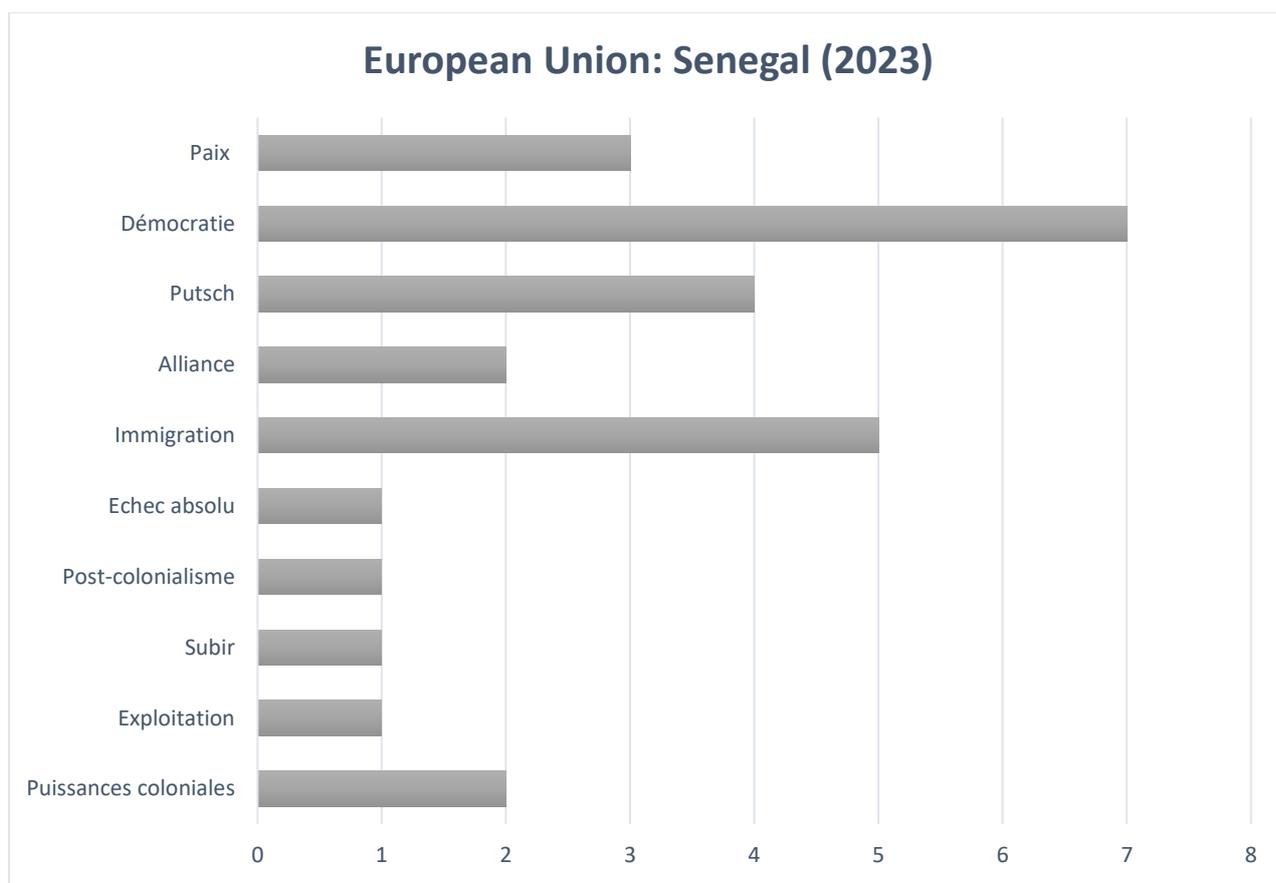
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Figure 51. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Burkina Faso (2023)



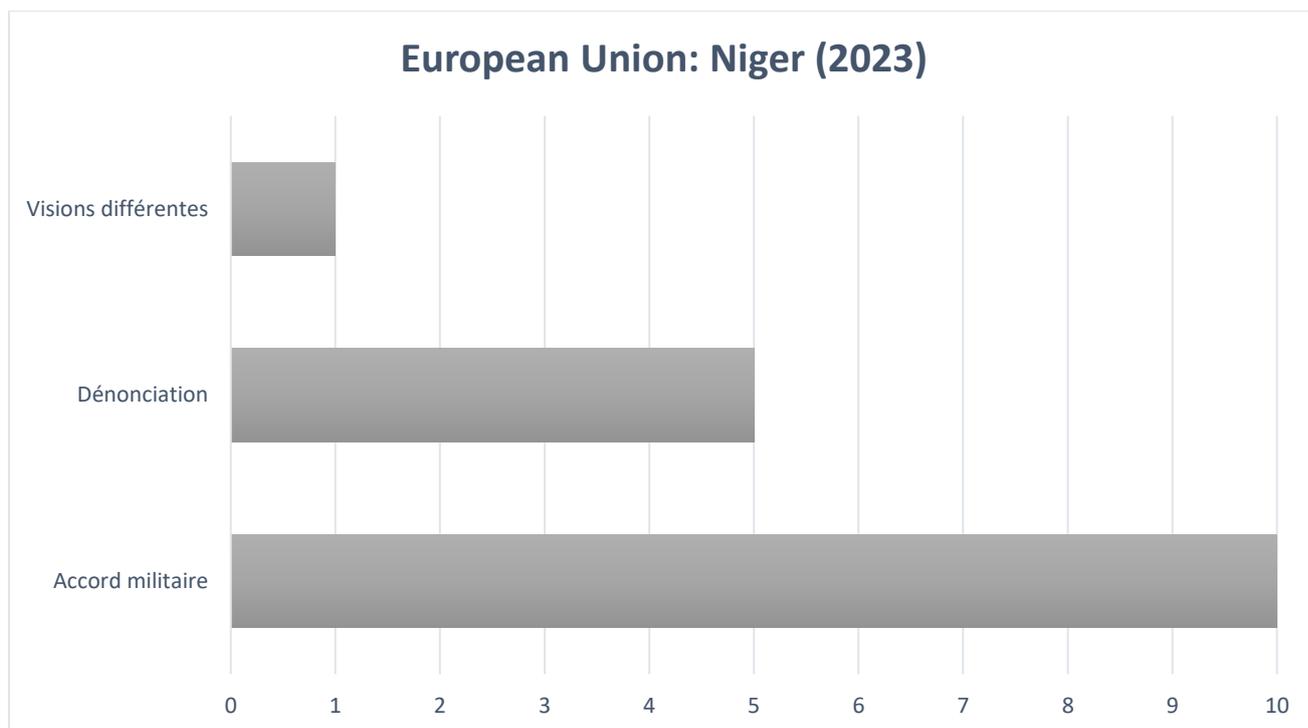
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Figure 52. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Senegal (2023)



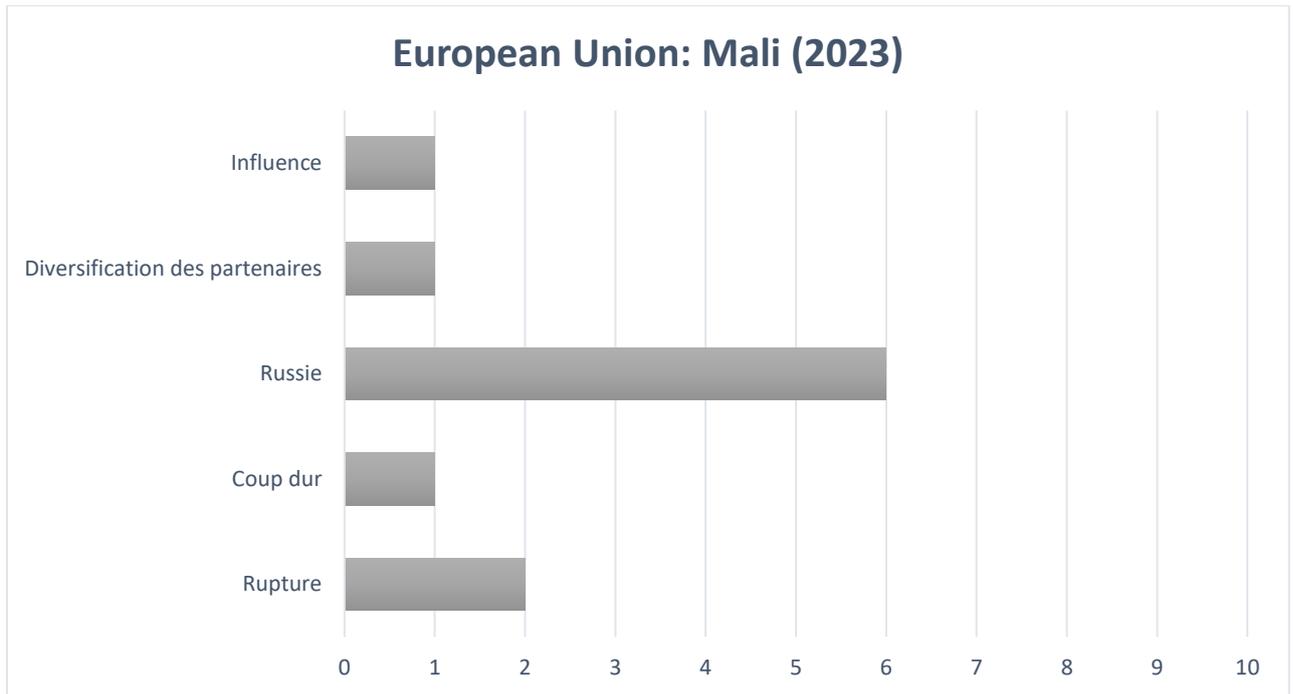
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 53. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Niger (2023)



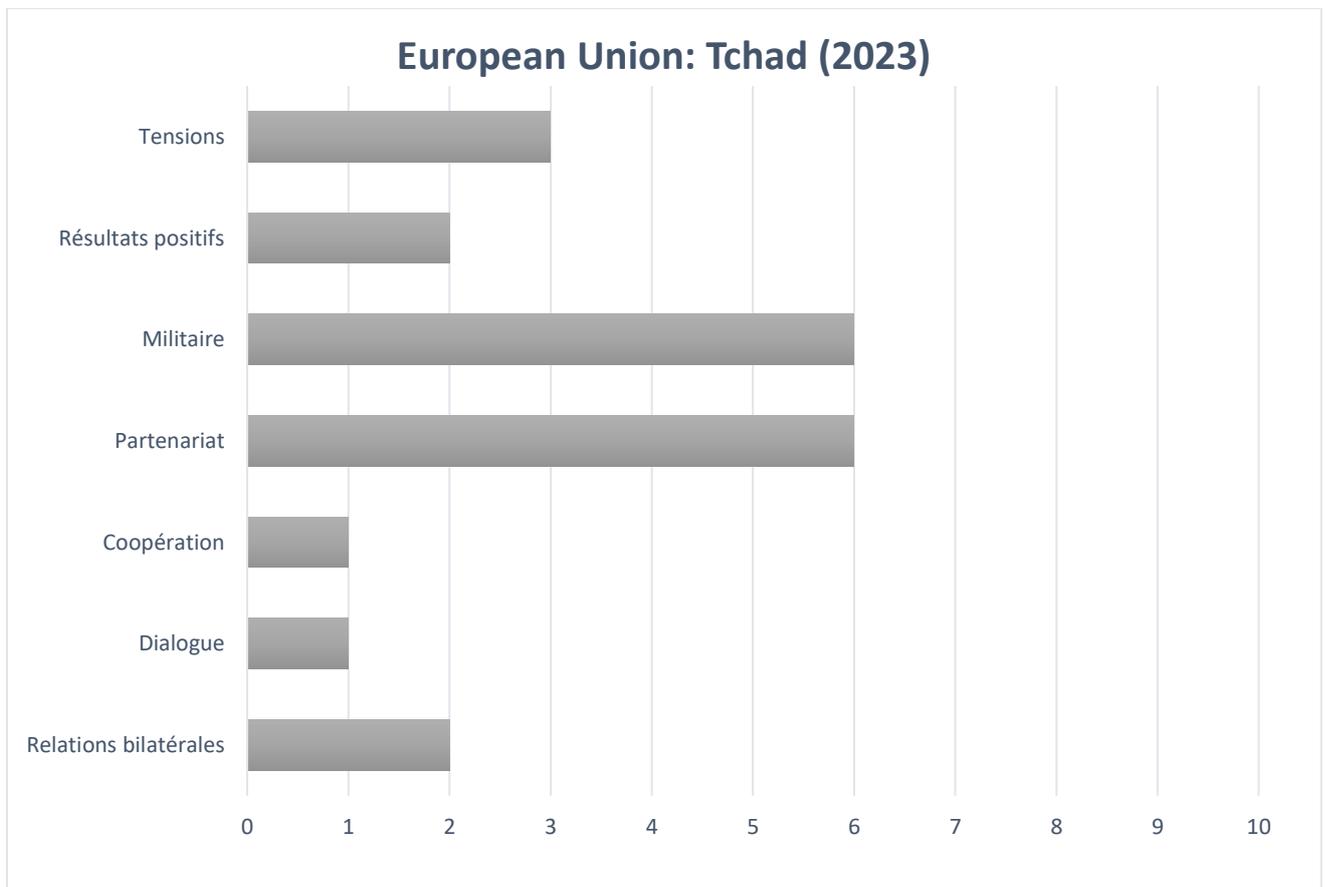
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Figure 54. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mali (2023)



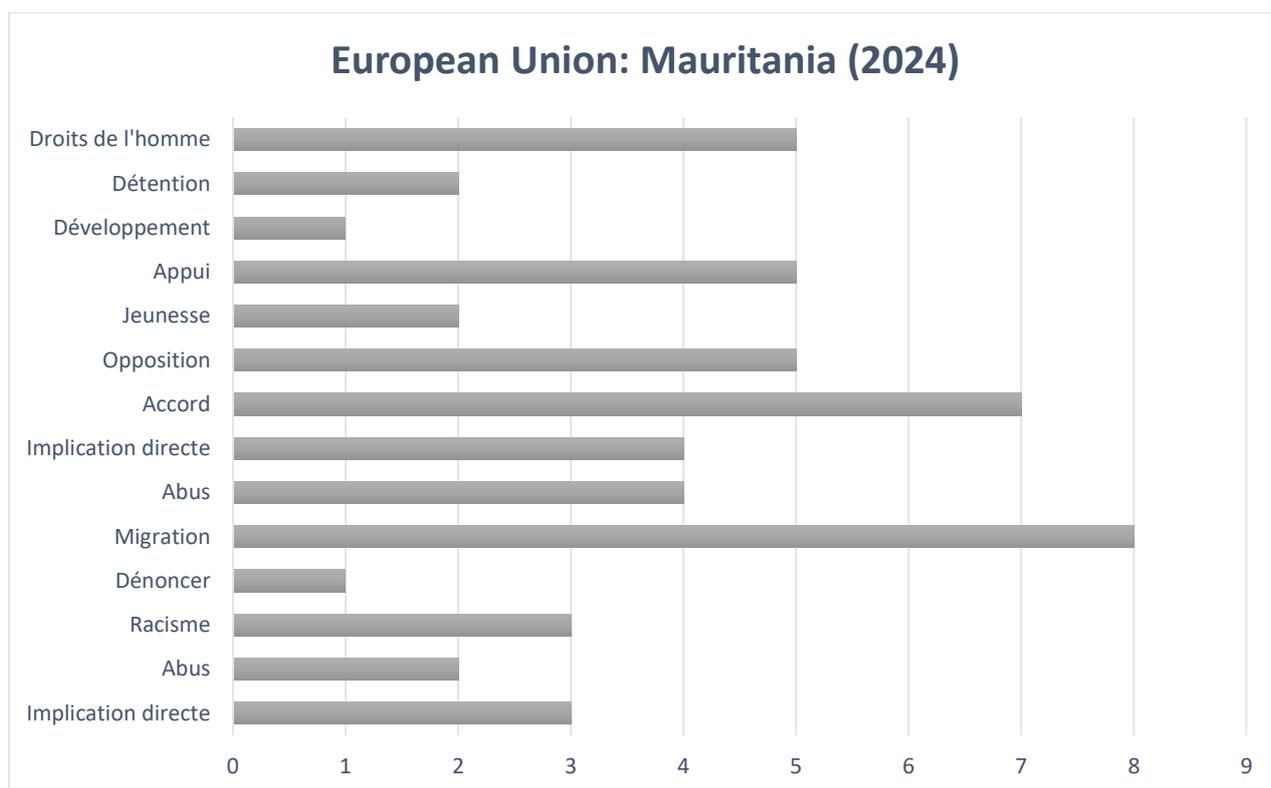
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Figure 55. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Tchad (2023)



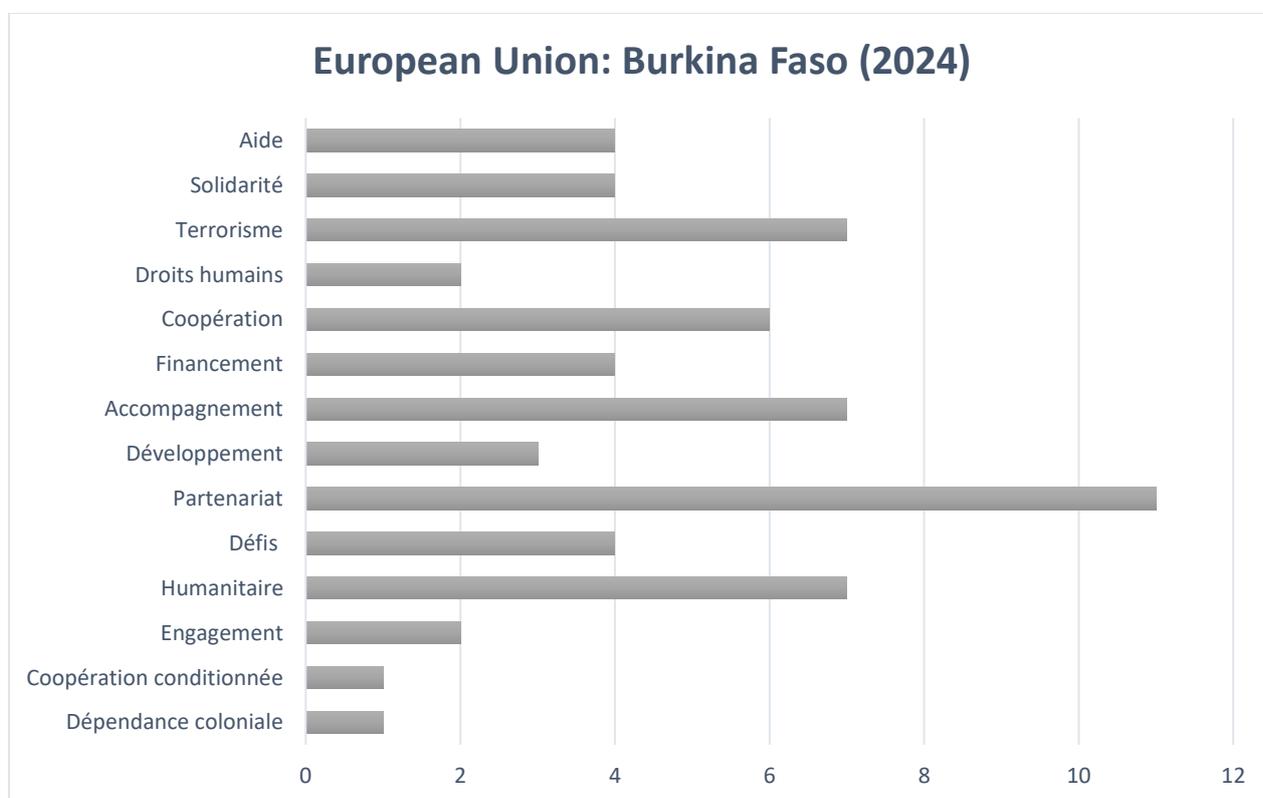
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 56. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mauritania (2024)



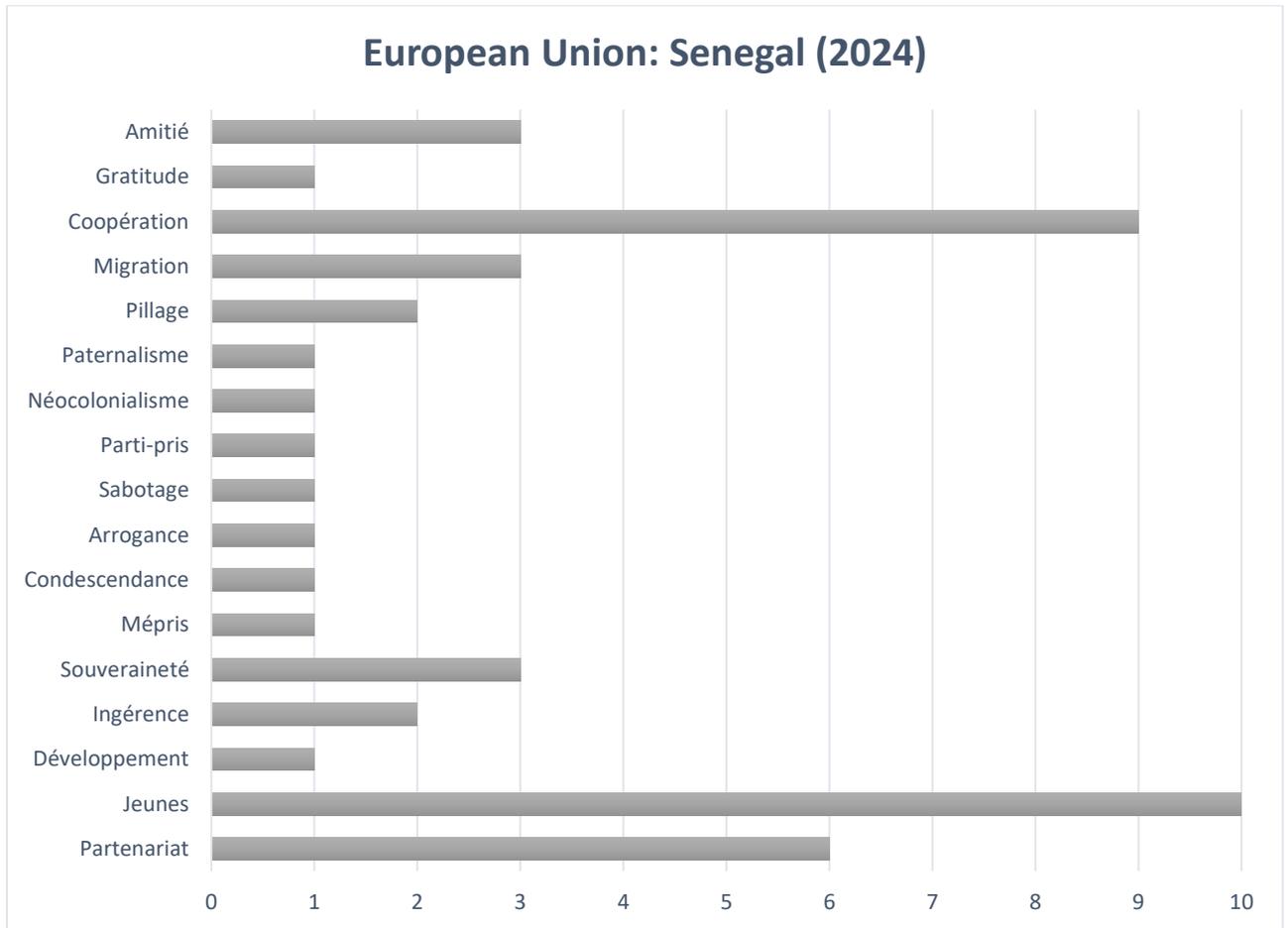
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Figure 57. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Burkina Faso (2024)



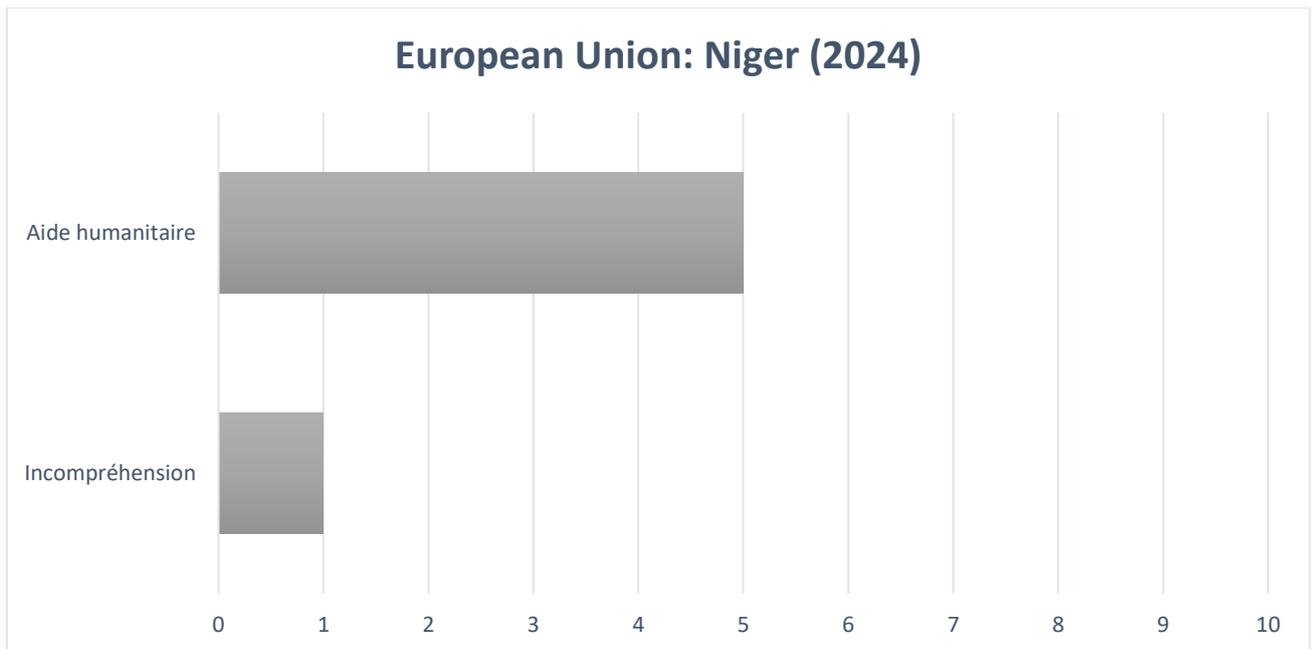
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Figure 58. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Senegal (2024)



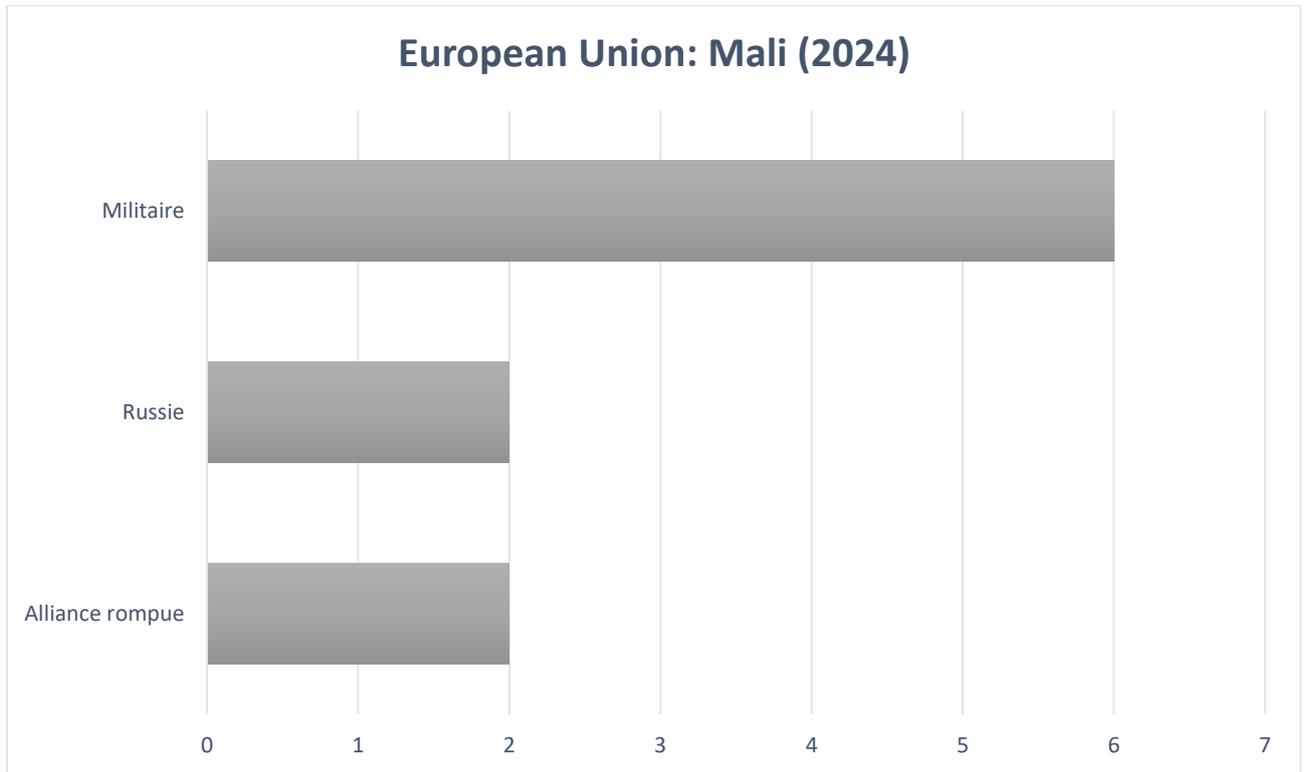
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Figure 59. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Niger (2024)



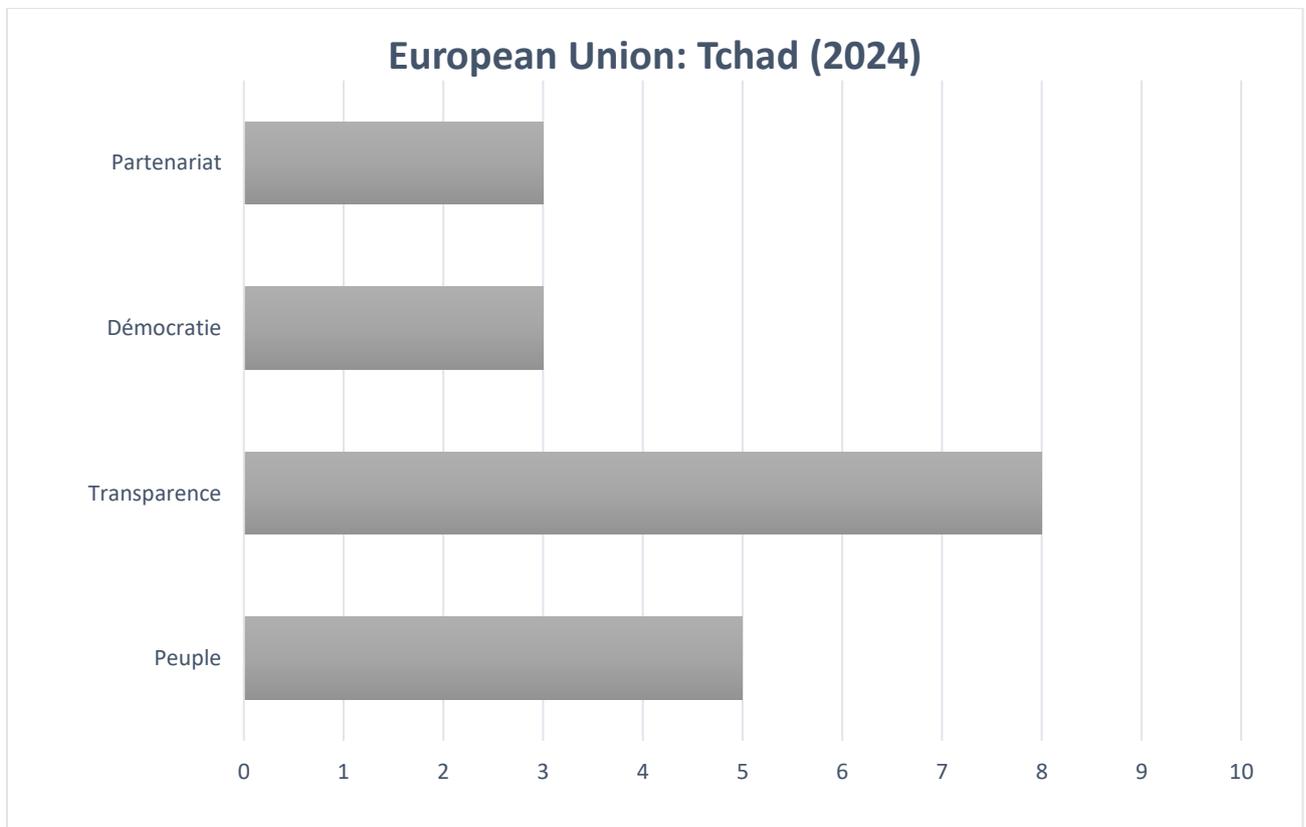
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 59. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mali (2024)



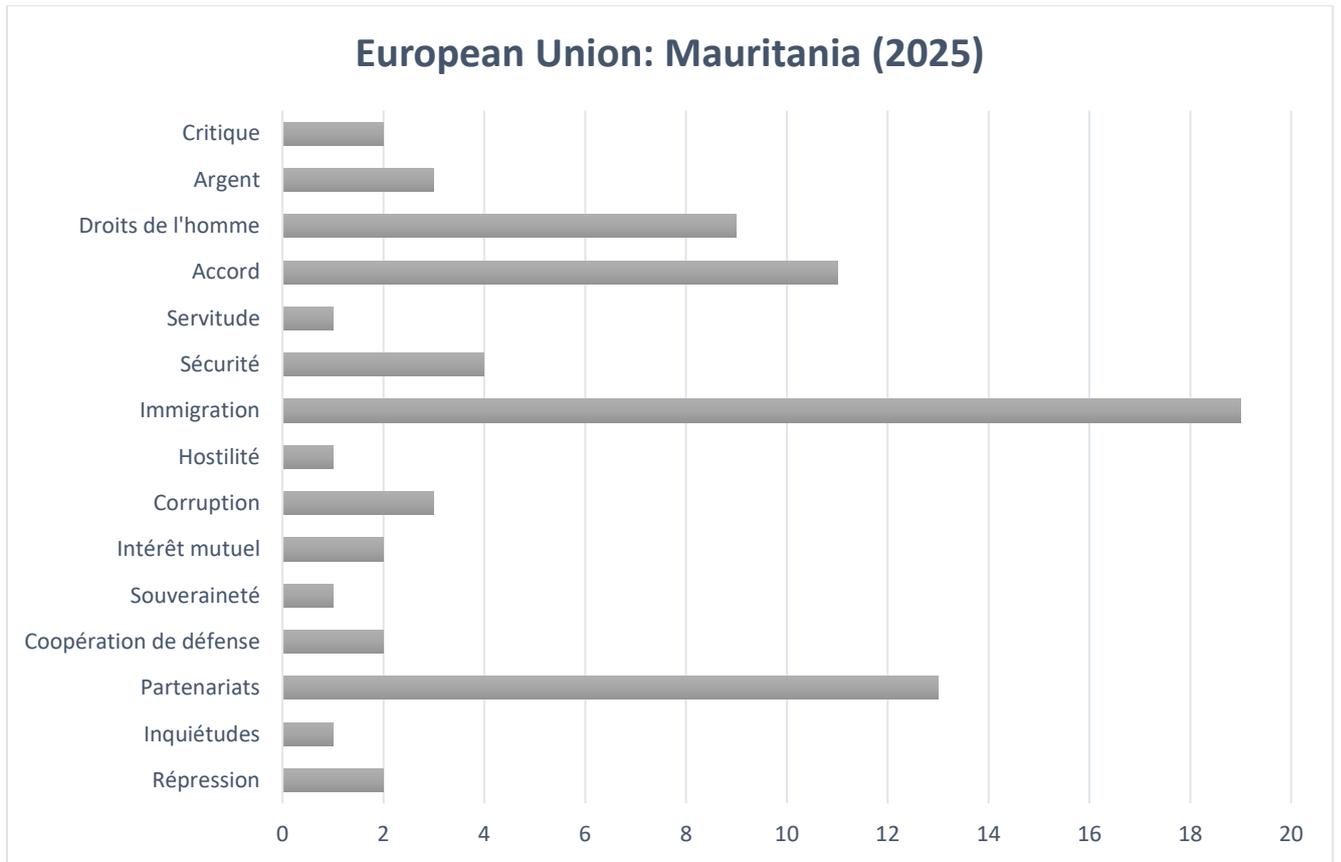
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 60. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Tchad (2024)



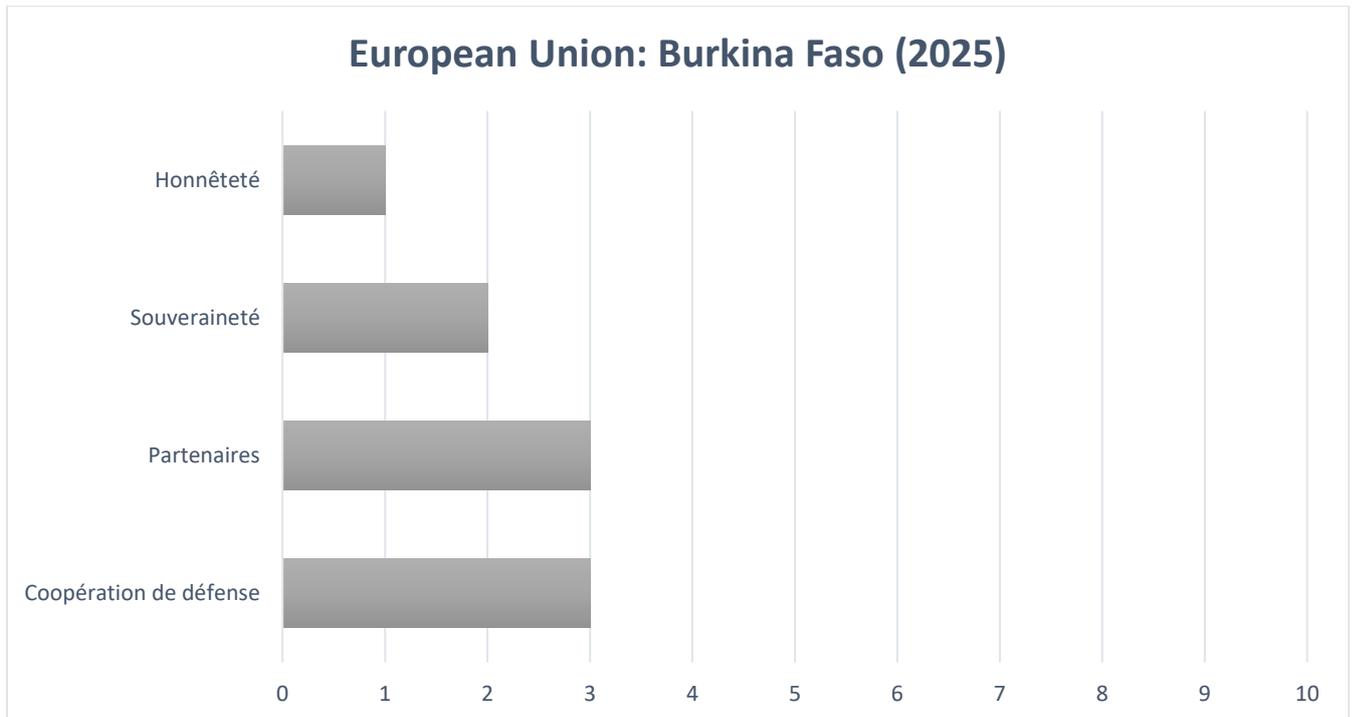
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 61. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mauritania (2025)



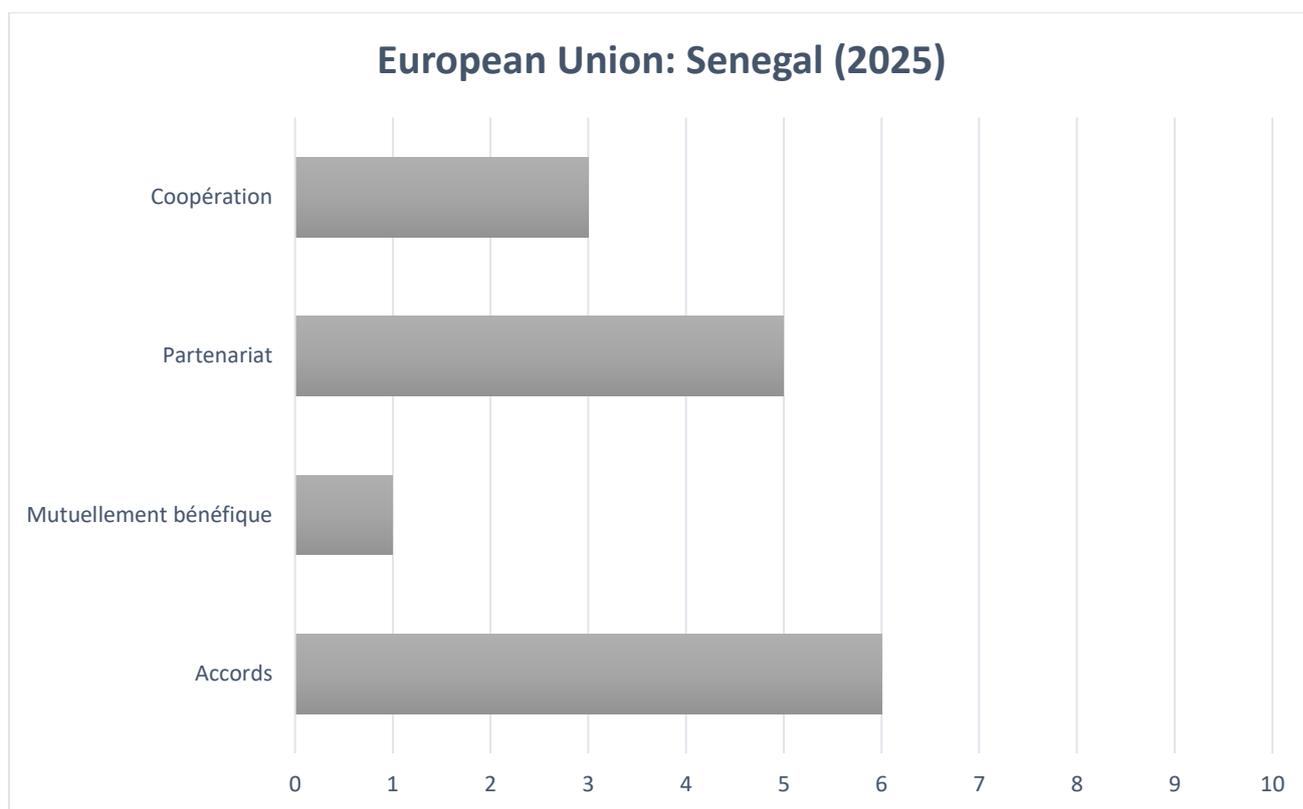
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 61. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Burkina Faso (2025)



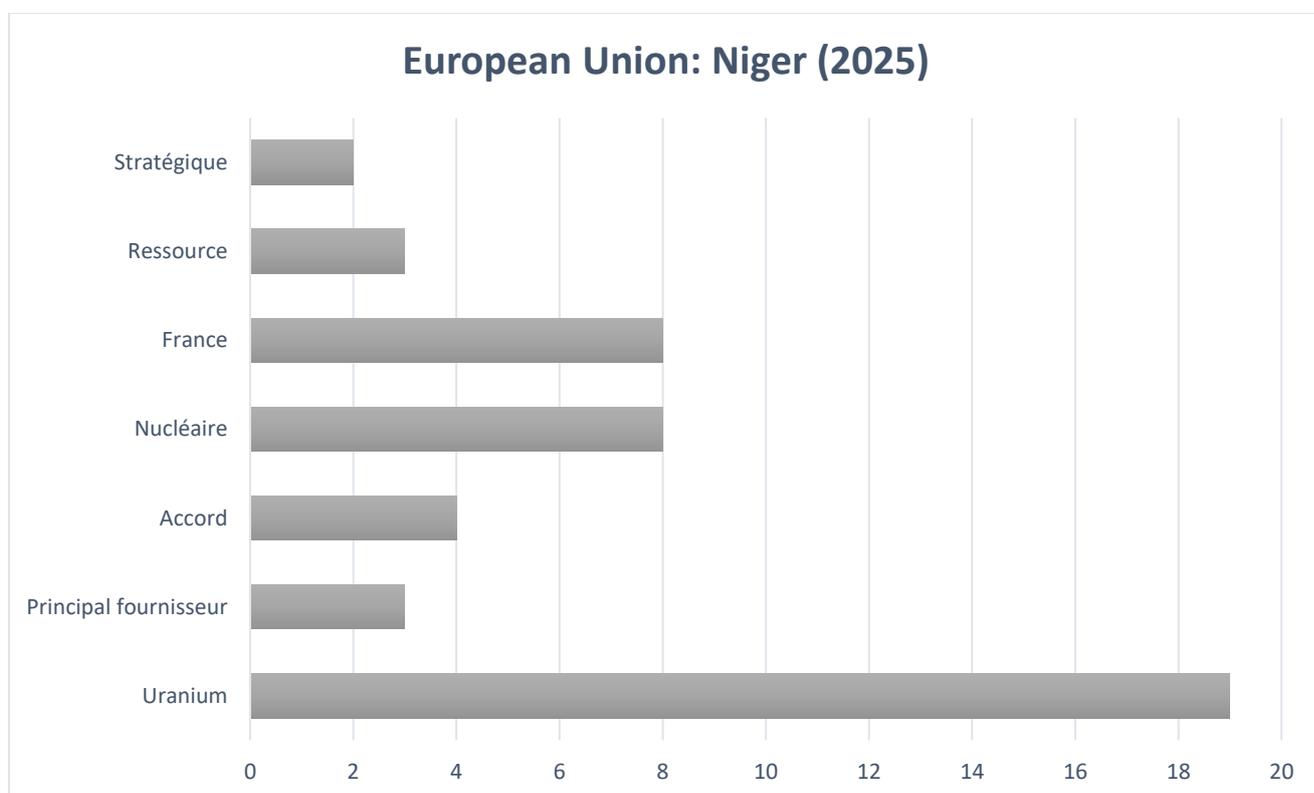
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 62. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Senegal (2025)



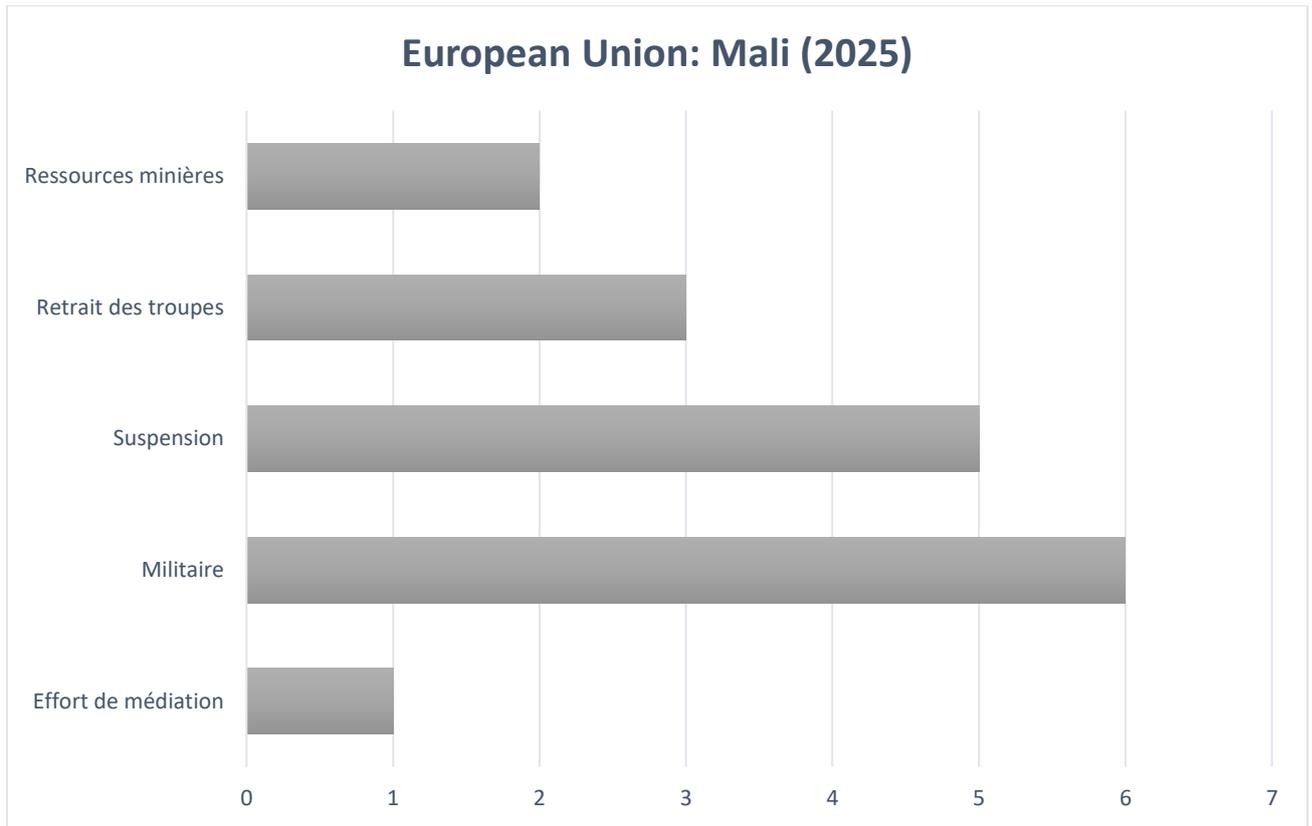
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 63. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Niger (2025)



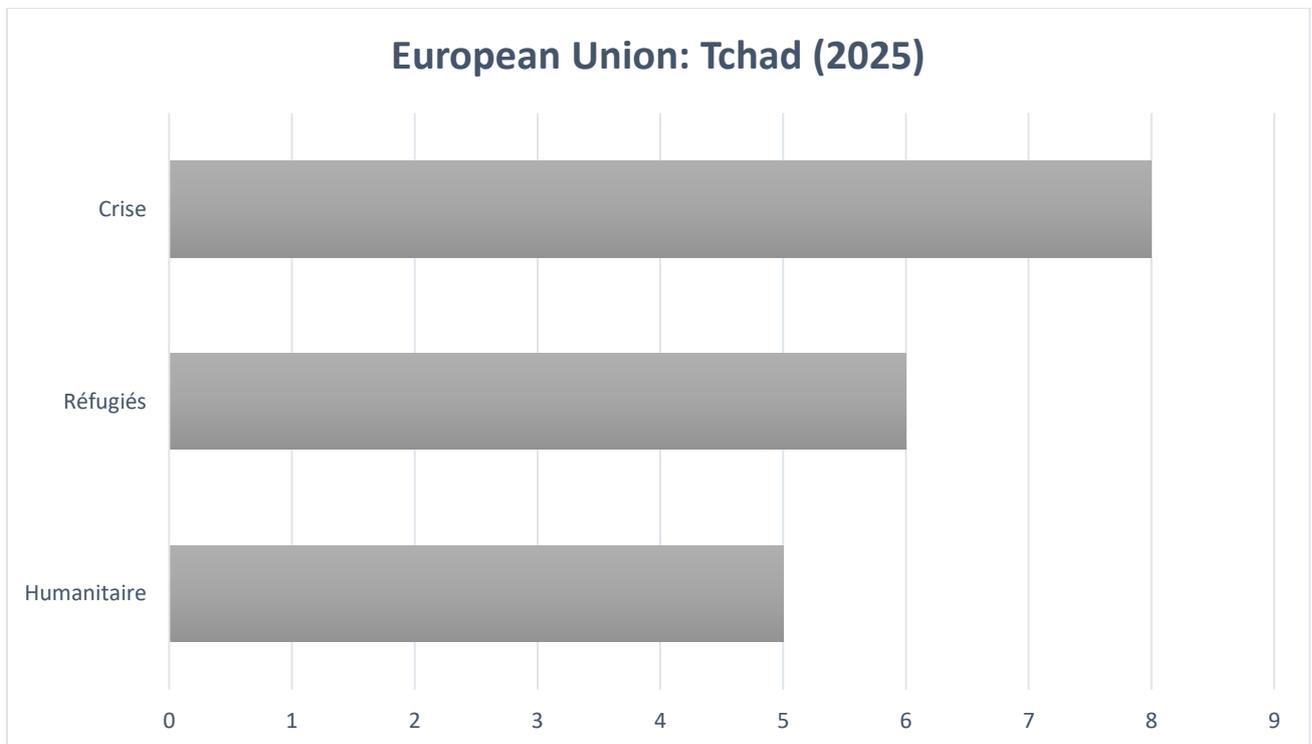
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 65. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Mali (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

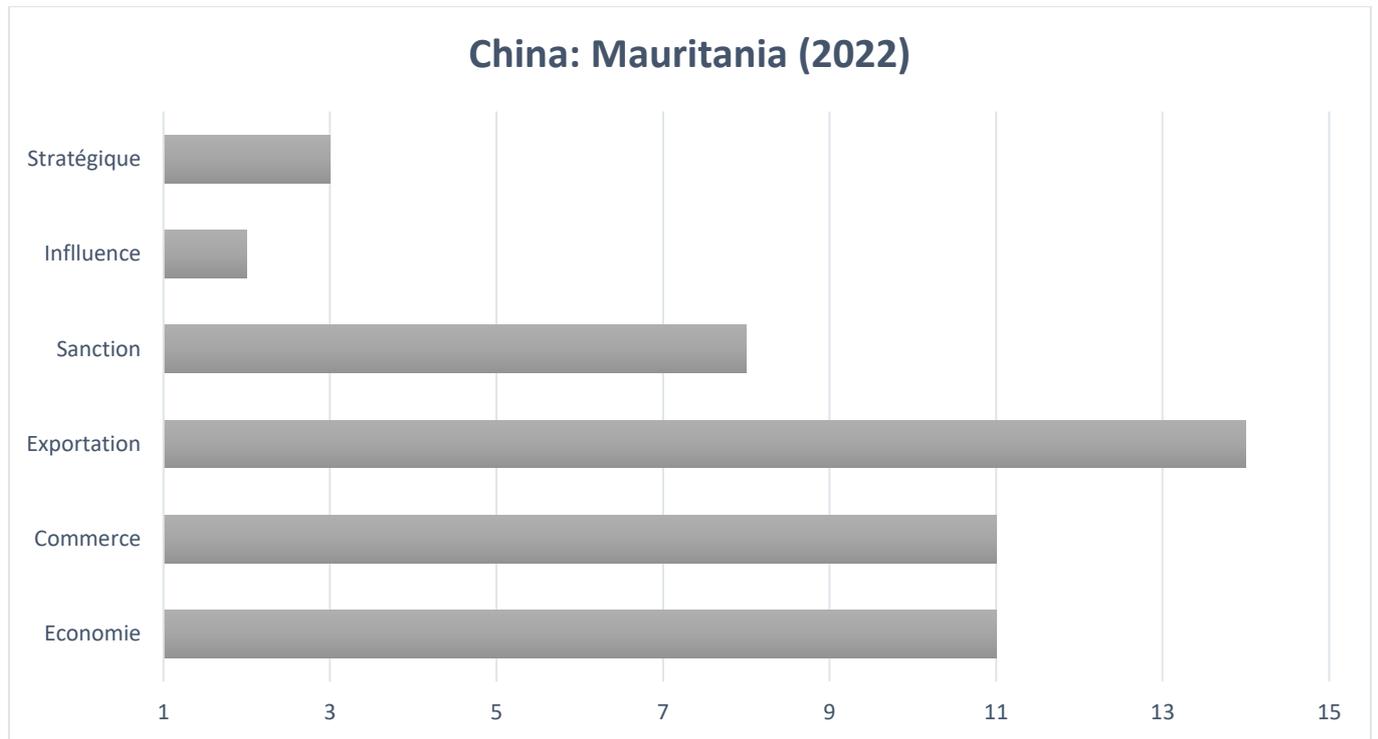
Figure 66. Vocabulary describing the European Union in Tchad (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

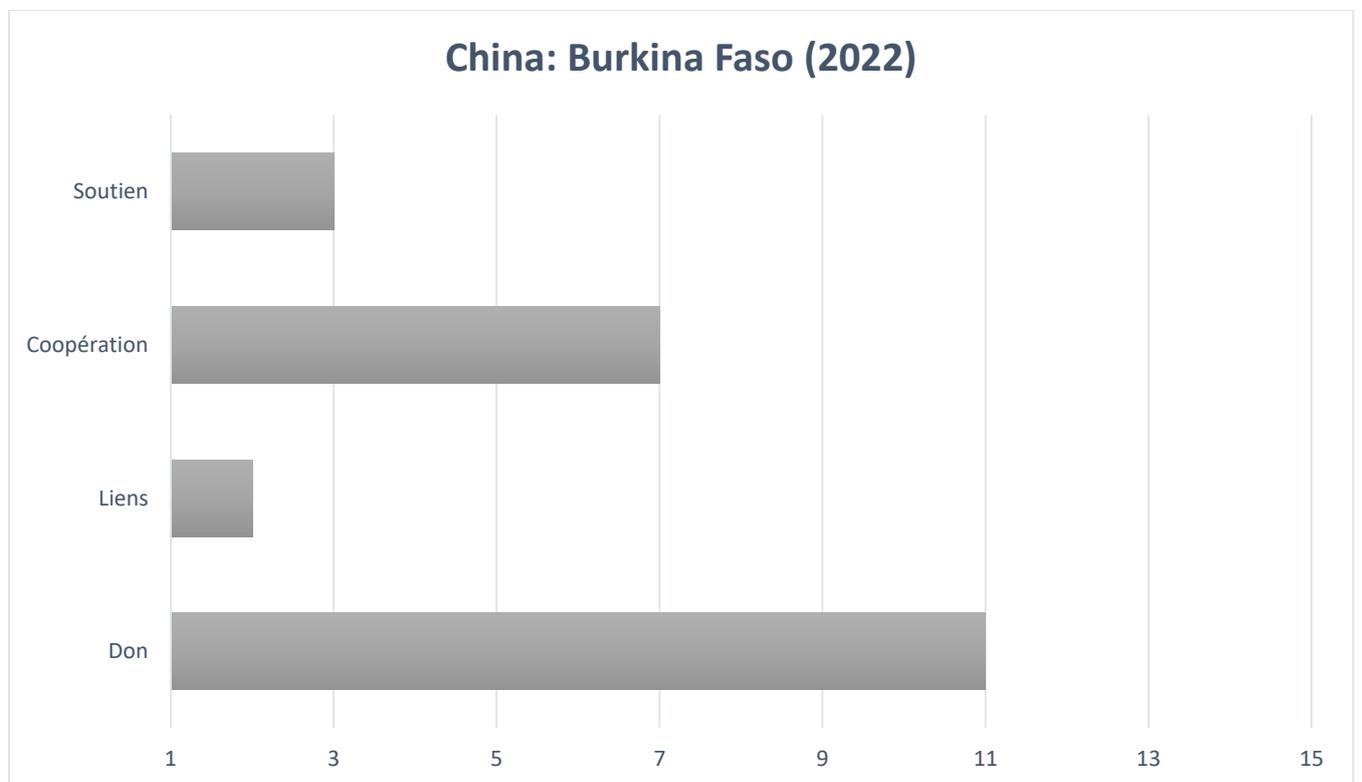
China

Figure 67. Vocabulary describing China in Mauritania (2022)



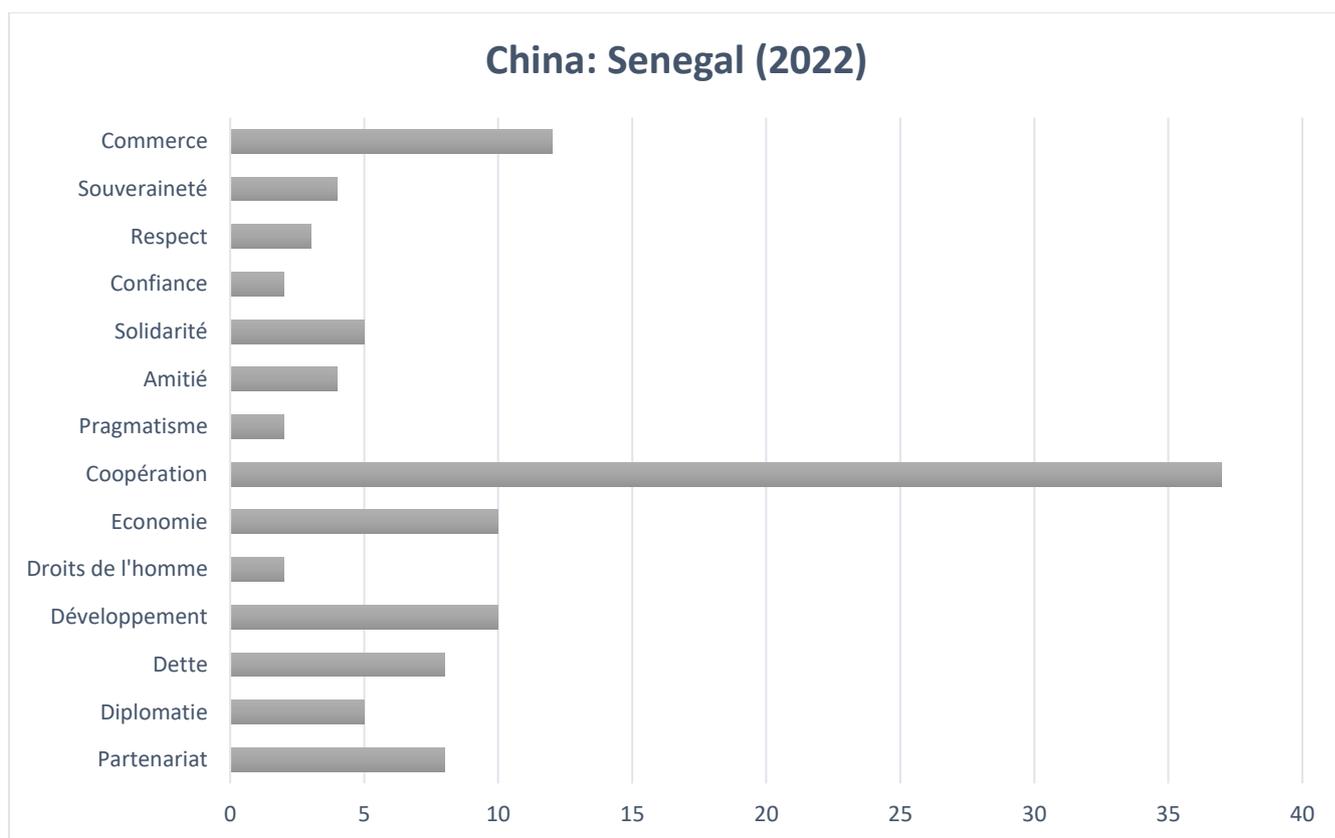
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 68. Vocabulary describing China in Burkina Faso (2022)



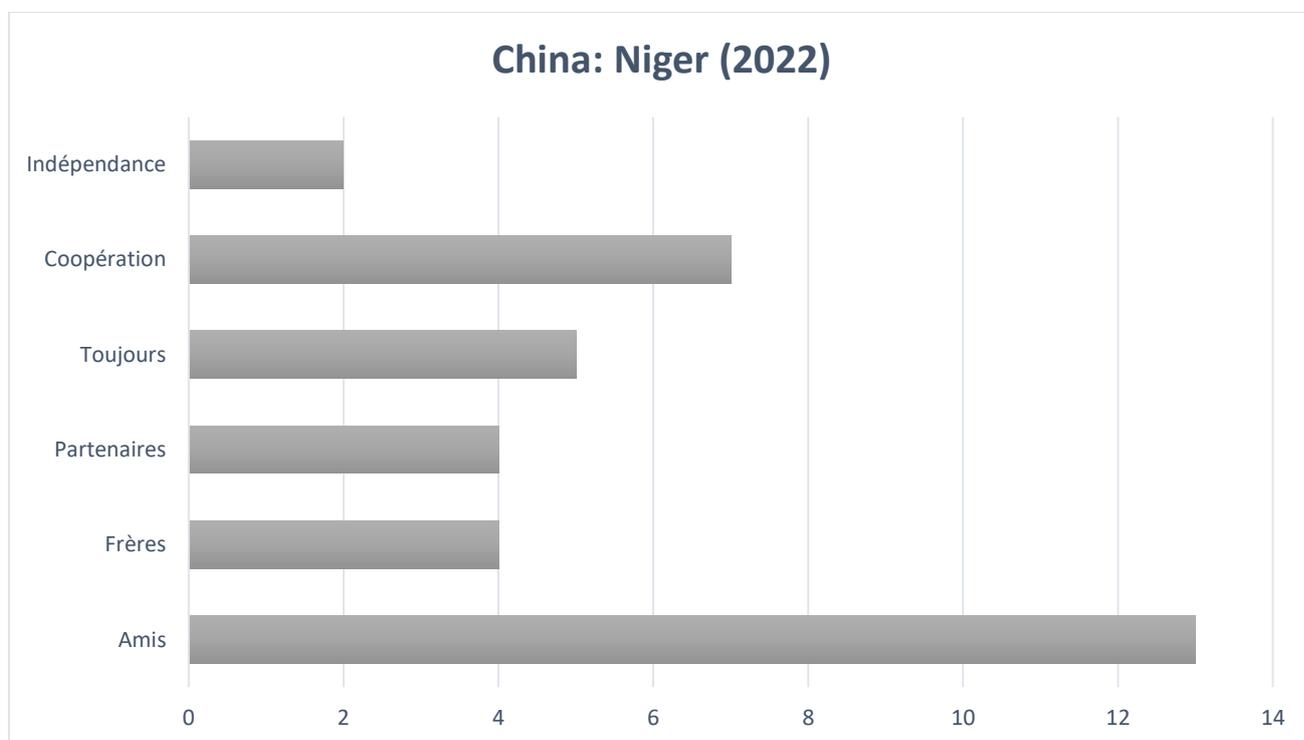
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 69. Vocabulary describing China in Senegal (2022)



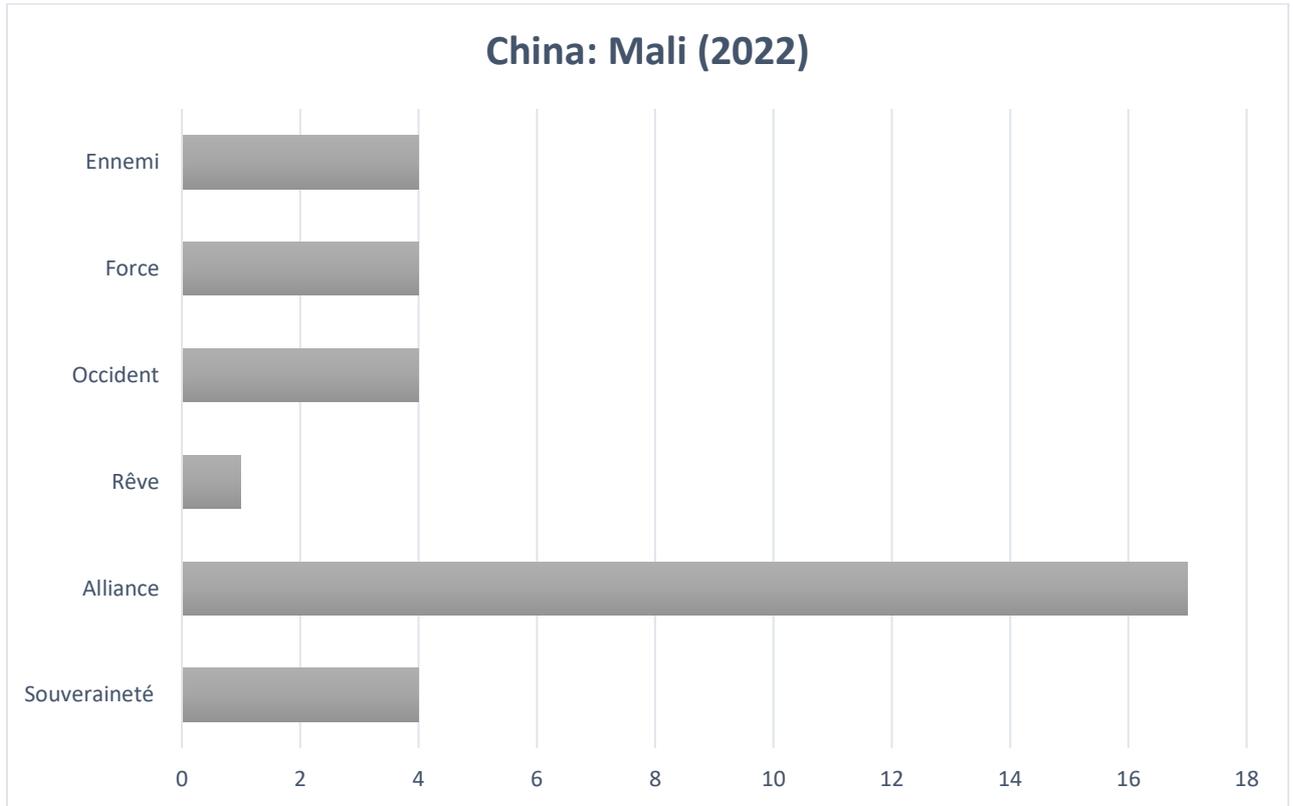
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 70. Vocabulary describing China in Niger (2022)



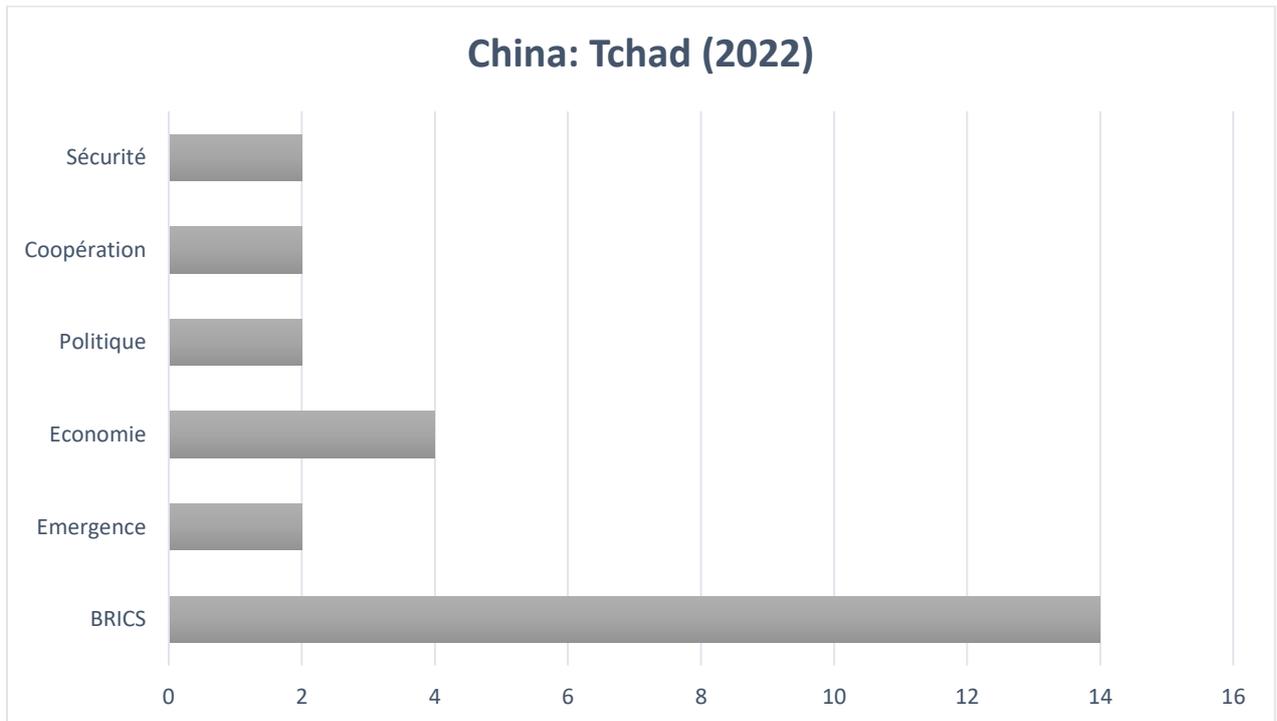
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 71. Vocabulary describing China in Mali (2022)



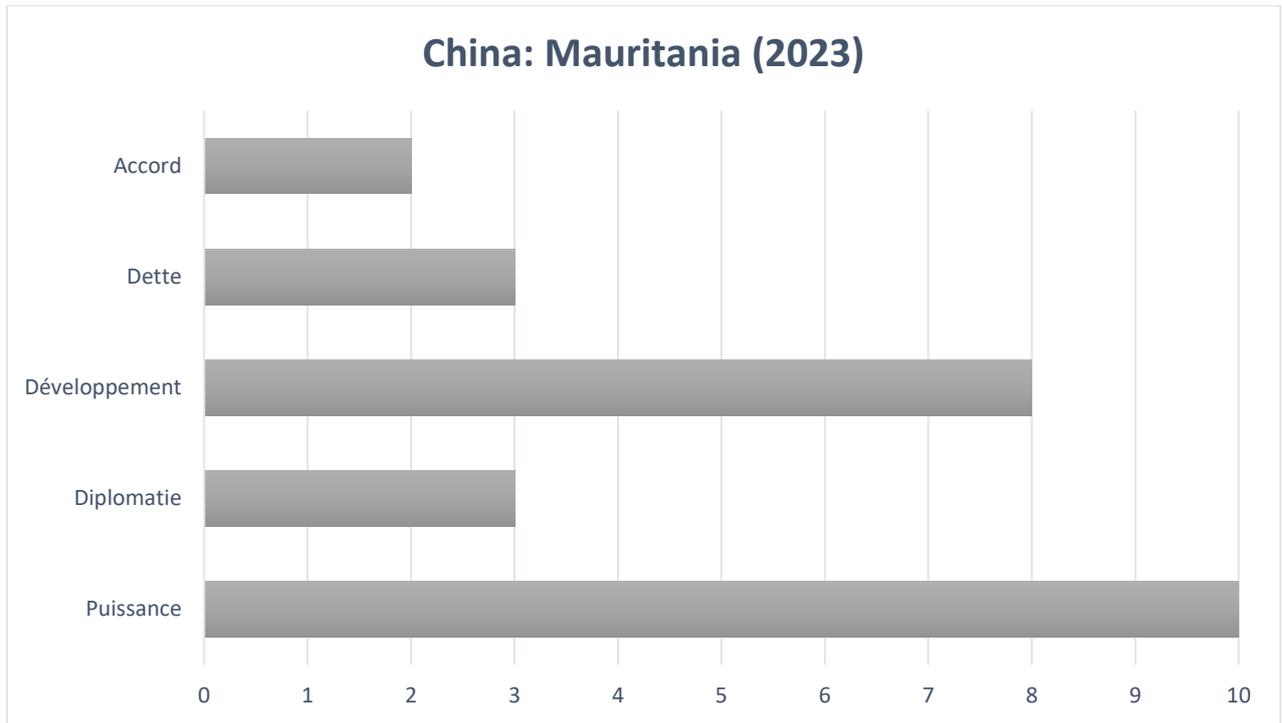
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 72. Vocabulary describing China in Chad (2022)



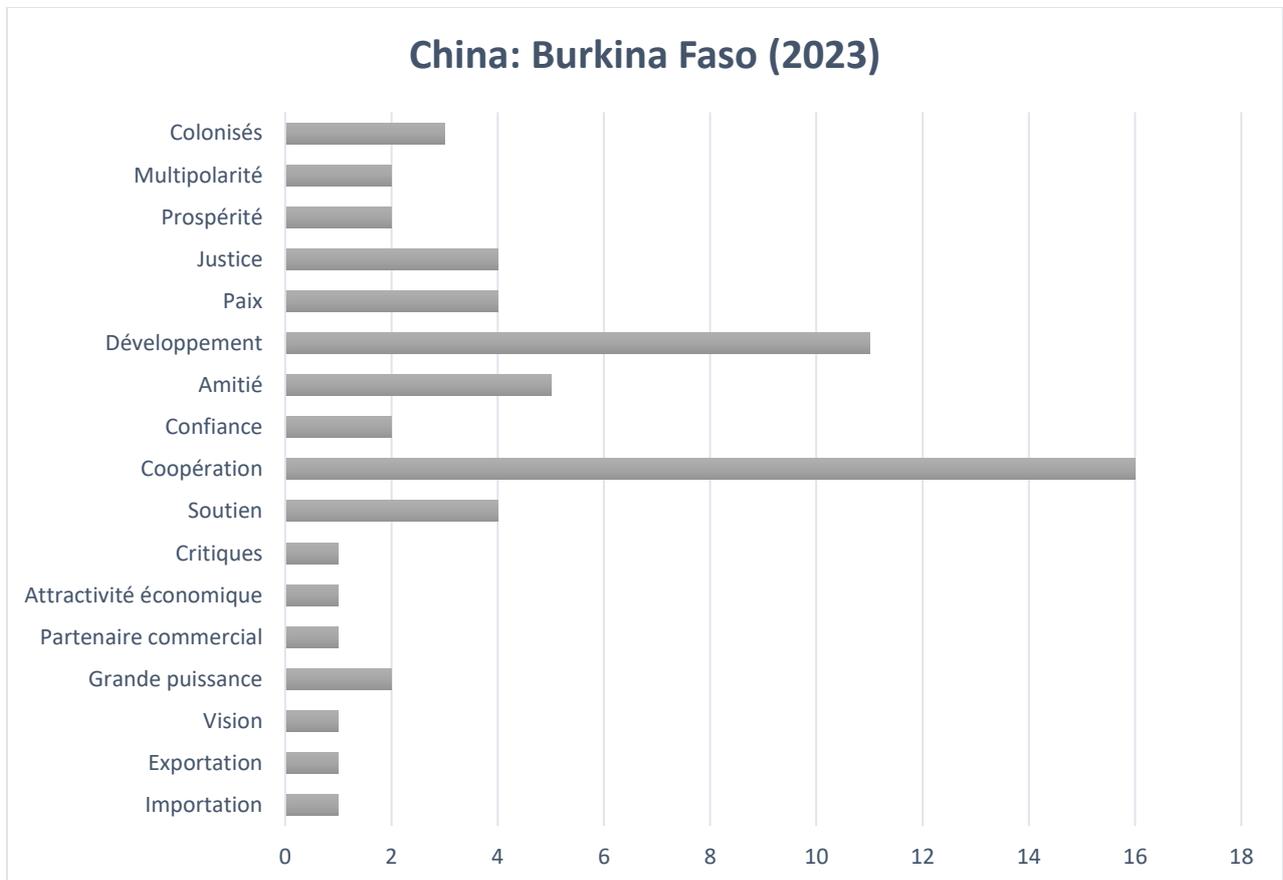
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 73. Vocabulary describing China in Mauritania (2023)



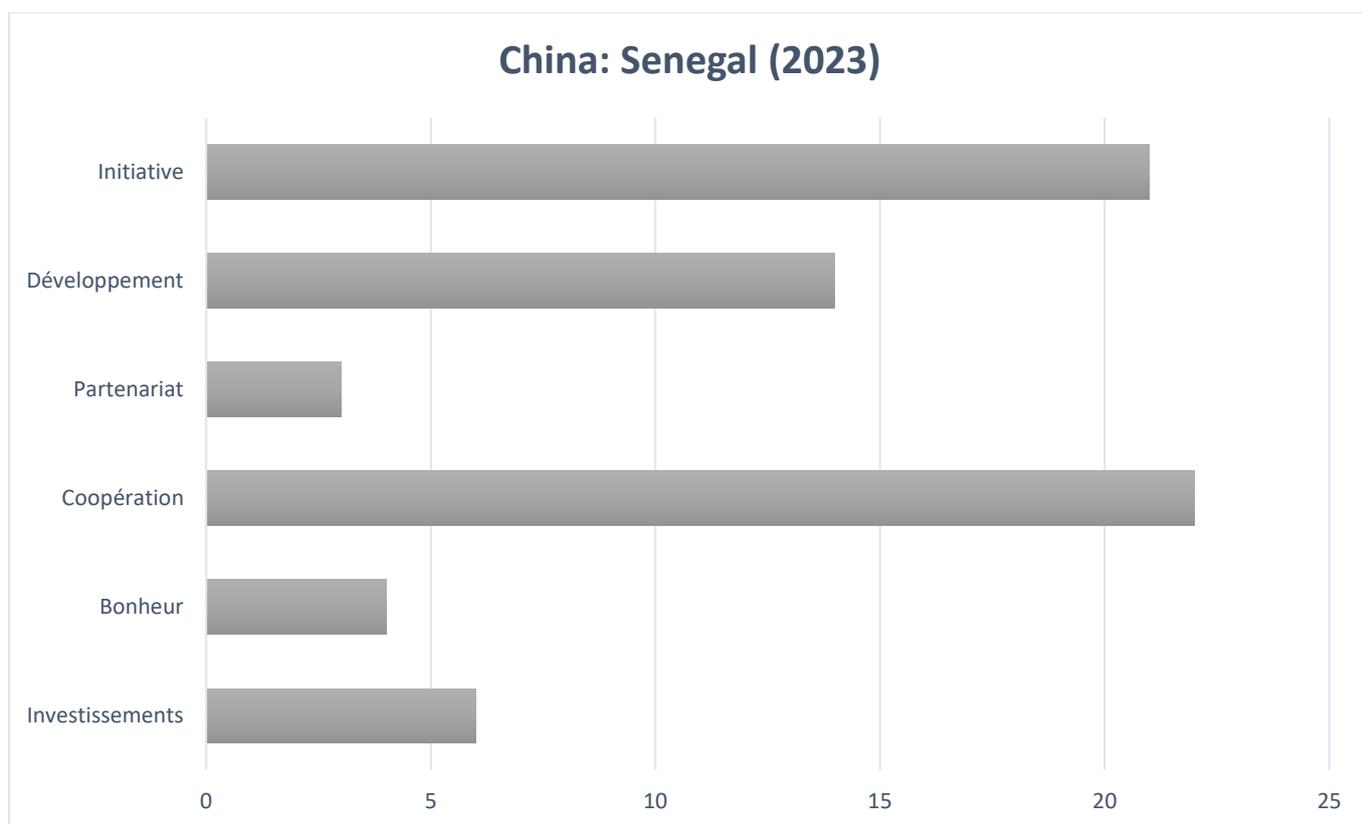
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 74. Vocabulary describing China in Burkina Faso (2023)



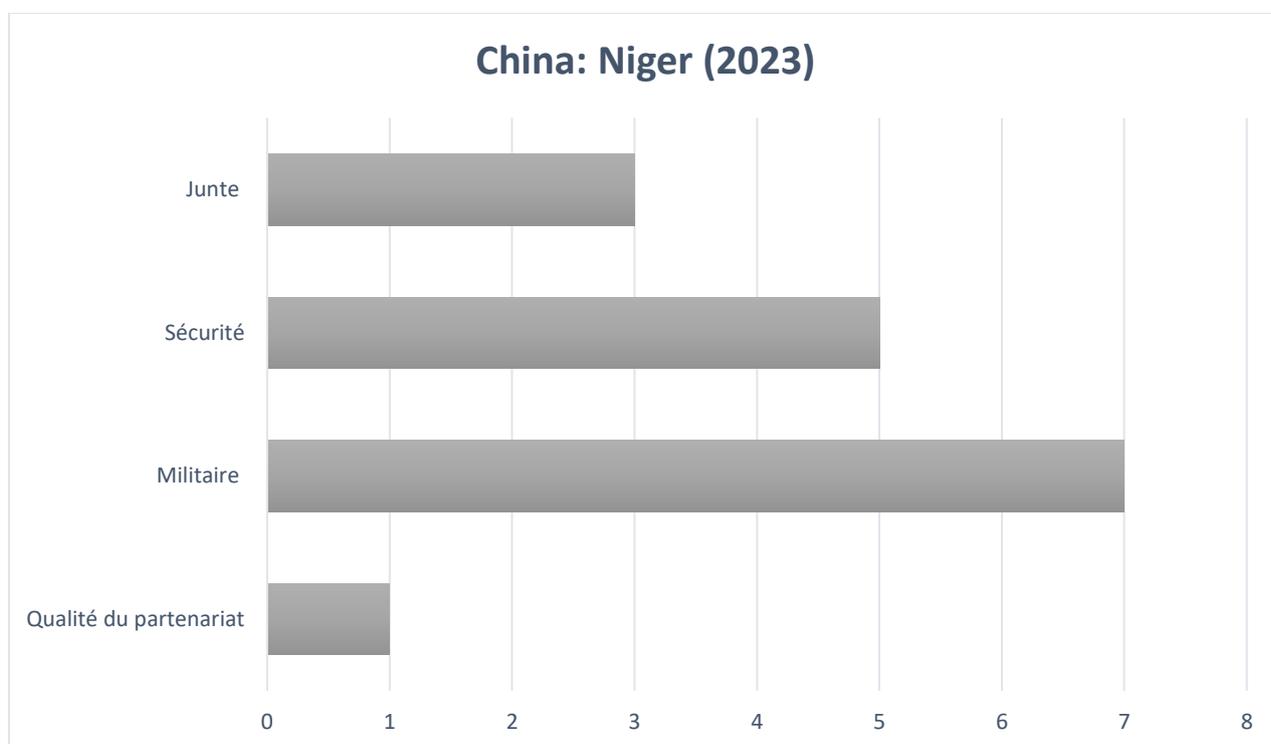
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 75. Vocabulary describing China in Senegal (2023)



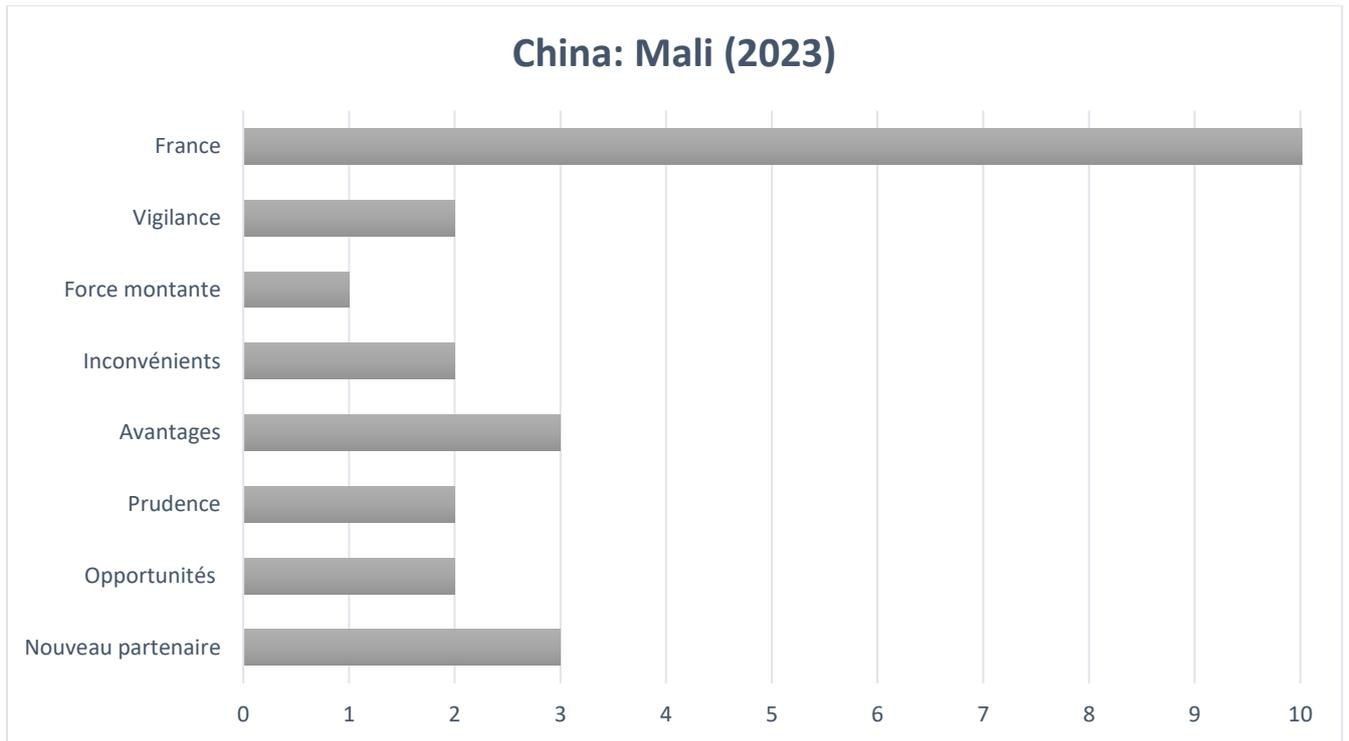
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 76. Vocabulary describing China in Niger (2023)



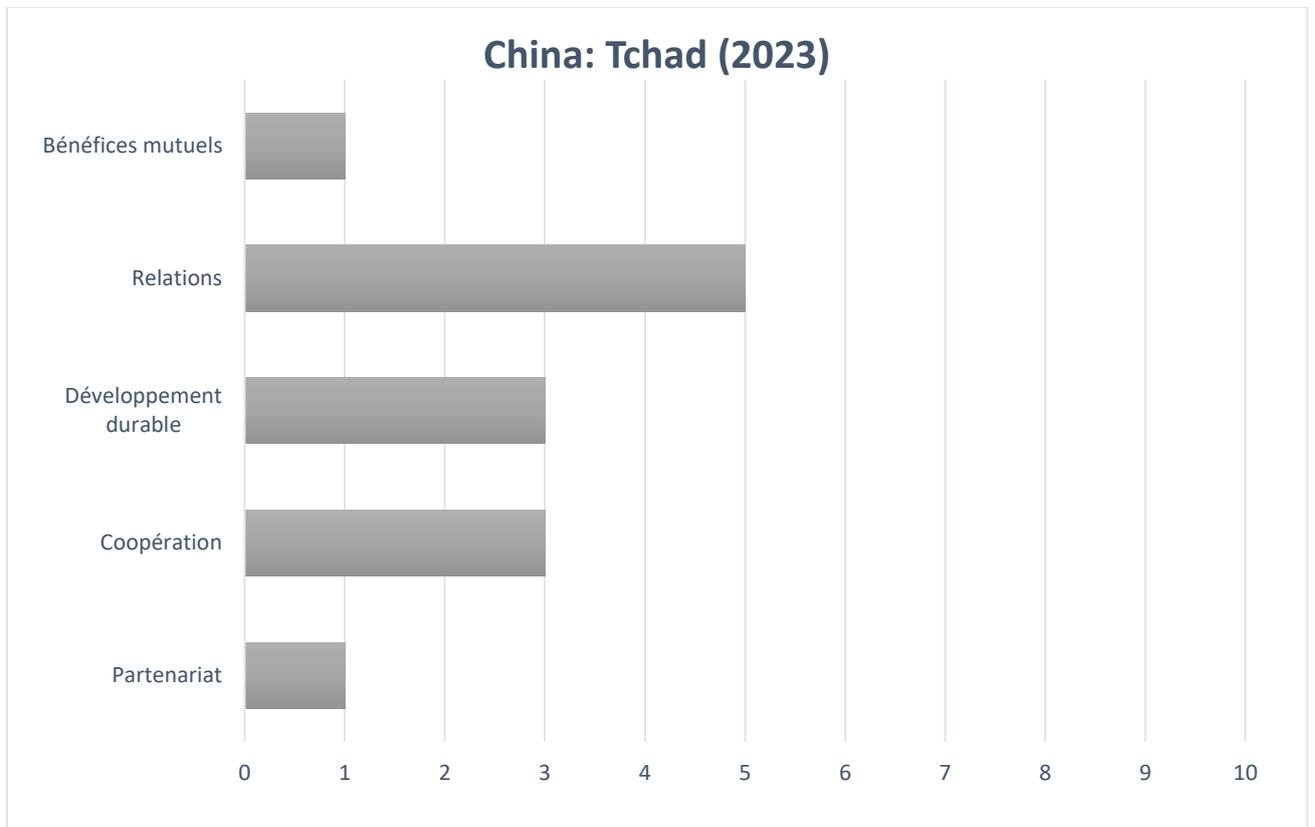
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Figure 77. Vocabulary describing China in Mali (2023)



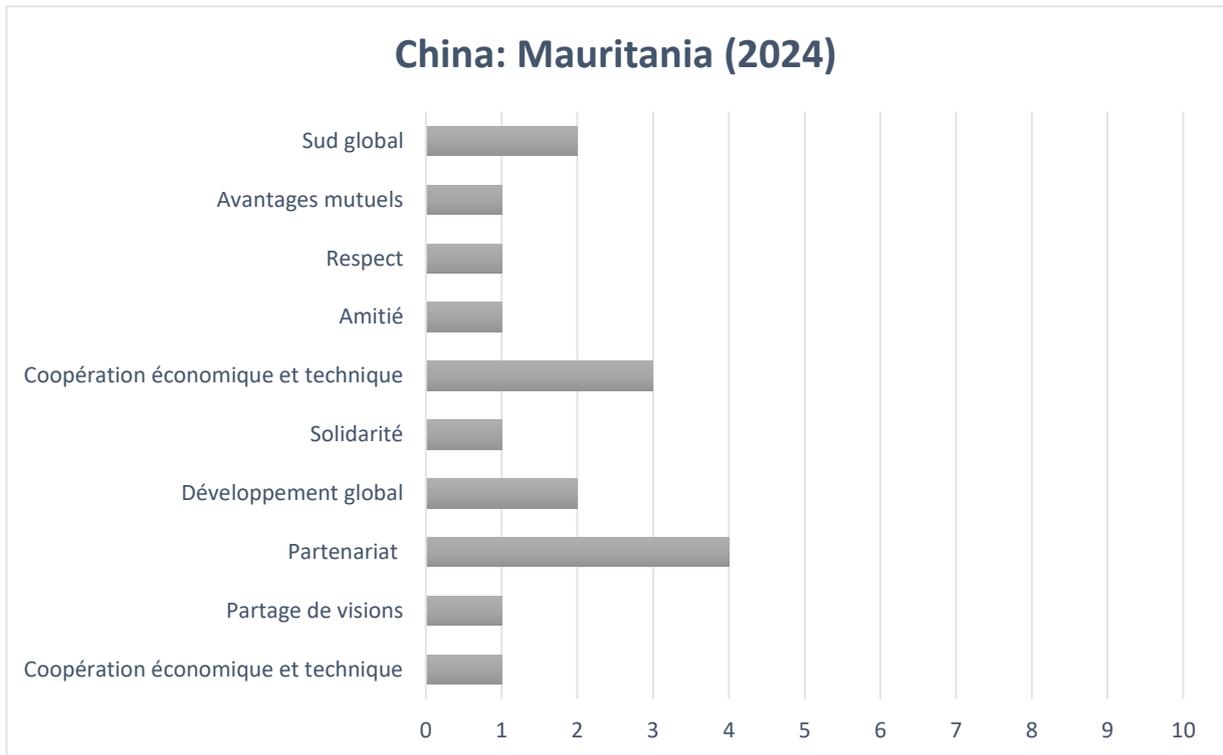
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Figure 78. Vocabulary describing China in Chad (2023)



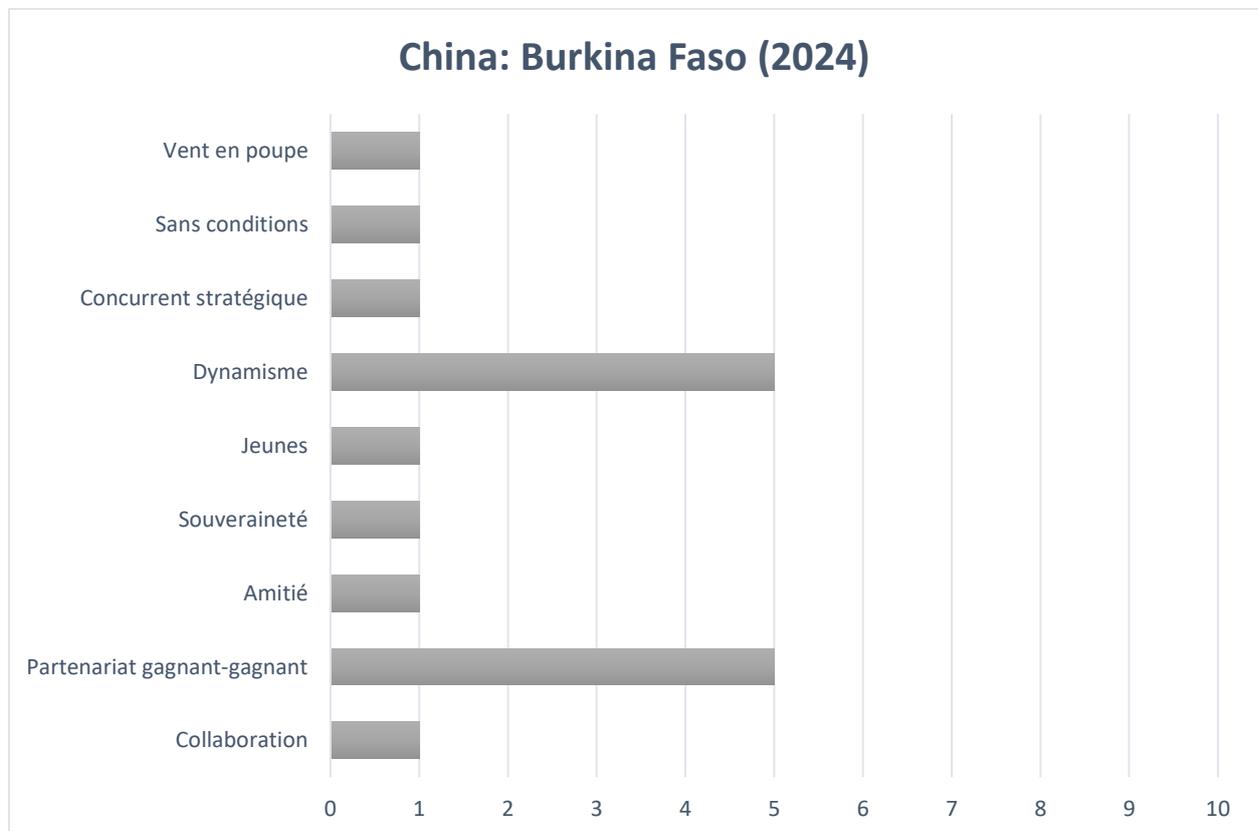
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Figure 79. Vocabulary describing China in Mauritania (2024)



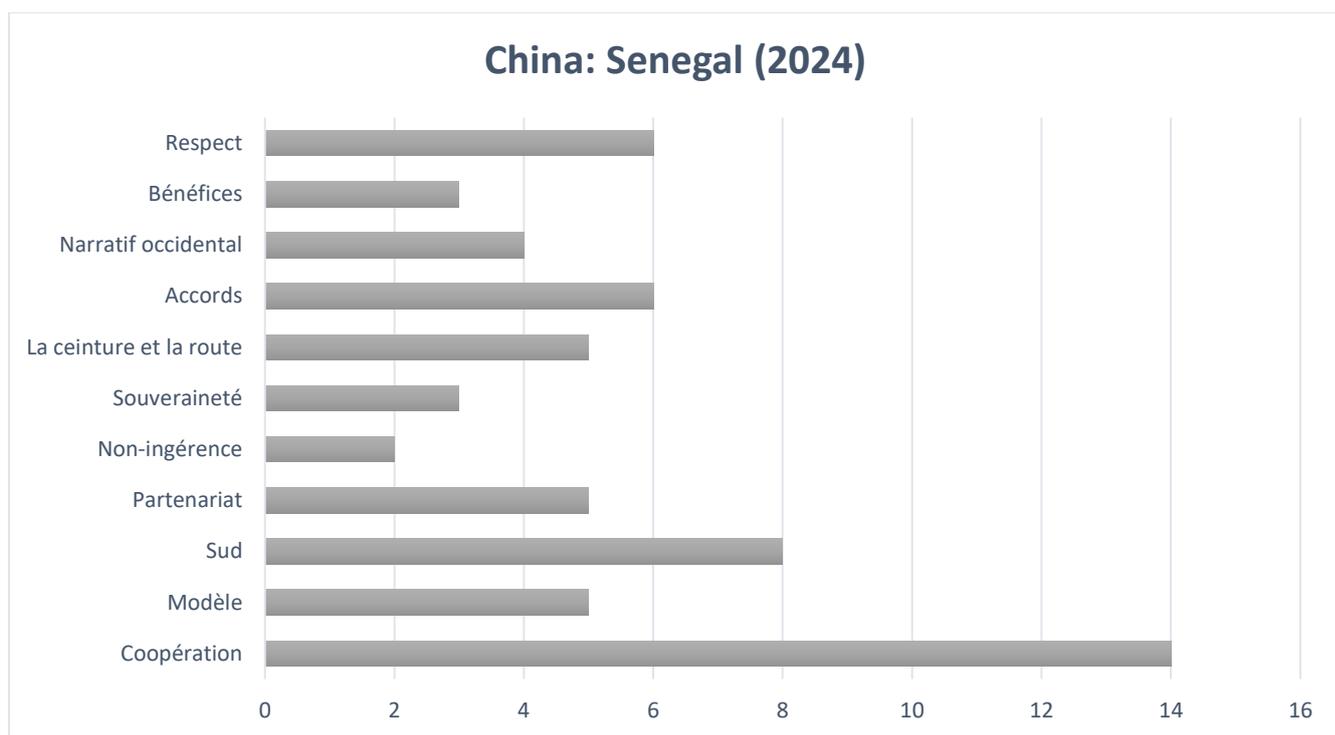
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Figure 80. Vocabulary describing China in Burkina Faso (2024)



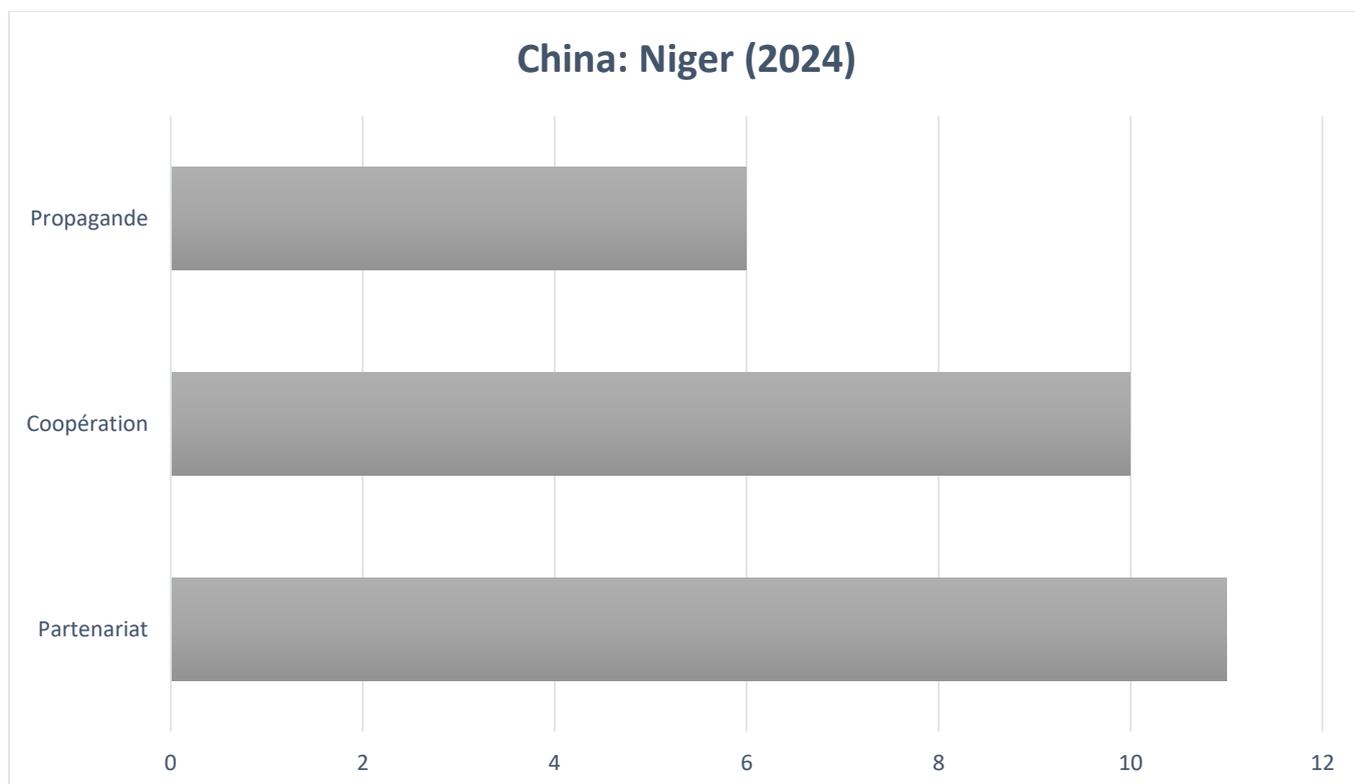
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 81. Vocabulary describing China in Senegal (2024)



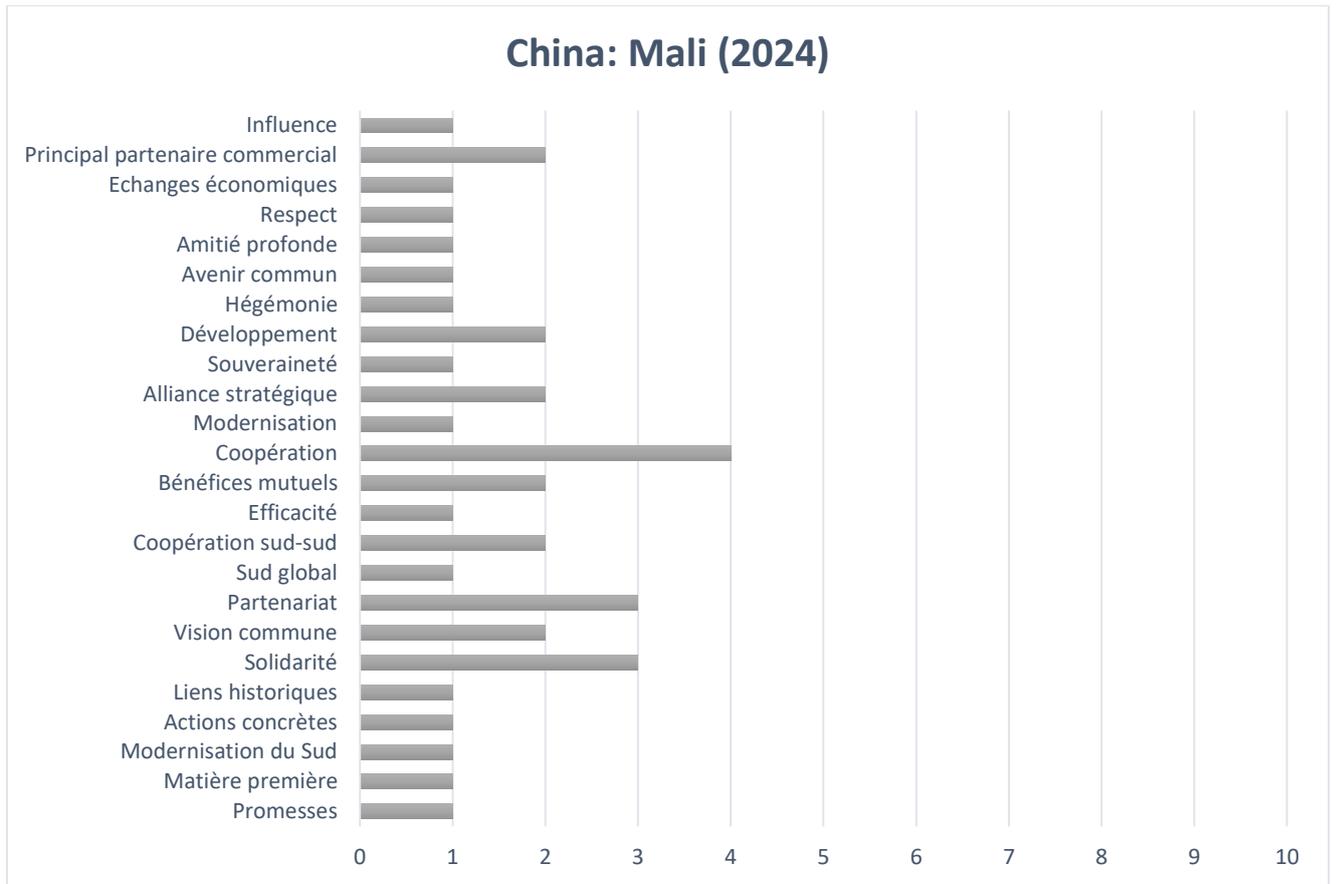
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 82. Vocabulary describing China in Niger (2024)



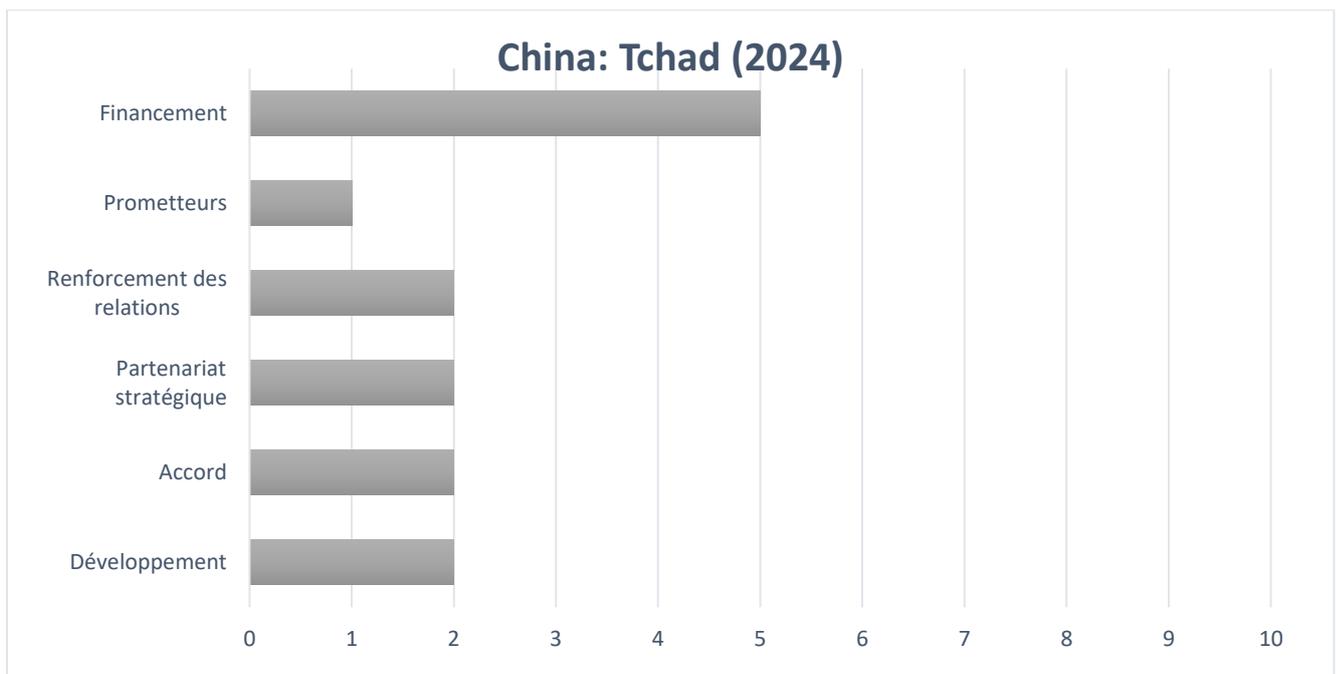
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Figure 83. Vocabulary describing China in Mali (2024)



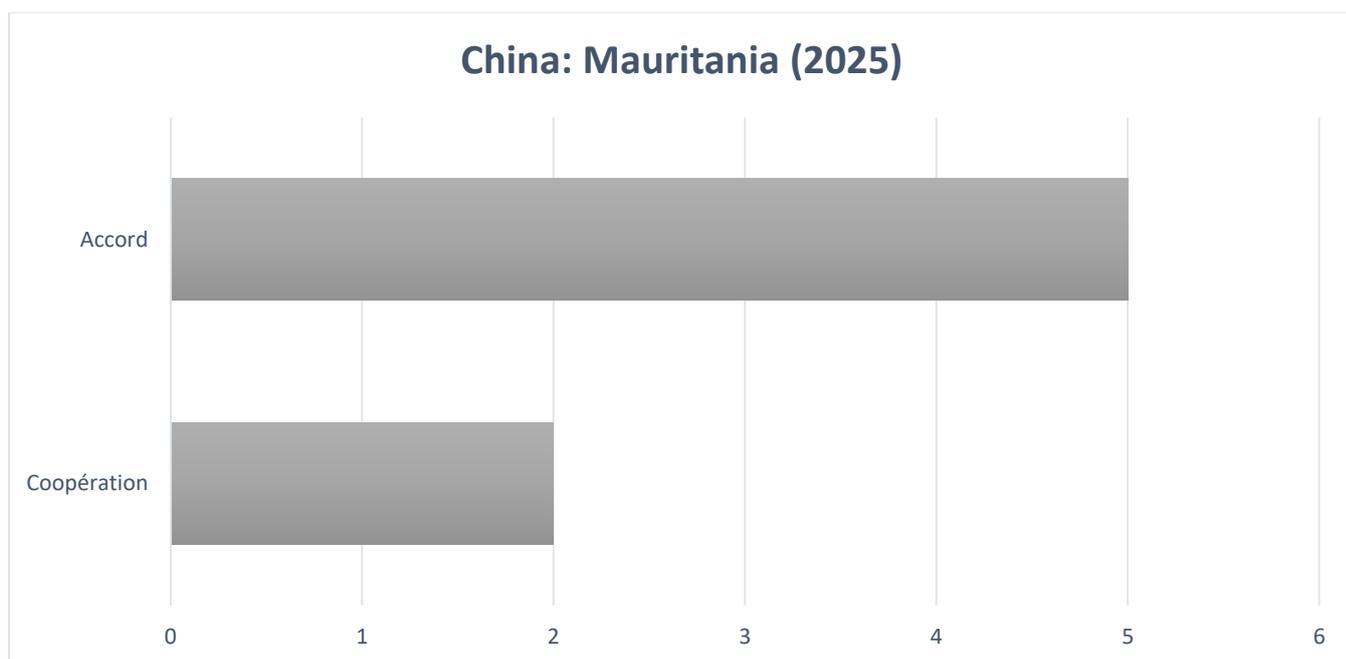
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 84. Vocabulary describing China in Chad (2024)



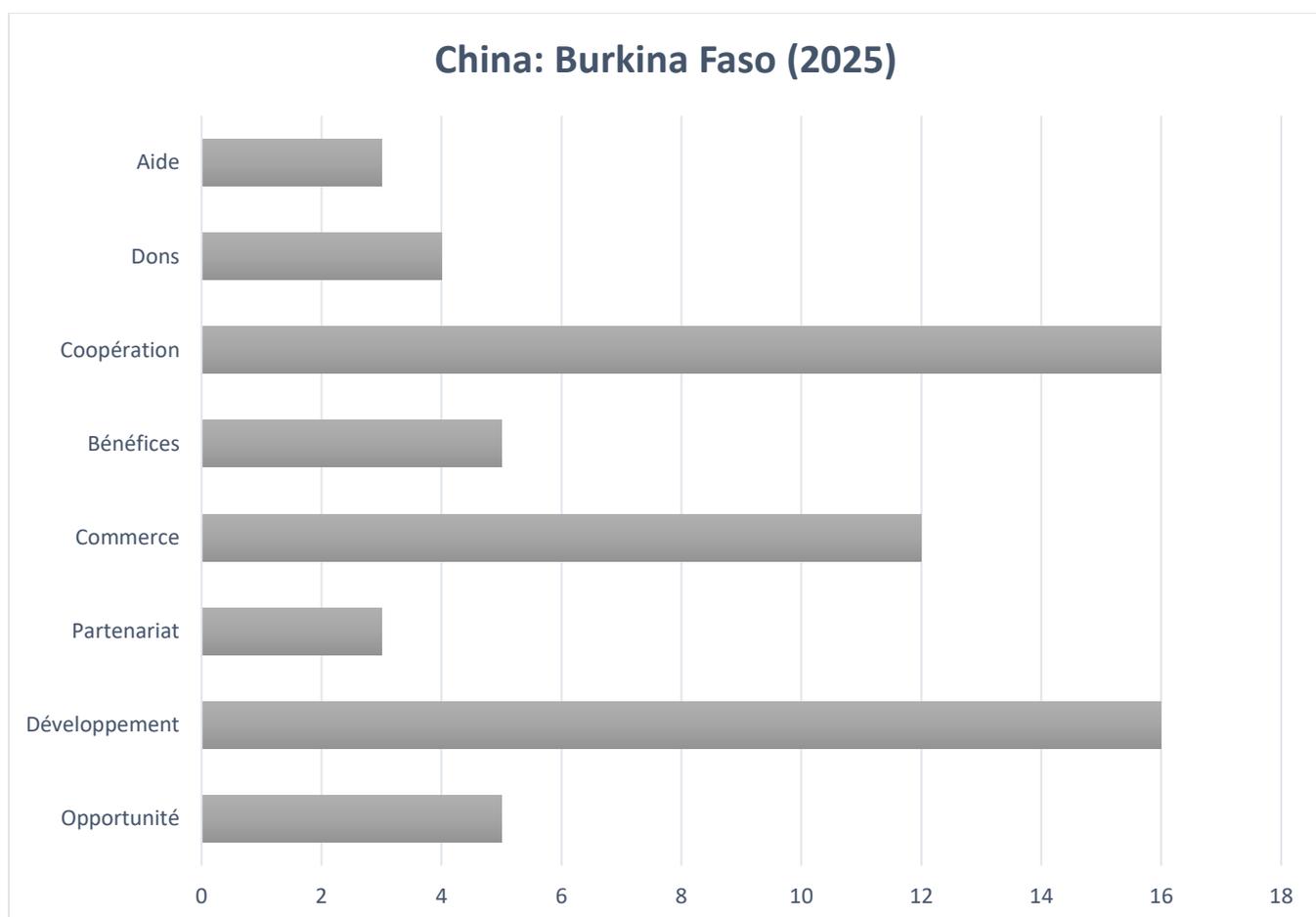
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Figure 85. Vocabulary describing China in Mauritania (2025)



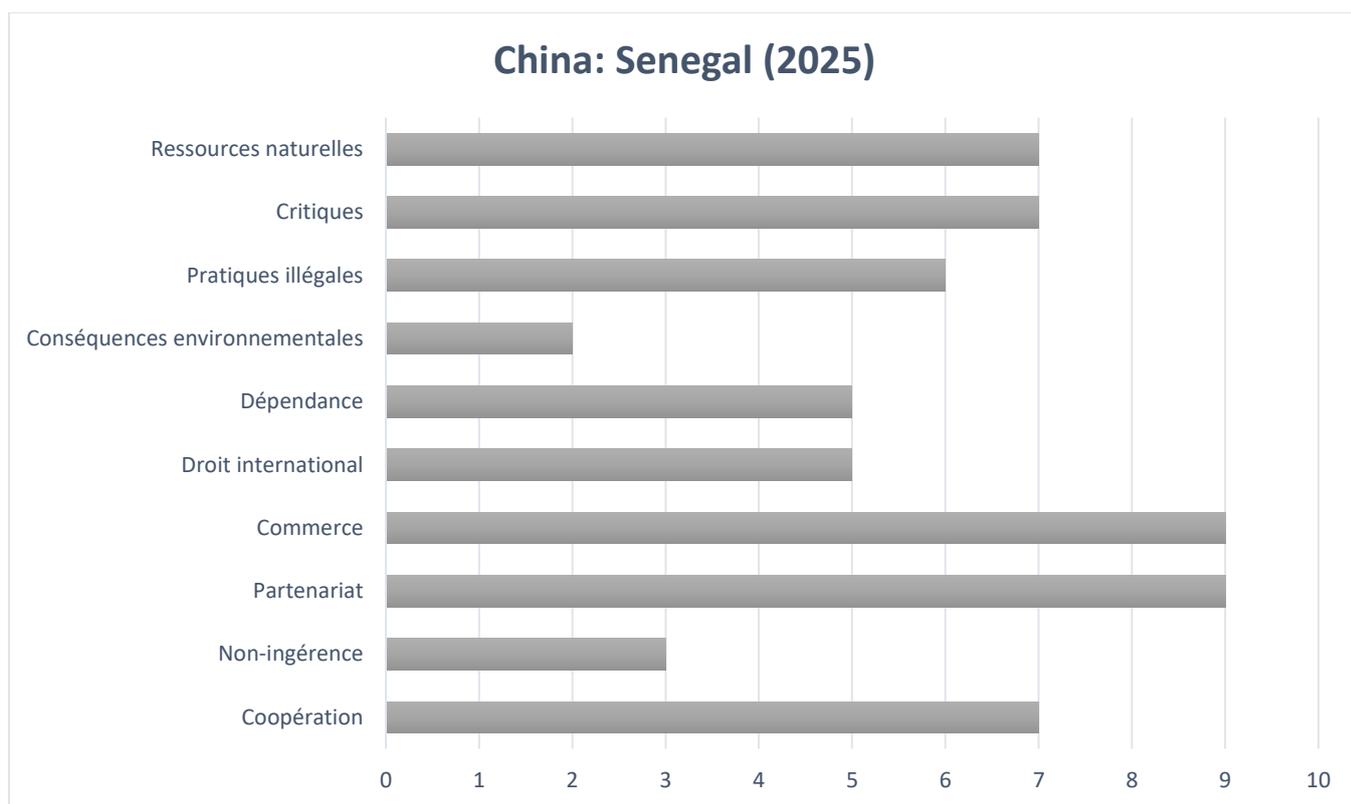
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Figure 86. Vocabulary describing China in Burkina Faso (2025)



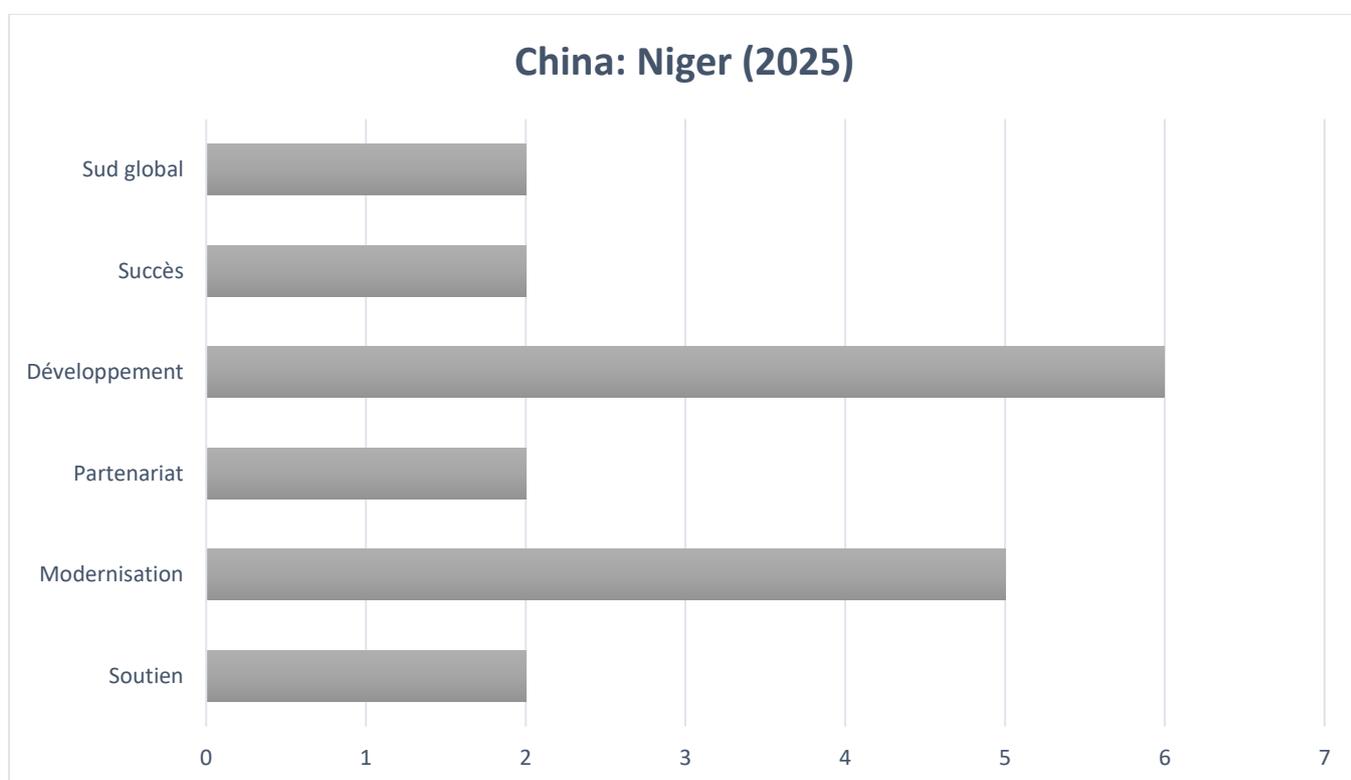
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Figure 87. Vocabulary describing China in Senegal (2025)



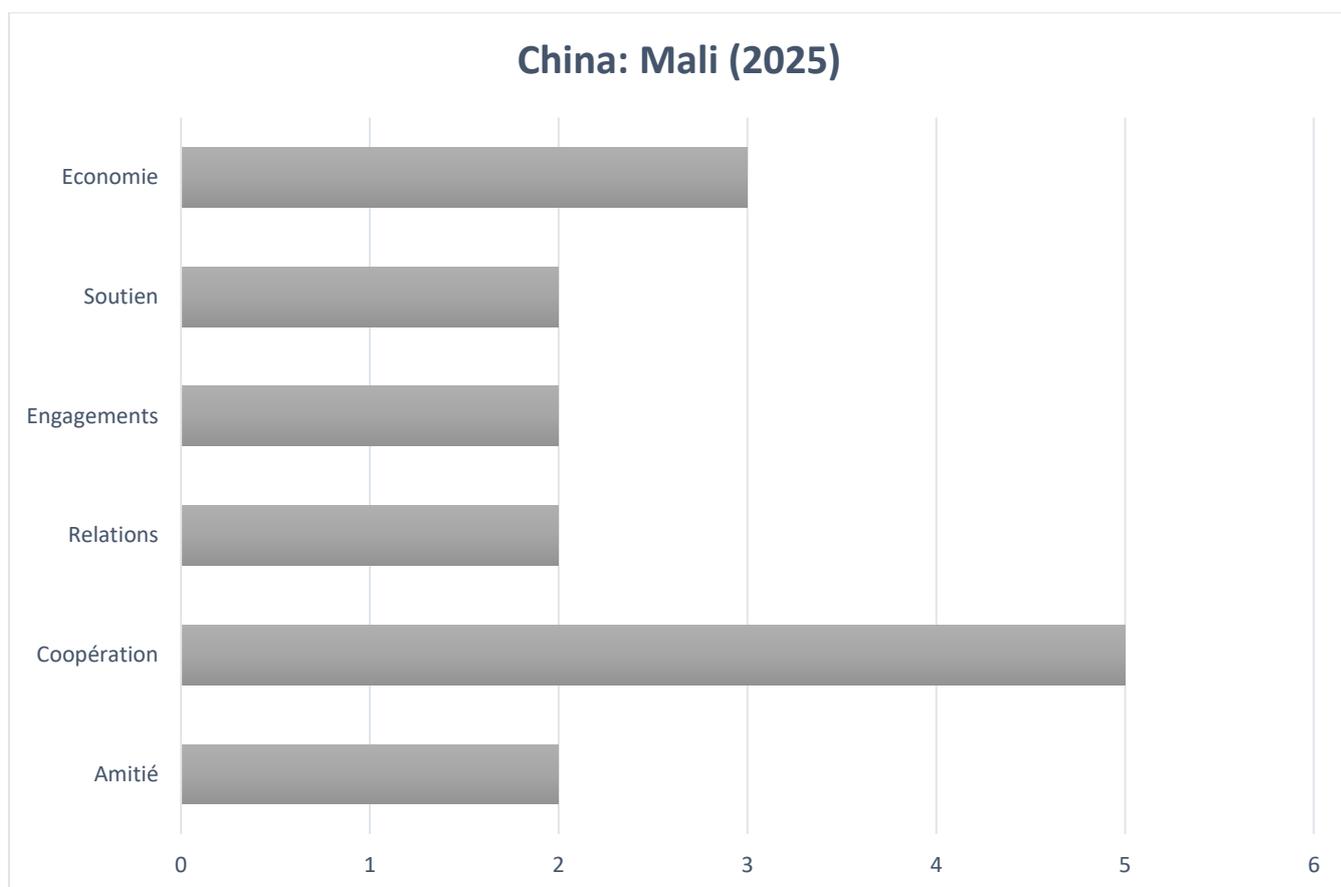
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Figure 88. Vocabulary describing China in Niger (2025)



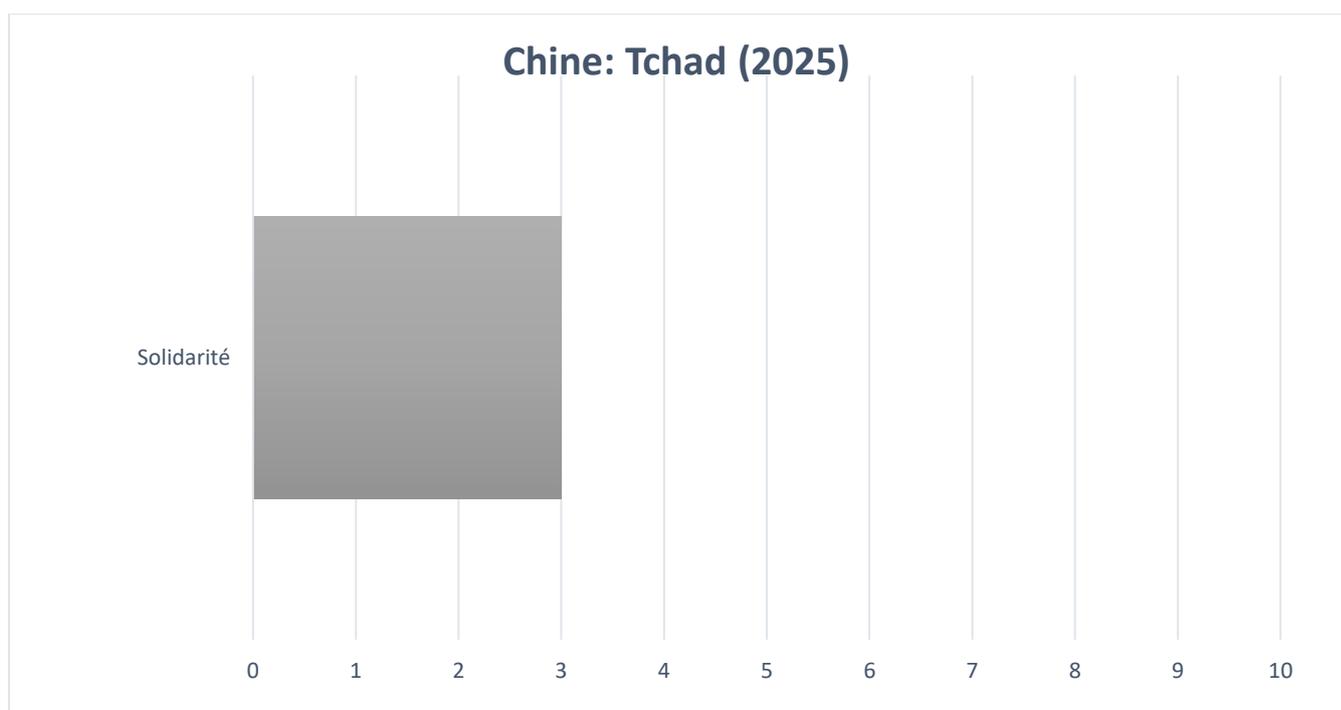
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Figure 89. Vocabulary describing China in Mali (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

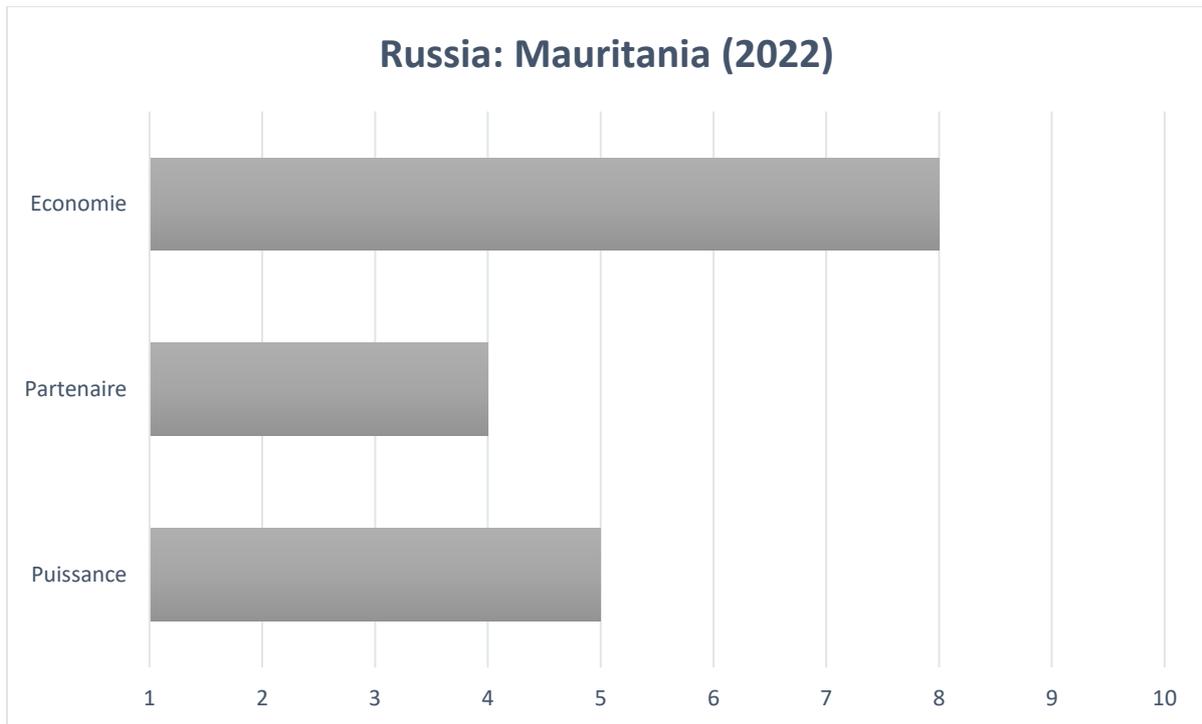
Figure 90. Vocabulary describing China in Chad (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

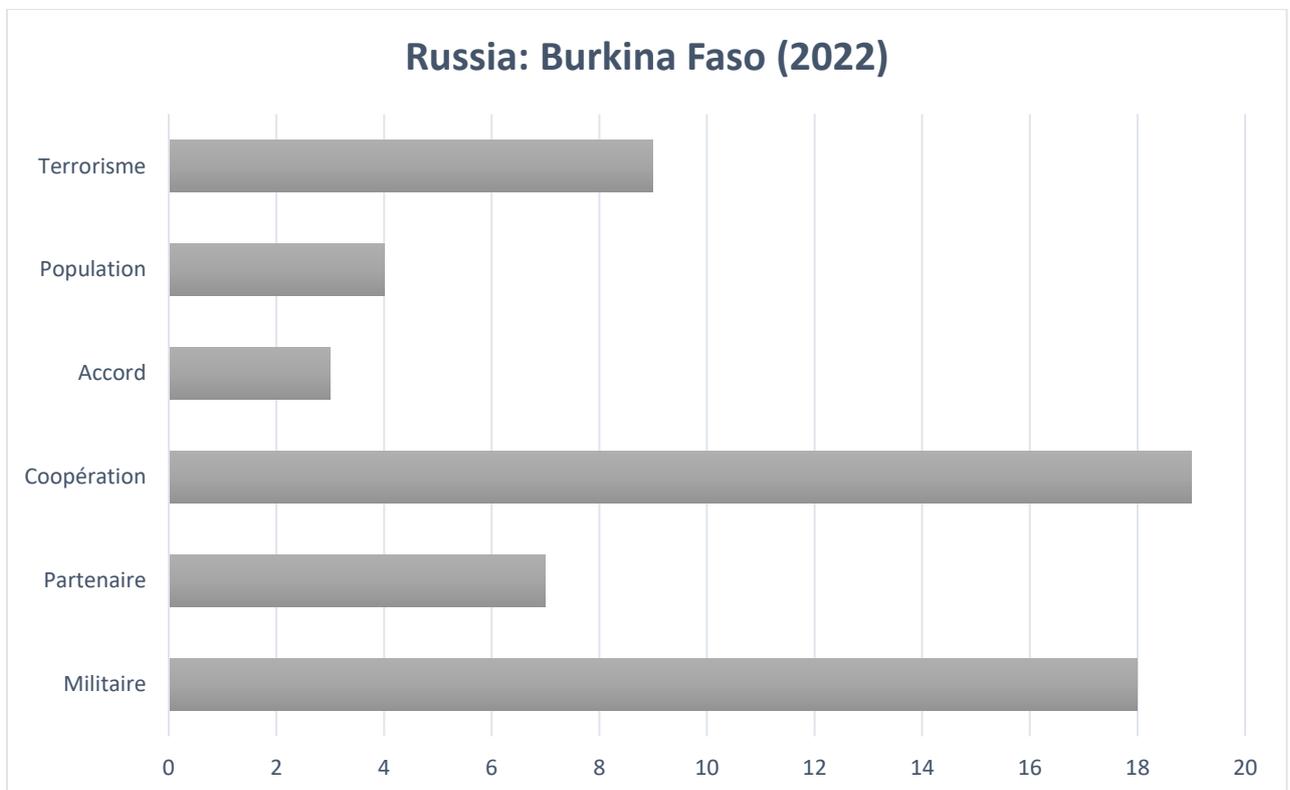
Russia

Figure 91. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mauritania (2022)



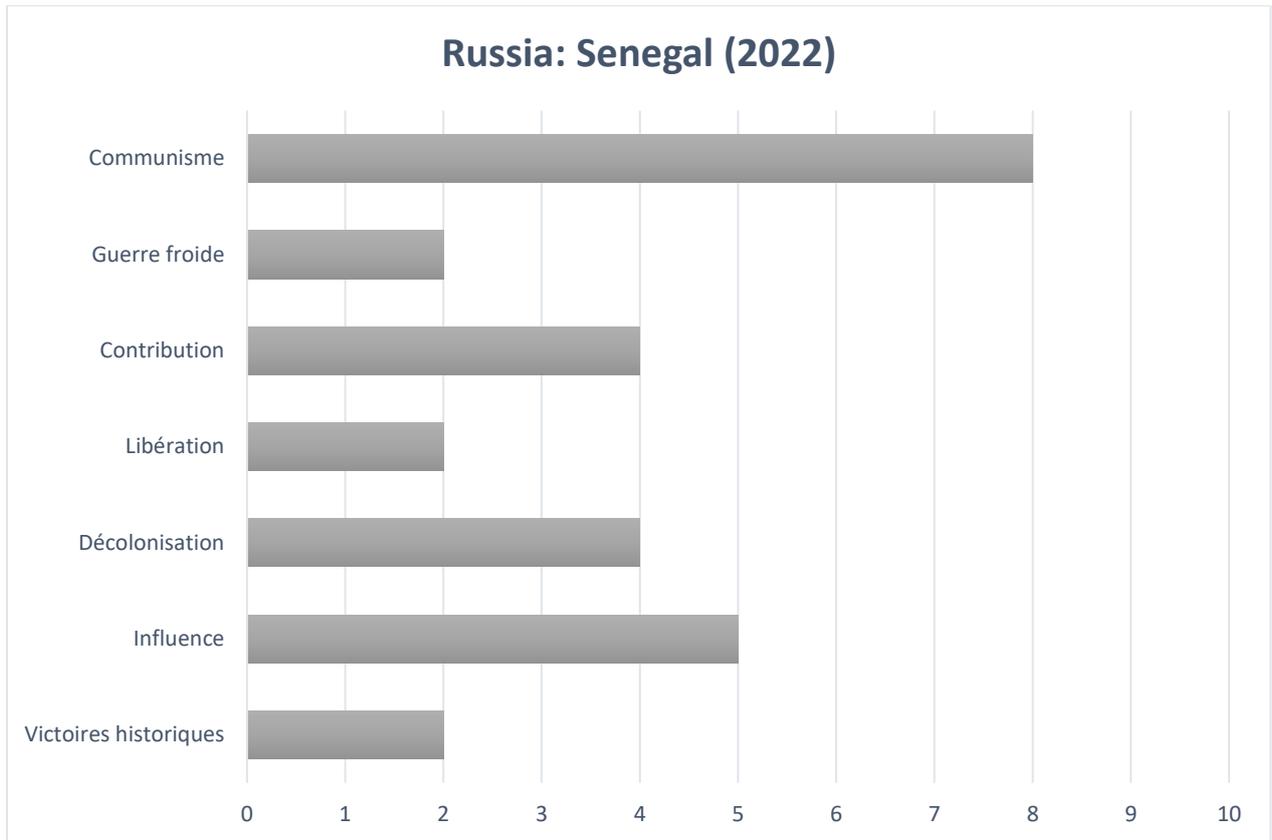
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Figure 92. Vocabulary describing Russia in Burkina Faso (2022)



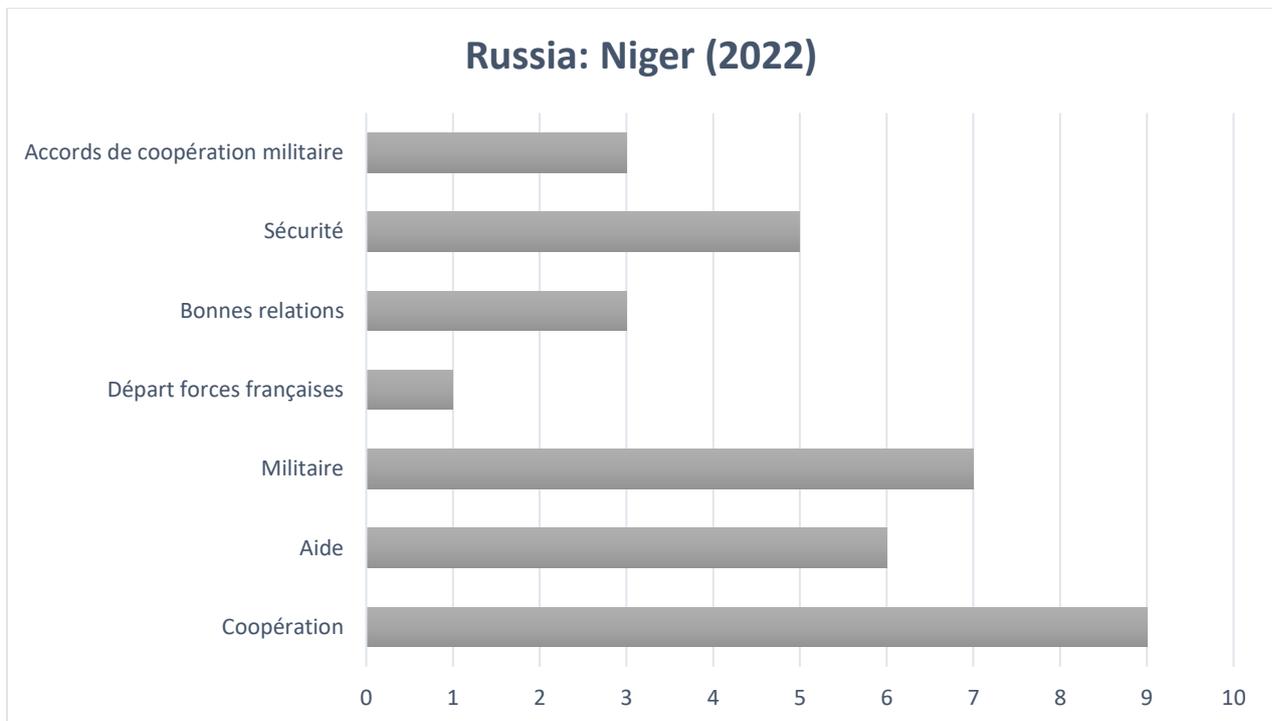
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Figure 93. Vocabulary describing Russia in Senegal (2022)



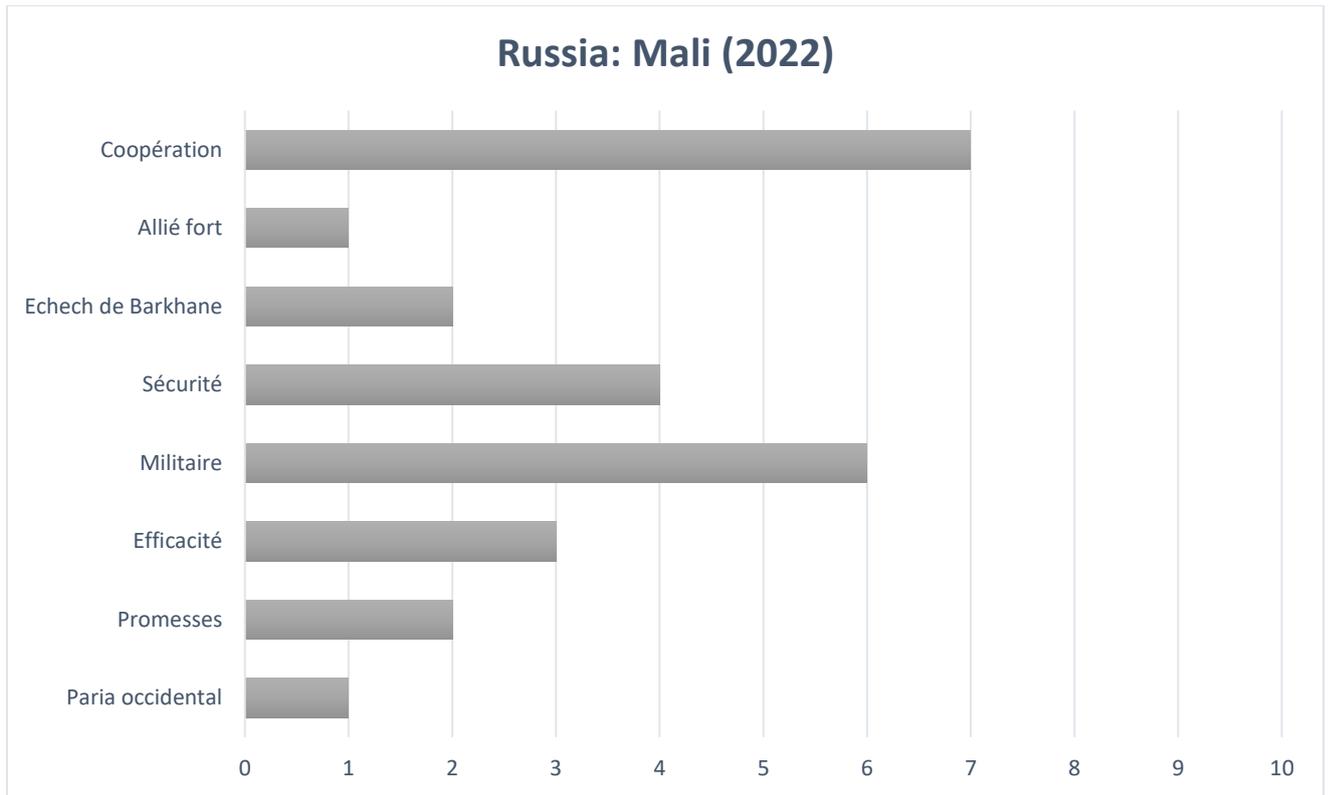
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Figure 94. Vocabulary describing Russia in Niger (2022)



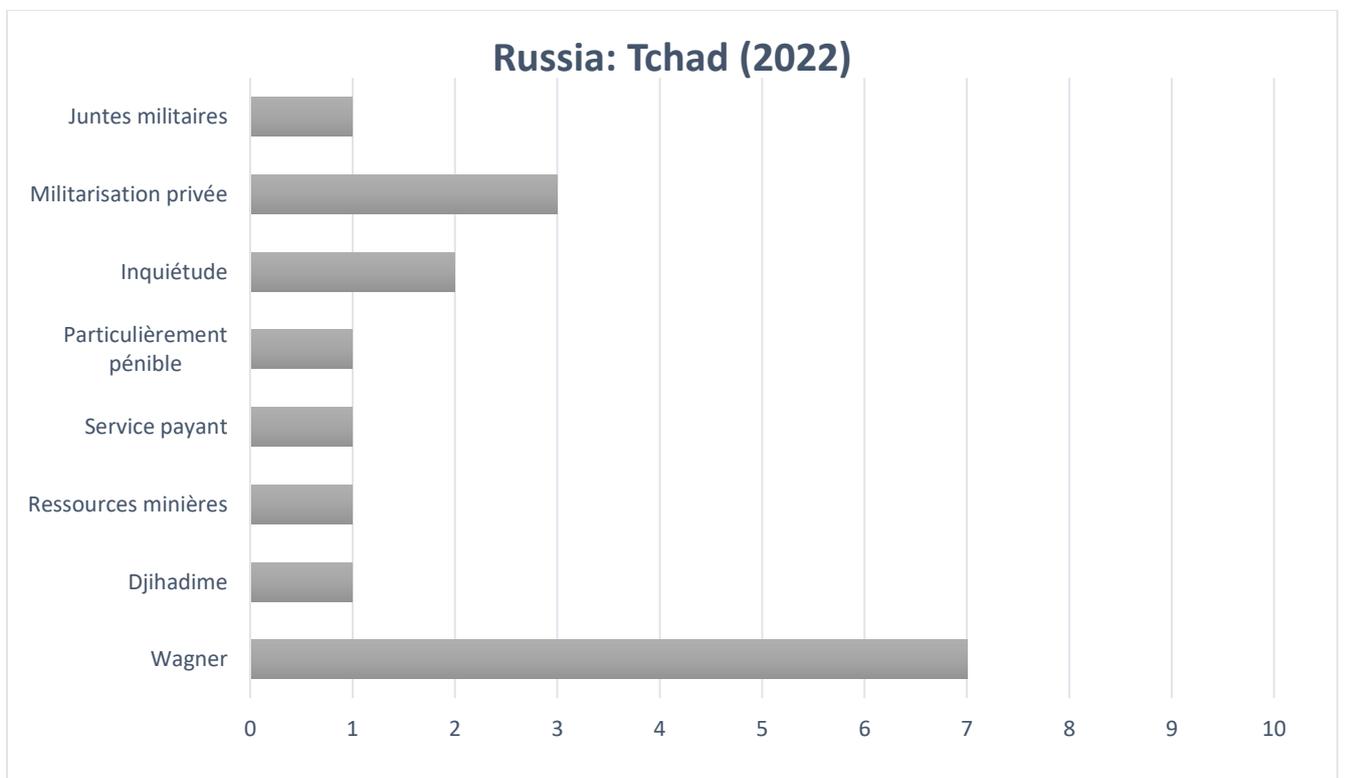
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Figure 95. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mali (2022)



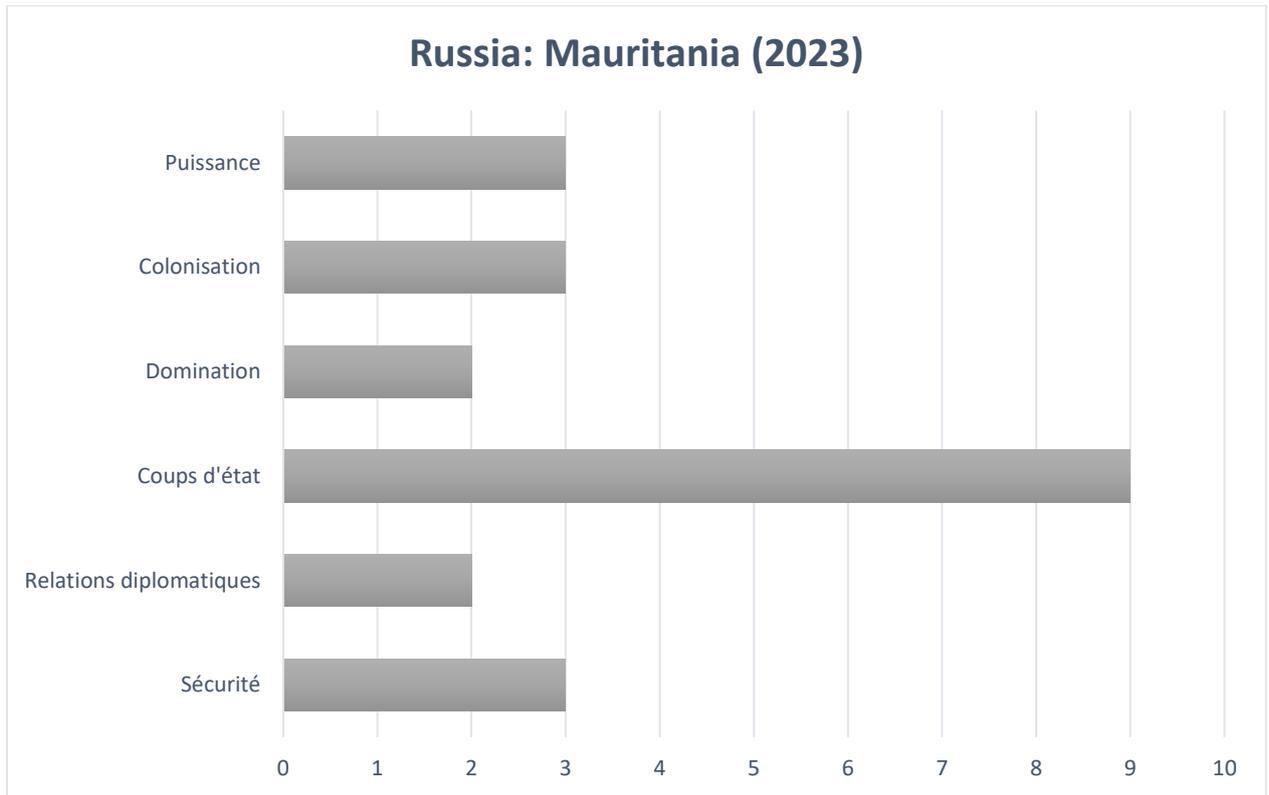
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Figure 96. Vocabulary describing Russia in Chad (2022)



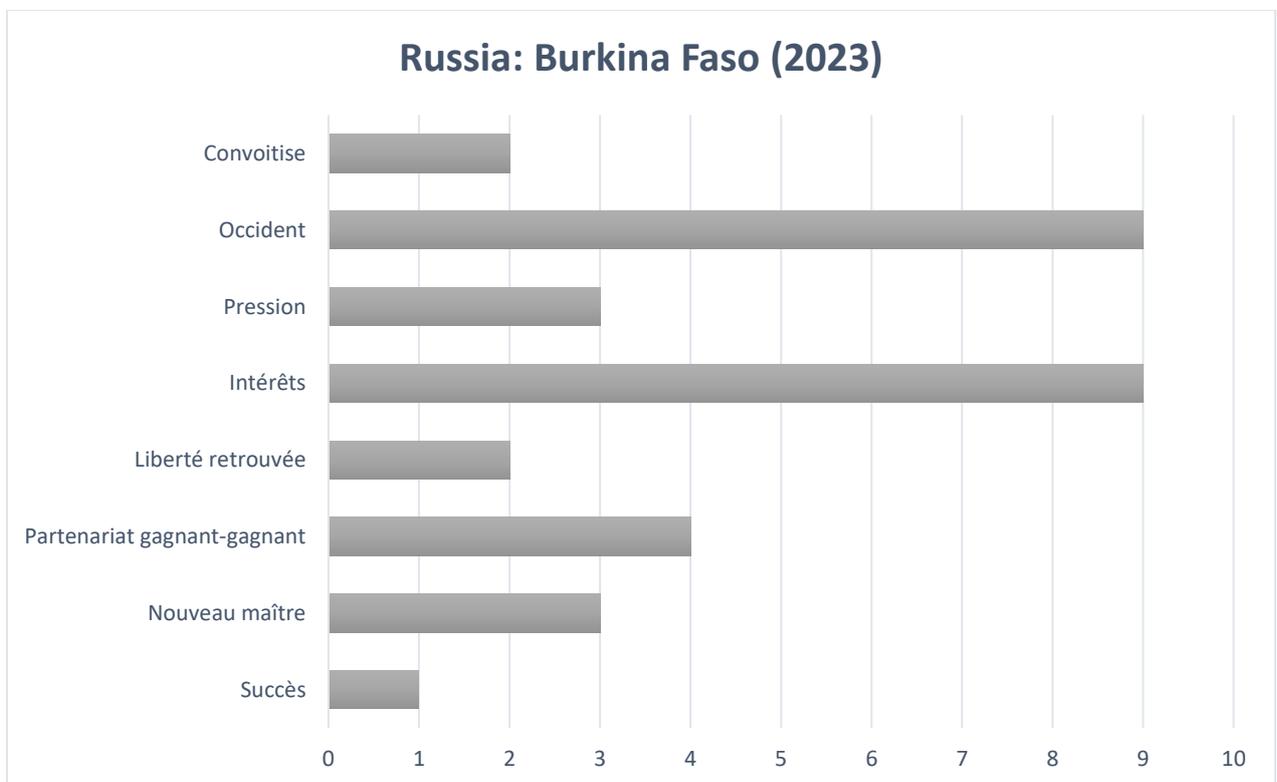
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Figure 97. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mauritania (2023)



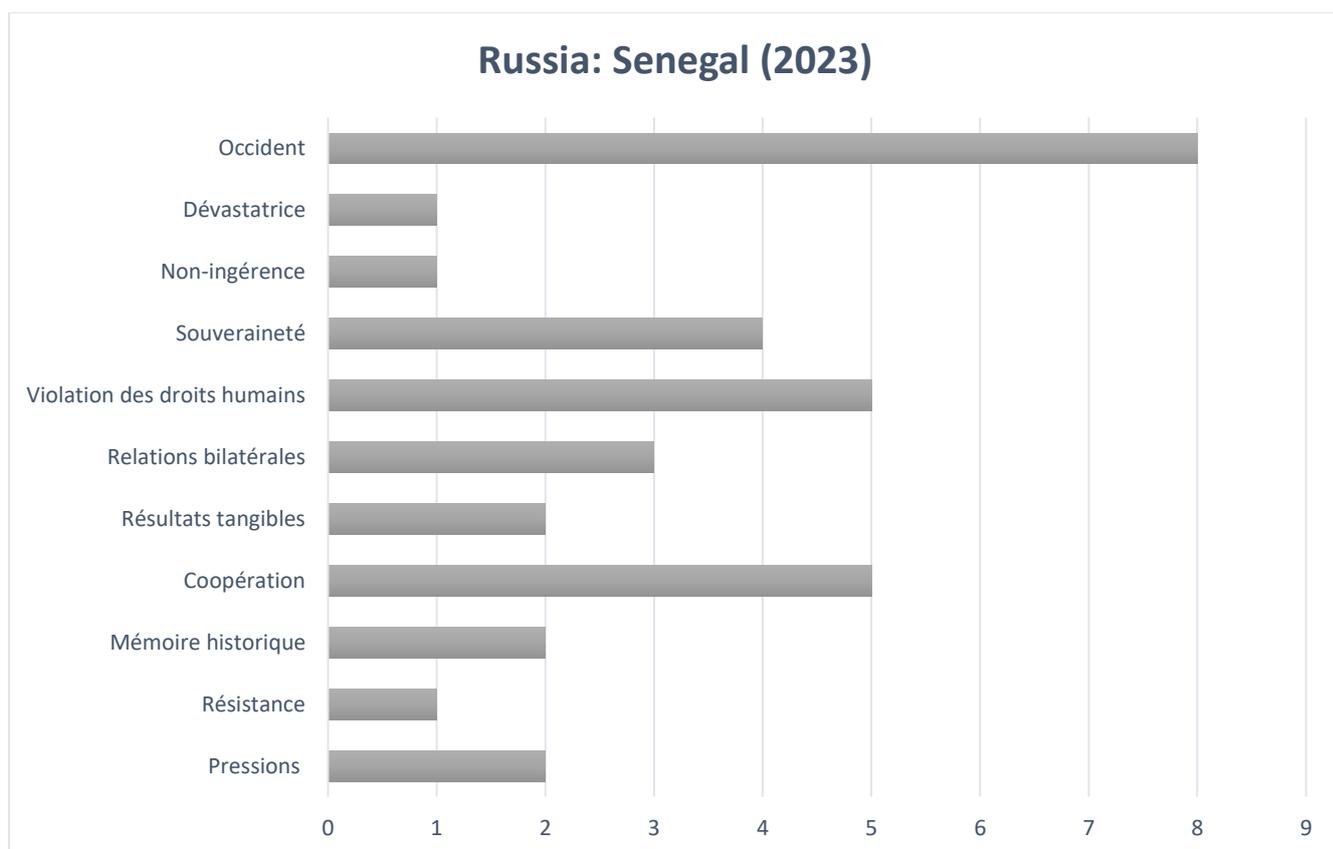
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Figure 98. Vocabulary describing Russia in Burkina Faso (2023)



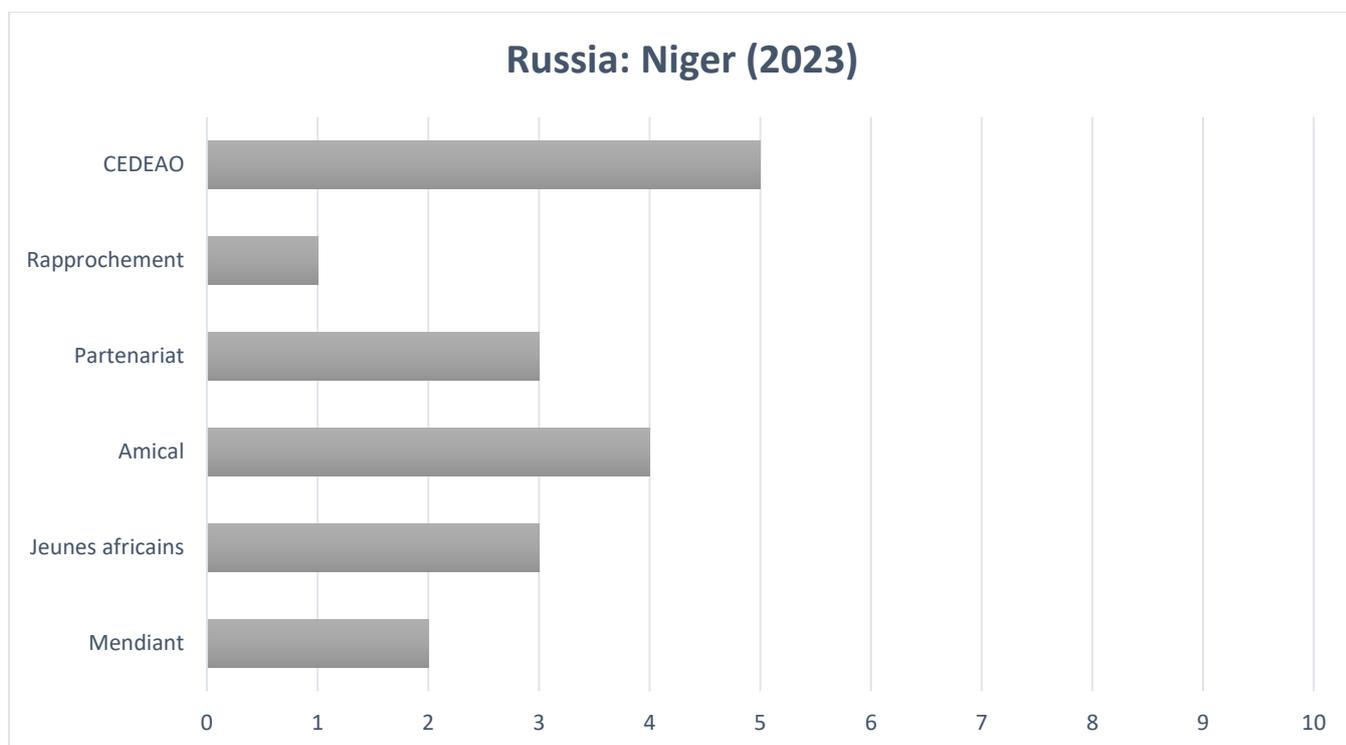
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Figure 99. Vocabulary describing Russia in Senegal (2023)



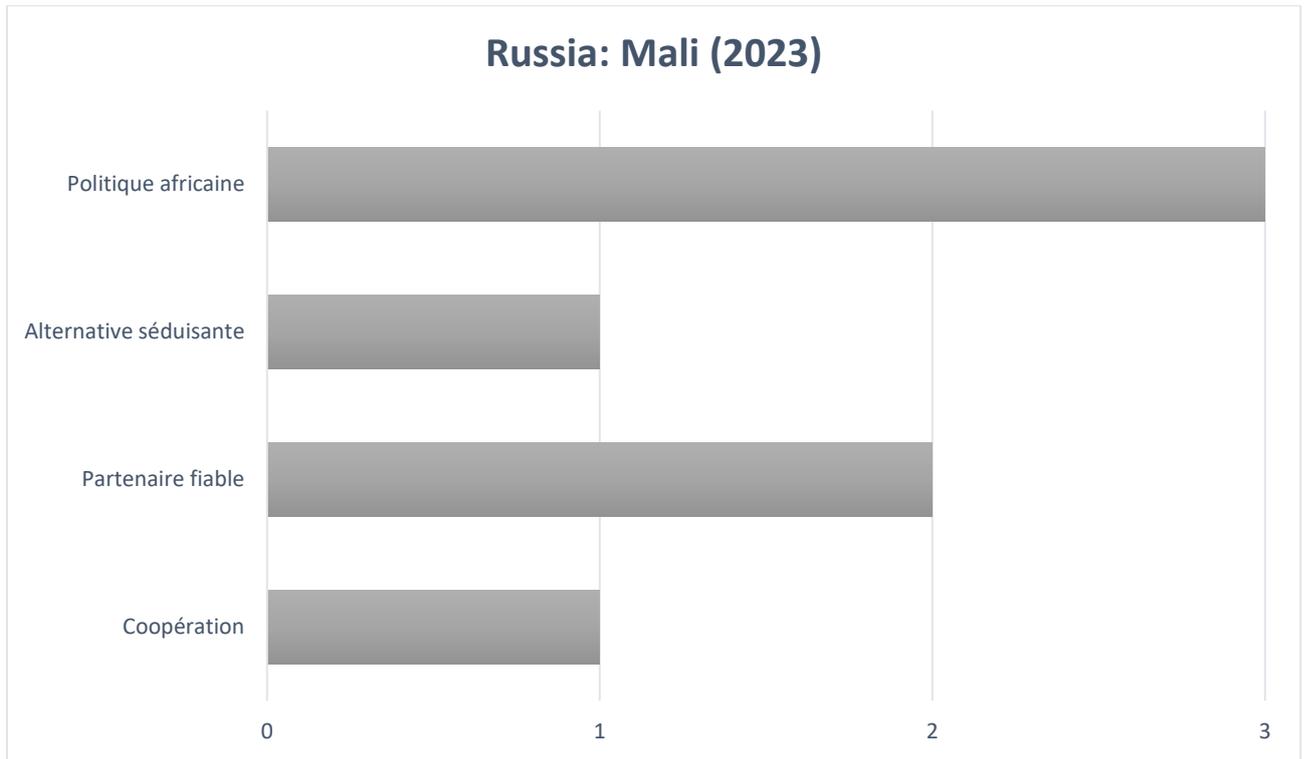
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Figure 100. Vocabulary describing Russia in Niger (2023)



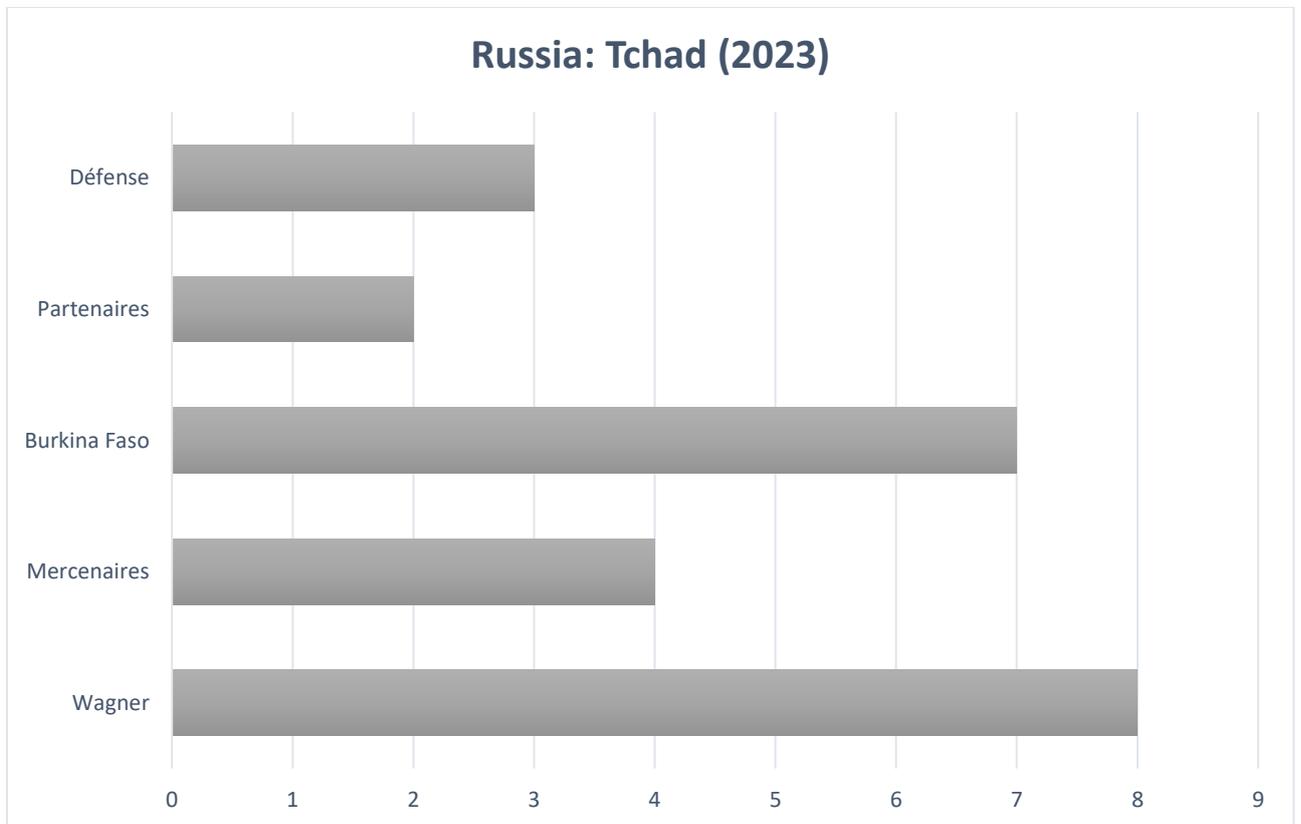
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Figure 101. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mali (2023)



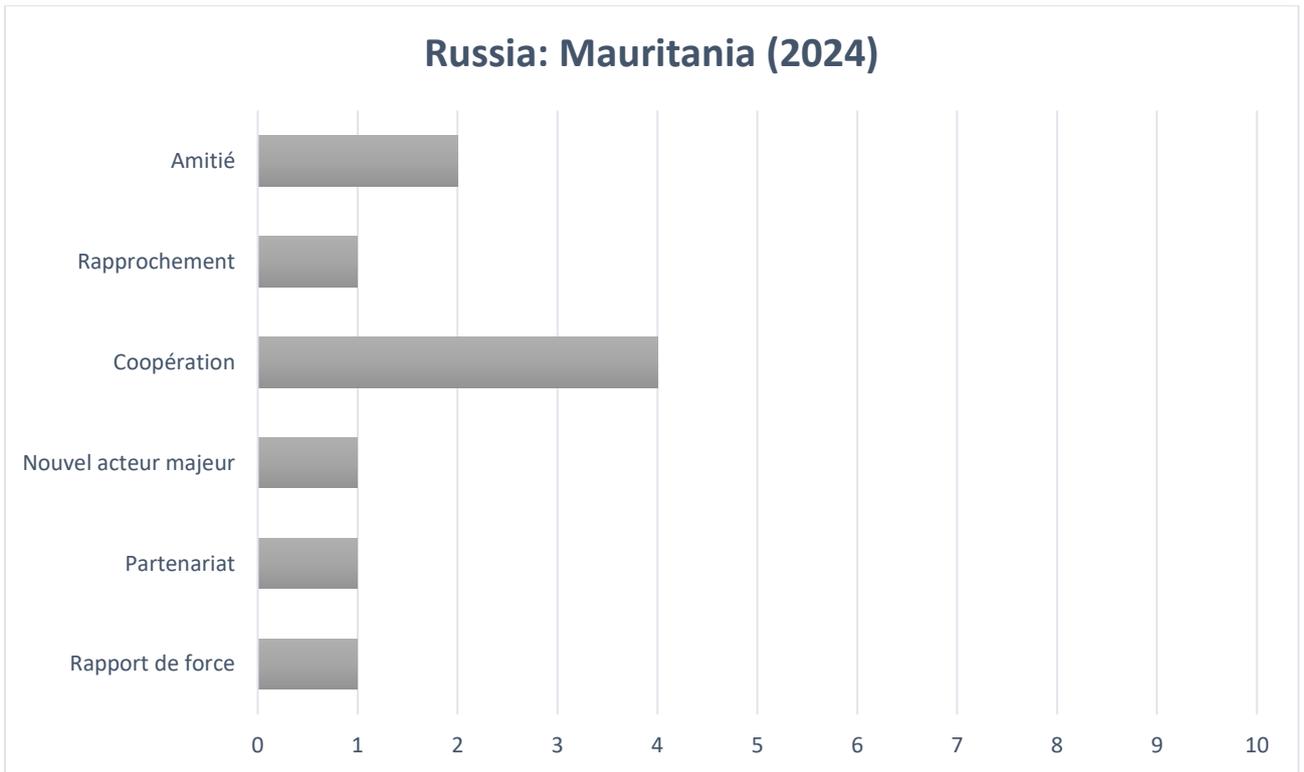
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Figure 102. Vocabulary describing Russia in Chad (2023)



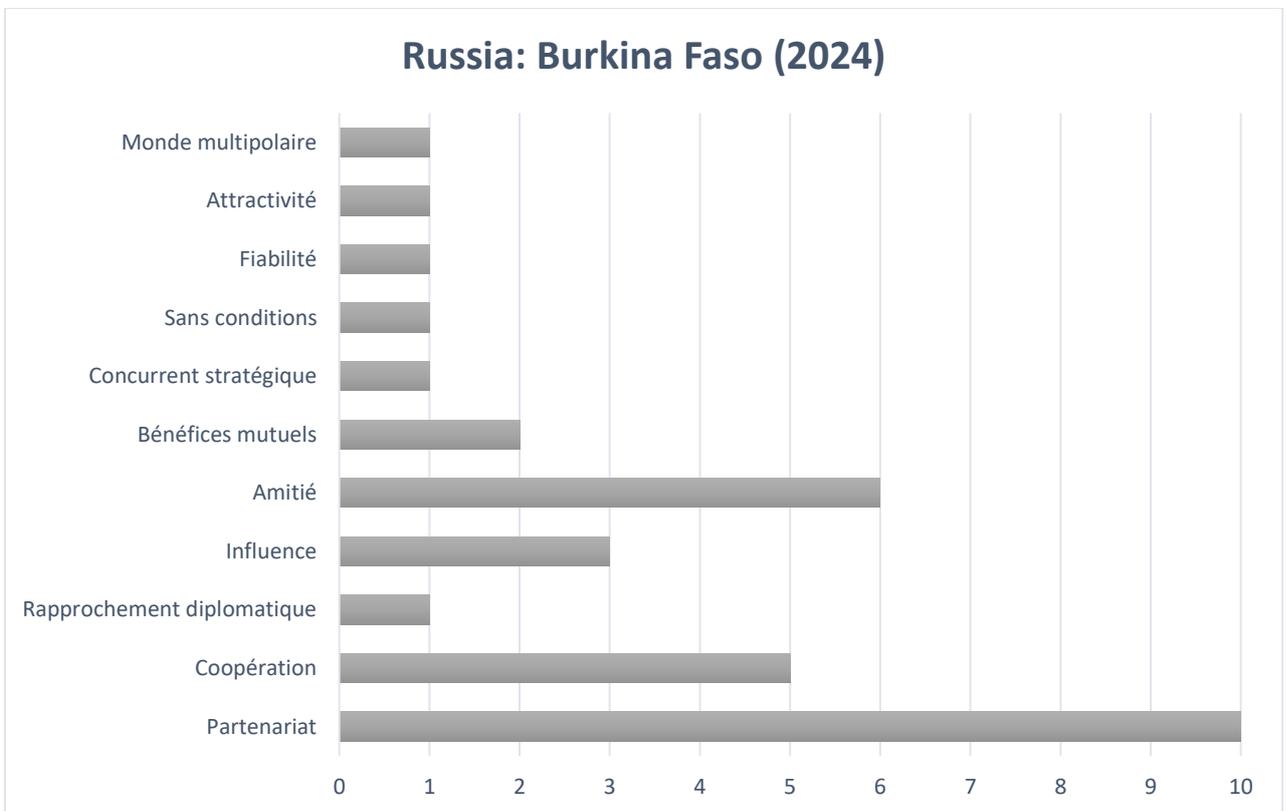
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Figure 103. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mauritania (2024)



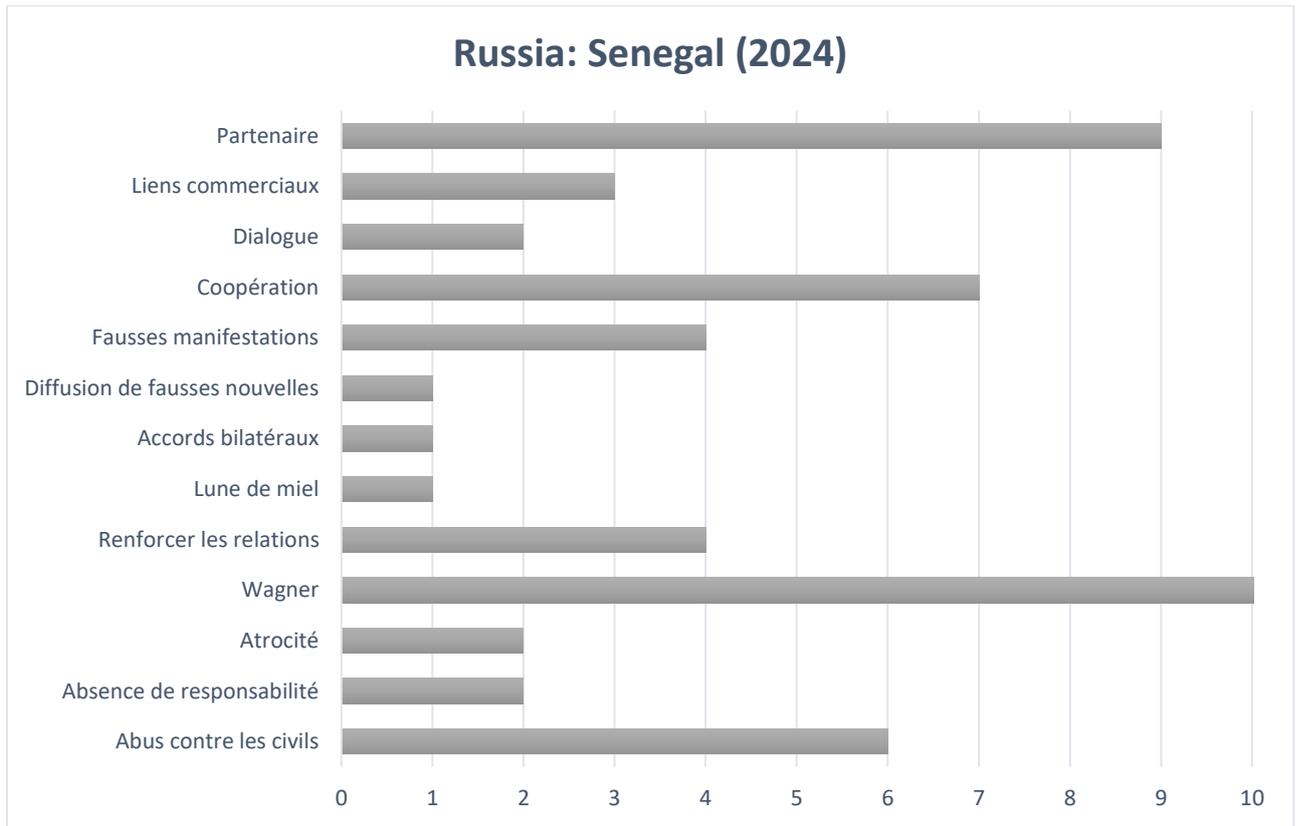
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Figure 104. Vocabulary describing Russia in Burkina Faso (2024)



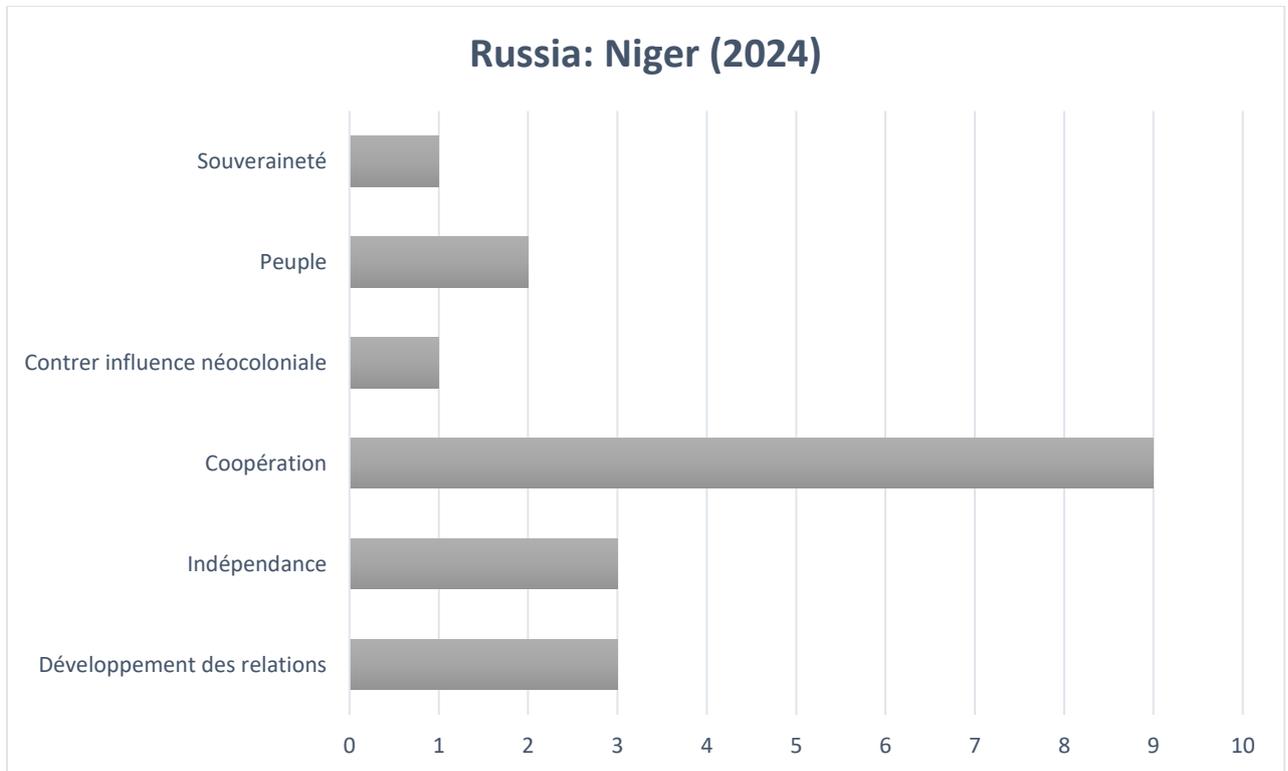
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Figure 105. Vocabulary describing Russia in Senegal (2024)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 106. Vocabulary describing Russia in Niger (2024)



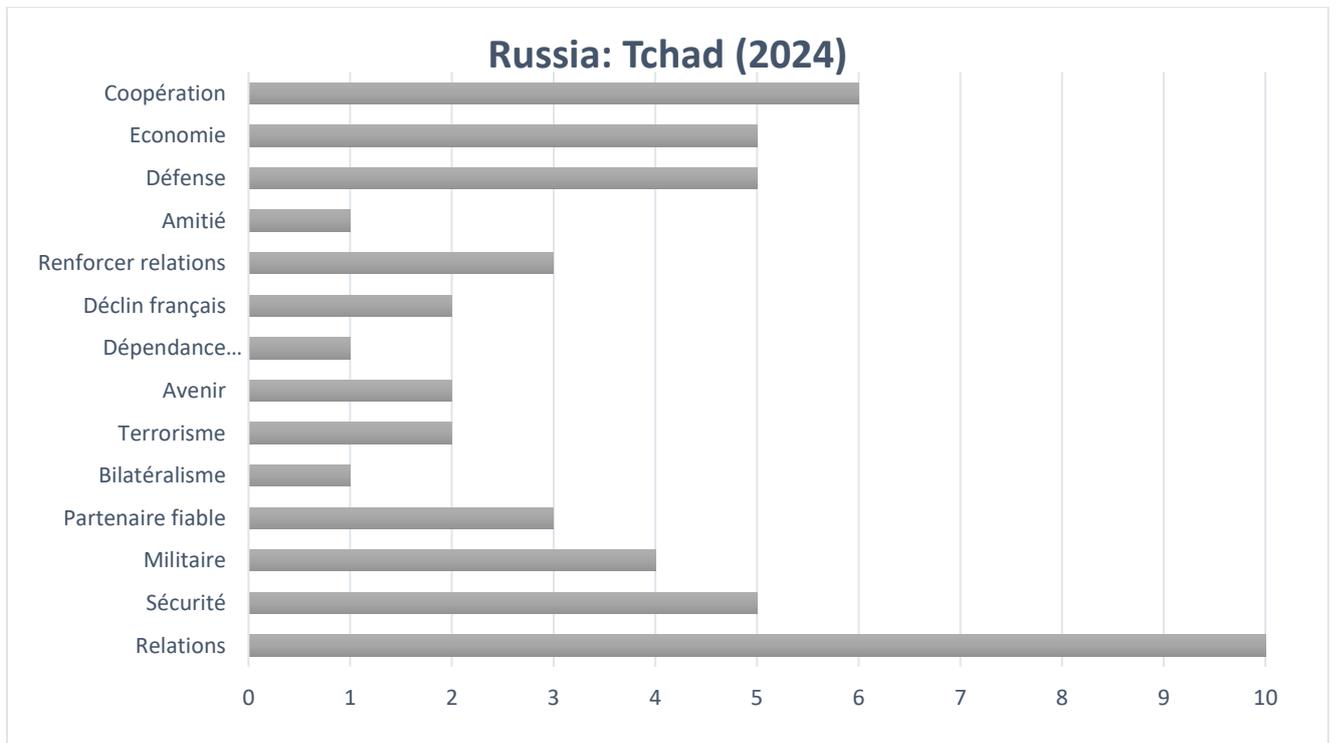
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Figure 107. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mali (2024)



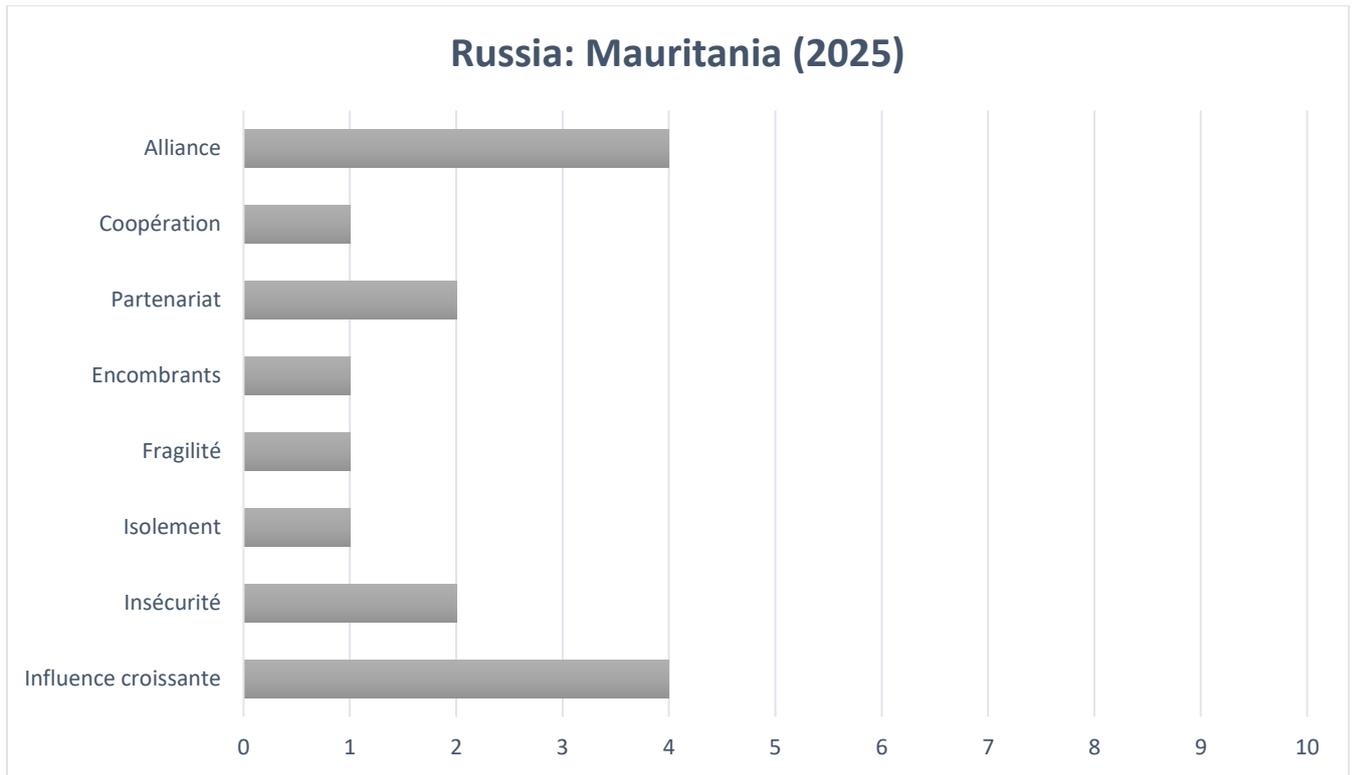
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Figure 108. Vocabulary describing Russia in Chad (2024)



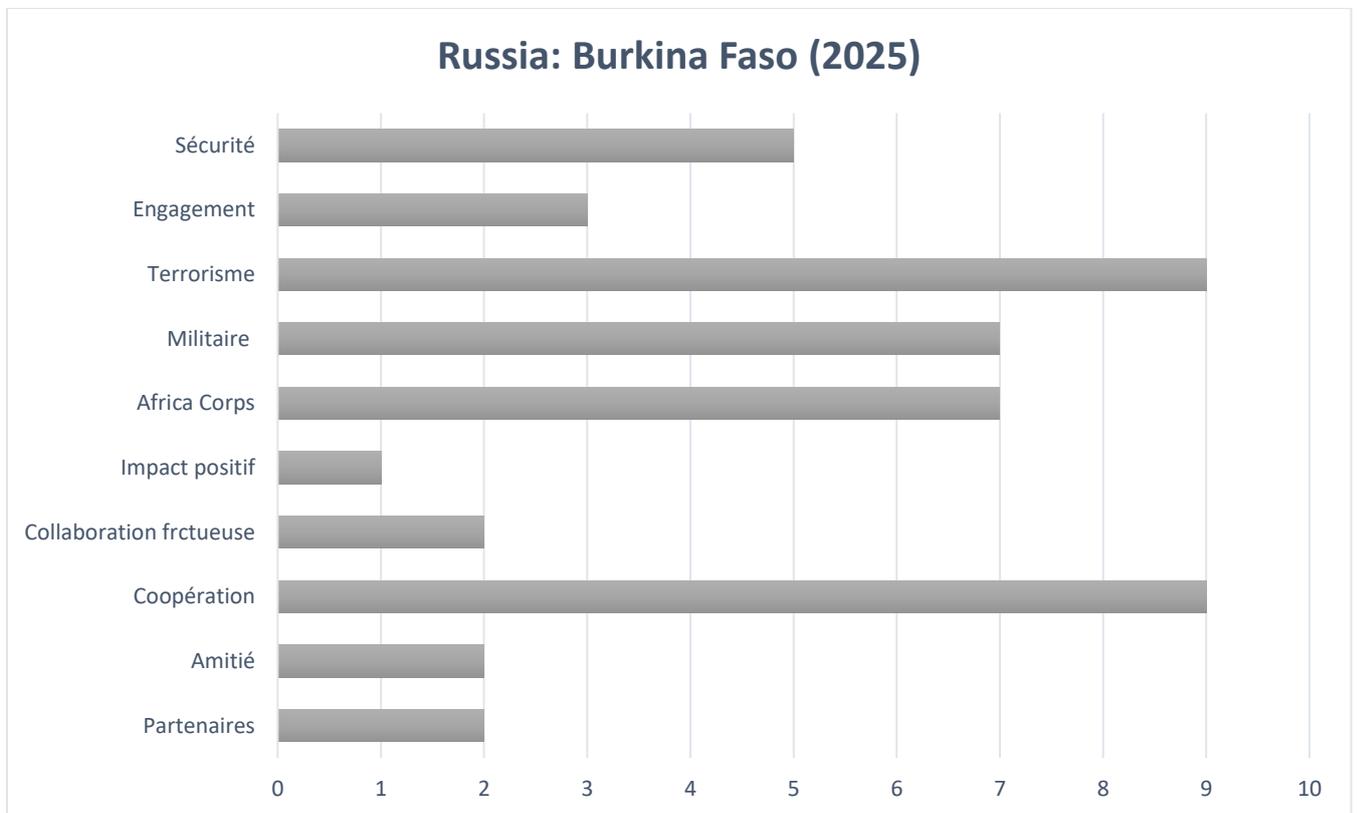
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Figure 109. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mauritania (2025)



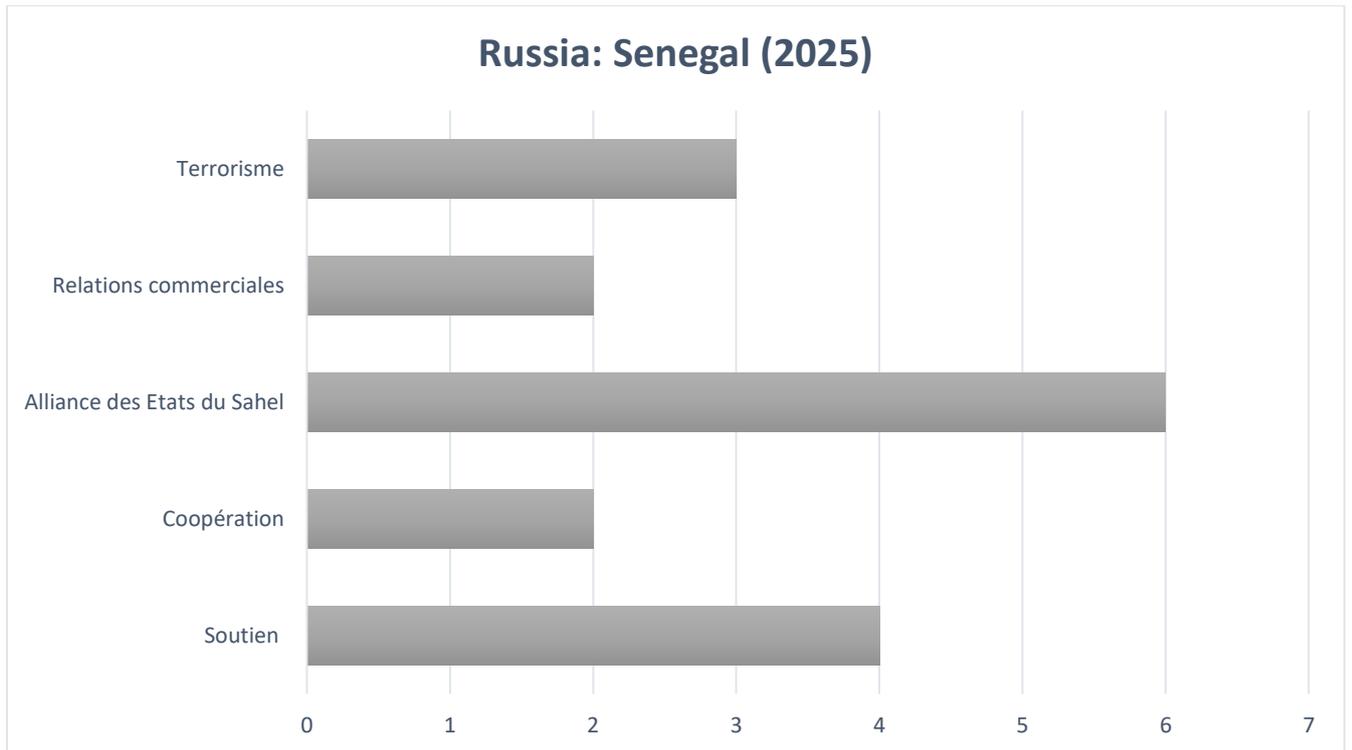
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Figure 110. Vocabulary describing Russia in Burkina Faso (2025)



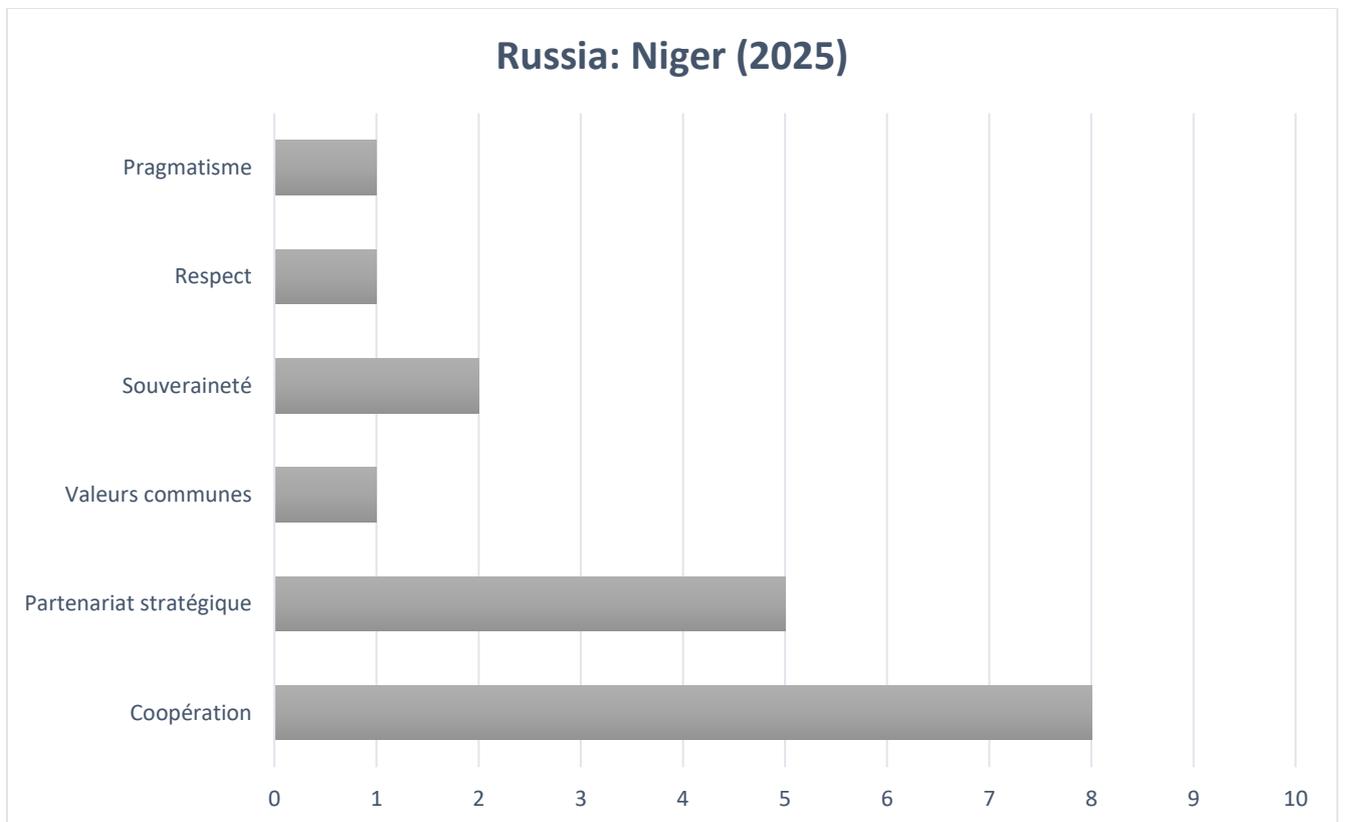
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Figure 111. Vocabulary describing Russia in Senegal (2025)



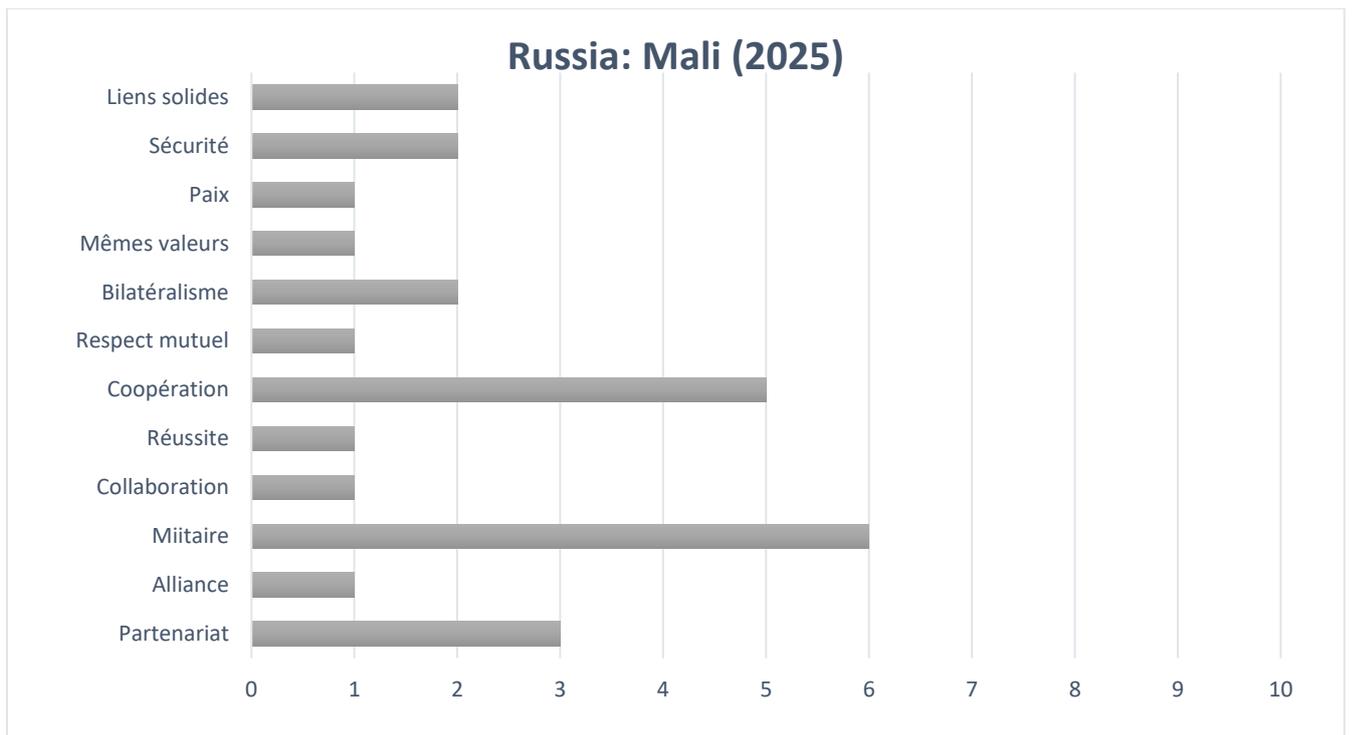
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Figure 112. Vocabulary describing Russia in Niger (2025)



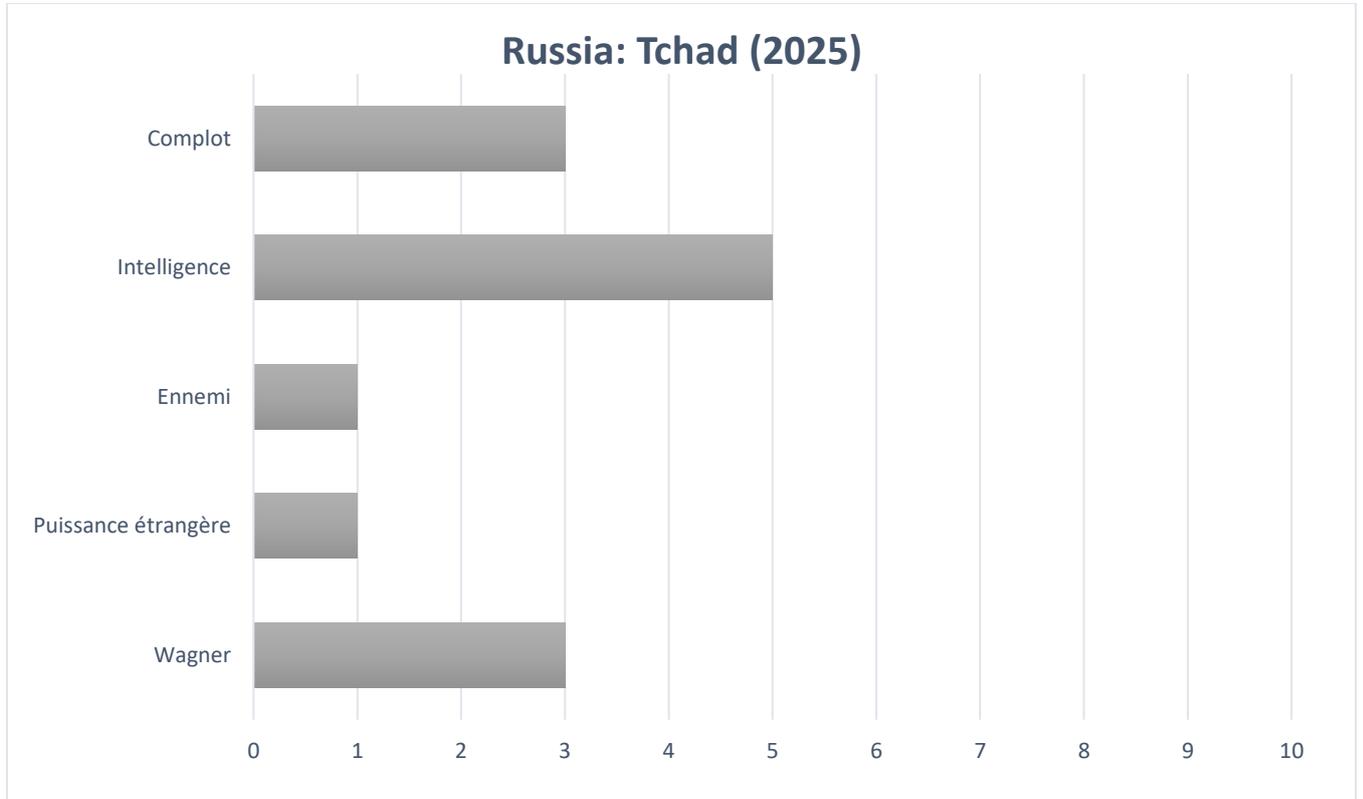
(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 113. Vocabulary describing Russia in Mali (2025)



(Source: Author's elaboration)

Figure 114. Vocabulary describing Russia in Chad (2025)



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Executive Summary

This thesis examines the decline of French influence in the Sahel from 2012 to 2025. It focuses on how Sahelian media portrayed France's security policies and compares these views with perceptions of other international actors, namely the European Union, China, and Russia. The research aims to explain why France, once seen as the region's primary security provider, came to be viewed as a neocolonial intruder, while Russia mostly but also China and the European Union to some extent gained significance in both public discourse and political decisions. By systematically studying Sahelian media, this work highlights local perspectives and demonstrates that legitimacy and public perception play a crucial role in shaping security outcomes and influencing shifting alliances in this fragile region.

The Sahel is a vast region spanning approximately 5,500 kilometres, extending from the Sahara Desert in the north to the Sudanian zone in the south. While it can include up to ten countries, this study focuses on six: Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. These countries form the core of the Sahel, where issues of security, governance, and development come together. Five of them, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, joined the G5 Sahel in 2014 to coordinate counterterrorism efforts and development, while Senegal, although not a member, has served as a key logistical hub and a stable democracy. Together, these six countries exhibit the primary characteristics of the Sahel's crisis, including insurgencies, coups, foreign interventions, and external competition, while also following their own distinct political trajectories.

The Sahel is a region of both promise and major challenges. It is rich in natural resources and has a young, growing population. However, it also faces challenges such as desertification, poverty, food shortages, weak governance, and frequent crises. These issues have been exacerbated by insurgencies, instability, and climate shocks, drawing global attention and prompting foreign intervention. After armed groups took over northern Mali in 2012, international involvement grew. France started Operation Serval in 2013 to stop jihadist advances, then expanded with Operation Barkhane in 2014. Barkhane was France's biggest overseas military mission in years, but it fell short. Security continued to decline, highlighting the limitations of foreign-led counterterrorism efforts.

By 2022, France's presence in the Sahel faced growing opposition. Military bases closed, defence agreements ended, and French troops were expelled from the Sahel. The end of Barkhane was a turning point for both France's role and the region's security setup. Meanwhile, other actors gained influence. The European Union focused on training and development, while China built its position through investment and infrastructure. Russia, on the other hand, became a popular security partner by employing both practical and symbolic strategies.

This research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse how Sahelian media have reflected these changes. It reviews over more than five hundred articles from major French-language outlets in the six countries. The study measures whether the articles are positive, neutral, or negative, and counts the frequency of words such as "sovereignty," "cooperation," "colonialism," and "partnership." It also examines the stories behind these words, focusing on how the legitimacy of different actors was built, questioned, or defended. This approach combines broad trends with deeper insights from the media.

The findings reveal a clear difference between how France and its competitors were seen. France's image changed sharply. At first, during Serval and the beginning of Barkhane, French actions were often viewed positively and even with gratitude for stopping jihadist advances. But this view faded quickly. As security deteriorated, the media began to view France as ineffective, self-serving, and even partly responsible for the ongoing problems. Accusations of neocolonialism became common, with criticism of resource use, political interference, and cultural influence through groups like the Francophonie. By the time French troops withdrew between 2022 and 2025 most articles about France were negative. It was no longer seen as a partner, but as a symbol of outside control and failed intervention.

The European Union was depicted in a very different light. Its representation was strikingly stable and largely neutral. Coverage described the EU as a technical, bureaucratic partner, primarily engaged in humanitarian aid, development support, and training missions. Positive perceptions centred on its multilateral and non-coercive approach, while negative commentary highlighted its conditionalized help, particularly on migration and its lack of strategic ambition. Crucially, the EU never became a source of strong emotions, neither resented as neocolonial nor admired as a sovereign ally. It was tolerated as a useful but uninspiring presence, often portrayed as little more than an extension of France.

China's image was shaped by its focus on development. The media often highlighted Chinese infrastructure projects, investments, and discussions of South-South solidarity. Most coverage

was positive, showing China as a partner that brought real benefits without interfering in politics. Still, some scepticism remained. Critics warned about debt, lack of transparency, environmental harm, and resource use. These concerns did not erase China's mostly positive image, but they showed its legitimacy was fragile. China was seen as a good economic option, but not fully trusted as a friendly partner.

Russia's rise was especially notable. Before 2018, Russia was rarely mentioned in Sahelian media, but by 2024, it had become highly visible and well-regarded. Even with global criticism of its war in Ukraine, Sahelian outlets covered Russia mostly in a positive light. The media described Russia as a strong military partner, a defender of sovereignty, and a symbol of resistance to Western control. Words like "cooperation," "partnership," and "Wagner" were common, showing both Russia's actions and its image as an anti-colonial force. This popularity came partly from disinformation campaigns disseminated on social media, and from genuine dissatisfaction with France. It is challenging to determine how much public opinion in the Sahel is shaped by local sentiments or external influences, which remains a gap for future research.

In summary, the findings show three main reasons for the changing alliances and France loss of influence in the region. First, military solutions were rejected, as attested by the withdrawal of French troops and the termination of defence deals. Second, neocolonial practices were refused, with more criticism of economic control, resource use, and cultural influence. Third, France's soft power decreased as anti-French sentiments intensified and its new strategies mostly failed to resonate with local people. At the same time, Russia was seen as a symbol of sovereignty and resistance, China as a development partner, and the EU as a neutral but less notable presence.

This thesis makes three main contributions. First, it focuses on Sahelian voices, demonstrating how local media shape perceptions of legitimacy and challenge external actors. Second, it shows that legitimacy and public opinion are central to security studies. In the Sahel, military outcomes cannot be understood without considering ideas of sovereignty and neocolonialism. Third, it situates the Sahel within the broader context of global competition, where both old and new powers compete for influence and importance.

The study suggests that France should adopt a different approach. Military power alone no longer works. France needs to acknowledge and address the harm caused by its colonial and neocolonial history. It should focus more on long-term development, inclusive governance, and on supporting African-led efforts. France also needs to adapt to a world with many strong

players, learning from the EU's neutrality, China's focus on tangible benefits but without dependency, and Russia's use of sovereignty as a symbol, while avoiding close ties to authoritarian regimes.

The conclusion also identifies directions for future research. Expanding the scope to neighbouring regions such as the Gulf of Guinea or North Africa, and incorporating actors like the United States, Turkey, or the Gulf States, would allow for a richer comparative perspective on legitimacy and contestation. Equally important is a closer investigation of disinformation campaigns and influence operations. These strategies increasingly shape local perceptions and, by extension, security dynamics, yet their precise impact remains elusive. Addressing this gap would help clarify the extent to which narratives of sovereignty and resistance are rooted in authentic local grievances or amplified by external manipulation.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the Sahel is not merely a region afflicted by serious security issues, but also a place where legitimacy is constantly tested. External actors are accepted or rejected not only for their military or economic power, but also for how well they align with local hopes for sovereignty and dignity. By examining media and public opinion, this research reveals that security encompasses more than counterterrorism or development. It is also about stories, legitimacy, and the meaning of partnership. France's decline in the Sahel demonstrates that, without legitimacy, even powerful states cannot maintain their influence.