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The Role of Domestic Control in Proxy War Realignment

A Case Study of Chad and Mali

Proxy war research is a growing field within International Relations theory. This paper focuses on proxy war realignment: the strategic decision of a proxy actor to shift its alignment to a rival sponsor, typically occurring in the context of great power competition. The selected case studies are both relevant and instructive: while Mali exemplifies a sharp pivot away from previous French and broader Western alignment toward Russia, Chad (thus far) avoided a similar break by pursuing cautious hedging among external partners, despite a significantly smaller-scale European intervention and France's recent military withdrawal. Building upon existing academic explanations, this paper places the emphasis on domestic political control as the decisive variable driving realignment, offering both timely and pragmatic insights into whether external intervention can achieve its intended outcome in the Sahel region.

Keywords: proxy war, Sahel region, Chad, Mali, EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali, proxy war realignment, great power competition, military intervention

Introduction

The Sahel region has undergone fundamental political shifts in recent years, while also emerging as a key battleground for competing geopolitical interests. With France's influence waning, alternative security partnerships are gaining traction – most notably Russia's expanding role in Mali, and the region presents a compelling case for analysing sponsor-proxy realignment. Additionally, these shifts potentially reflect not only changing partnerships, but evolving patterns in how regimes manage external ties and internal power.

This paper aims to challenge sponsor-centric explanations of proxy realignment by shifting the emphasis to the internal political structure of the proxy state. Using Mali and Chad as comparative cases, it argues that elite cohesion and regime control – and primarily not sponsor leverage or great power competition – decisively shape alignment outcomes. The ability of proxy regimes to enforce elite consensus and convert foreign support into a source of domestic control determines whether alignment is preserved or ruptured. This approach reframes realignment not as a reaction to what sponsors do, but as a product of how host governments manage internal cohesion and external dependency.

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Mali and Chad represent two divergent cases. Both experienced sustained French military engagement, regional insurgencies, and political instability, yet only one exited the Western security orbit unequivocally. Despite receiving substantially greater political support, military assistance and foreign development funding, Mali expelled European Union and U.S. forces and deepened ties with Russia, while Chad maintained a hedging strategy toward great powers. The goal of this study is to explain this divergence. While Chad may appear to be the regional exception, it is treated here as the default: historically, proxies more often continue alignment than abandon it.²

Research scope and approach

This paper uses a comparative case study design centred on Mali and Chad. Burkina Faso and Niger are included as secondary reference points to help situate the main cases along a broader spectrum of alignment behaviour. They are not analysed in depth but serve to illustrate partial convergence toward either end.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data – on natural resource rents, government revenue, arms imports, and defence spending – are used to capture structural capacity and variation across cases. This is combined with qualitative analysis of regime structure, elite bargaining, and the political management of foreign sponsorship. The aim is to trace how domestic control shapes alignment outcomes beyond surface-level shifts in rhetoric or policy.

Theoretical framework and literature review

This section introduces key theoretical frameworks relevant to proxy war realignment, and defines the core terms used throughout the paper. These concepts – alignment, elite cohesion, and domestic control – are not treated descriptively, but as structured variables that guide the comparison between Mali and Chad. While not all of them can be fully operationalised across cases, the paper draws on both quantitative indicators and qualitative patterns to make their analytical role as explicit as possible.

Prevailing explanations

While each of the following theories captures a portion of the variance in sponsor-proxy behaviour in the Sahel, they tend to overstate their explanatory power. Rather than disowning them, this paper treats these theories as important contributing factors, but not the decisive causes of realignment.

² Abbas Farasoo (2021): *Rethinking Proxy War Theory in IR: A Critical Analysis of Principal-Agent Theory*. *International Studies Review*, 23(4), 1844.

Sponsor mismanagement

In their 2025 article, European academics Edoardo Baldaro and Francesco Strazzari focus on Western engagement in the Sahel. They argue that an overly securitised intervention model – fragmented, sponsor-driven, and politically incoherent – reflected Europe's own internal contradictions. Additionally, they were shaped more by institutional logic than political needs. Rather than reinforcing host state legitimacy, these external programmes often sidelined national institutions. In Mali, this dynamic produced a growing sense of mistrust, ultimately pushing the regime toward alternative alignments and resistant to adaptation.³

Great power competition

Laura Rajosefa (2023) examines how shifting patterns of strategic competition have altered alignment behaviour in the Sahel. She argues that Russia's increased presence – through arms transfers, training programmes, and political engagement – coincided with the retreat of Western forces and created a new space for realignment. Rather than coercion, the author emphasises timing and opportunity: regimes acted when Western security guarantees weakened, and Russia offered material support without political conditions. In this reading, realignment reflects a pragmatic recalibration in response to changing international incentives, not necessarily an ideological shift.⁴

Rejection of Western political terms

In their 2023 article, Jack Watling and Nina Wilén shifts the great power focus to ideological alignment. They argue that Sahelian military elites have grown increasingly resistant to the political conditions attached to Western partnerships. These include expectations around democratisation, civil-military reform, and liberal governance – terms often viewed by local actors as intrusive and misaligned with regime survival. As these regimes consolidate power internally, they prefer partners who offer material support without demanding political concessions. Russia's growing presence, in this view, reflects not just strategic opportunity but a deliberate choice to avoid Western conditionality.⁵

A dynamic relationship

Much of the earlier paradigms on proxy war have leaned heavily on great power-centric models, assuming a top-down relationship in which sponsors dictate and proxies

³ Baldaro, Edoardo – Strazzari, Francesco (2025): *Strategic Misalignment: European Security and P/CVE Engagement in the Sahel*. *Mediterranean Politics*, 30(3), 639–649.

⁴ Rajosefa, Laura (2023): *The Future of Strategic Competition in the Sahel Region: Placing Partnership First*. Maxwell, Alabama: Air University Press, 11–19.

⁵ Watling, Jack – Wilén, Nina (2024): *Assessing the Causes of Strategic Realignment in Sahelian States*. *RUSI Journal*, 169(4), 64–68.

implement. More recent scholarship questions that premise. Rather than treating proxies as controlled extensions of sponsor power, these newer frameworks emphasise contested, negotiated, and sometimes reciprocal forms of influence and alignment. This shift is central to how this paper approaches realignment – not as a breakdown of strategy, but as a product of shifting leverage and domestic policy.

Sara Plana develops the concept of bidirectional control, in which influence flows both from sponsor to proxy and from proxy to sponsor across the lifespan of the relationship. She outlines three strategies – issue-specific control, behavioural constraint, and preference-shaping – that vary in cost and effectiveness. Issue-specific control applies to short-term, targeted actions where the sponsor intervenes to direct discrete operations or decisions – such as launching an attack or avoiding a specific engagement. Behavioural constraint refers to limiting available choices of a proxy through incentives, disincentives, or material dependencies, aiming to steer behaviour without explicit orders. Preference-shaping involves aligning the proxy's strategic outlook with that of the sponsor, typically through early conditioning, training, or narrative framing, so that control becomes embedded rather than imposed.⁶ This conceptual distinction shall be helpful to demonstrate differences between Chad's and Mali's bidirectional relationships. Crucially, her model also highlights how proxies retain leverage throughout the conflict, shaping not only operational decisions but also the long-term strategic behaviour of the sponsor.⁷

Afghan scholar and former diplomat Abbas Farasoo offers further refinement of proxy war theory by shifting the focus inward – toward the proxy state's own political system. Rather than seeing alignment as the outcome of external coercion, he frames it as a contested process within the proxy regime itself. Competing elites seek to define which external alignment serves their interests and use foreign affiliation as a tool in domestic power struggles.⁸ This makes alignment not simply a reaction to sponsor pressure, but a reflection of who controls the decision-making apparatus inside the state. In Mali, this internal contestation became especially visible after the 2020 and 2021 coups, when rival factions leveraged foreign backing to consolidate authority.

Domestic control as the key determinant

Following the curve within the literature, the final section of the theoretical framework introduces domestic control not just as a background variable – but as a decisive precondition for sustained alignment. Even in cases of high sponsor commitment – measured in material support, force deployments, or political backing – external support cannot be converted into strategic continuity if the regime cannot enforce it internally. Without internal control, sponsorship leaks, fragments, or turns into a liability.

⁶ Plana, Sara (2024): Controlling Proxies An Analytical Framework. In Moghadam, Assaf – Rauta, Vladimir – Wyss, Michel (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*. London: Routledge, 220–222.

⁷ Plana 2024: 220.

⁸ Farasoo 2021: 1849, 1853.

Louis-Alexandre Berg and Andrew Radis's research on external assistance in weak states offers a foundation for conceptualising both domestic control and elite cohesion as decisive variables in proxy alignment. Drawing on cases from West Africa, he makes the case that foreign security support is not absorbed into neutral institutions, but instead filtered through elite networks that determine its strategic utility or distortion. What matters, then, is not simply whether aid arrives – but whether internal political actors can consolidate and manage it effectively.⁹

According to this framework – and applied to this paper – domestic control can be conceptualised as the regime's capacity to concentrate external and internal resources by filtering them through elite networks whose cohesion and bargaining arrangements shape state behaviour. For the quantitative dimension of this study, domestic control is measured through indicators that reflect the government's ability to mobilise resources at scale: the volume of arms imports, the absolute size of public revenue, its share of GDP, and the degree to which natural resource rents are captured by the regime. These serve as practical markers of whether external support is likely to be absorbed into a coherent political structure – or dissipated through fragmentation and rival factions.

This logic is especially evident in Chad, where regime continuity has long depended not on institutional strength or broad legitimacy, but on controlling how foreign support and state resources are distributed. As Darrin McDonald (2024) describes, Idriss Déby's government operated as a "neopatrimonial gatekeeping" regime – one that managed external aid and oil revenues through personal networks and military patronage. Foreign partnerships were not embraced for their values or security benefits alone, but for their role in reinforcing the regime's internal power. This model persisted after Déby's death, as Mahamat Déby's transitional government inherited both the external alliances and the gatekeeping logic that sustained them. McDonald shows how this strategy allowed Chad to maintain foreign alignment through regime change – not because of sponsor insistence, but because the government remained able to control access, suppress rivals, and present itself as a reliable partner on its own terms.¹⁰

Resource structures as instruments of political control

Theory describes important, yet interpretative terms tied to domestic control; such as *elite network cohesion*, *neopatrimonial gatekeeping*, and the *regime's capacity to concentrate internal and external resources*. Before we turn back into the qualitative assessment of these terms in the context of our case studies, let us take a comprehensive, realist look at what resources we are talking about, the degree of their centralisation, and the comparative trends between the two countries.

⁹ Berg, Louis-Alexandre – Radin, Andrew (2023): *Elite Capture and Corruption of Security Sectors*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 11–19; Berg, Louis-Alexandre (2020): *Elite Bargains and External Influence: Security Assistance and Civil–Military Relations in Post-War Liberia and Sierra Leone*. *Civil Wars*, 22(2–3), 275–277.

¹⁰ McDonald, Darrin Patrick (2024): *Transition Meets Instability: Chad after Idriss Déby Itno*. *Third World Quarterly*, 45(11), 1760–1764.

Mali and Chad are located at similar latitude in a transition zone between the sub-Saharan desert and savannah. Although the fractured territorial conditions were the heritage of colonisation, their social and economic consequences continue to shape the present. In both countries, while the north is dominated by nomadic lifestyles, the south can be characterised by agriculture and major urban population centres. This fracture is strengthened by multiple layers, such as religion and ethnicity – Tuaregs and Arabs in northern Mali with the Bambara in the south; and in Chad, the Zaghawa and Toubou in the north, with the Sara concentrated in the south. These agrarian populations in the south – with the highest relative majority – are historically linked to the seat of government, anchoring regimes that rule over far more diverse and contested peripheries. (Almost as if British and French colonial powers purposefully chose to lock into single political units these obvious fractions through the divide and conquer principle.) Despite all instability, both countries continue to grow at one of the highest rates globally: Chad at 3.01% annually in 2024, and Mali just behind at 2.90%. This leads to a population size of 23.3 million in the case of Mali, with Chad possessing a markedly smaller 17.2 million inhabitants.

In order to analyse the material foundations of domestic control, I have compiled a time series dataset of 18 variables, covering sectors such as origin and volume of arms transfers, natural resource rents, Western foreign aid, and core macroeconomic indicators. Most of the source data comes from the International Monetary Fund (World Economic Outlook Database and Government Finance Statistics), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Development Fund (EDF), and the World Bank. All graphs were created using the statistical software R.

Mapping the political economy of Mali and Chad

The economic growth of the four Sahelian states – all affected to varying degrees by Islamist and separatist uprisings gaining traction in 2012 – has followed diverging paths. Despite having a smaller population, Chad possessed a nominal economic size of 17.9 billion USD at the start of the dataset in 2012 – the highest among the four states. This early advantage, however, did not translate into sustained growth. A descending trajectory and cyclical stagnation led to only 18.7 billion USD by 2025, marking a lost decade of economic momentum. In contrast, Niger's economy expanded from 9.4 billion to 21.8 billion USD, a 132% increase, while Mali grew from 12.4 billion to 23.2 billion USD, representing an 86% increase despite years of war and political turbulence.¹¹

¹¹ *World Development Indicators*. [online], World Bank DataBank, s. a. Source: databank.worldbank.org [06.04.2025].

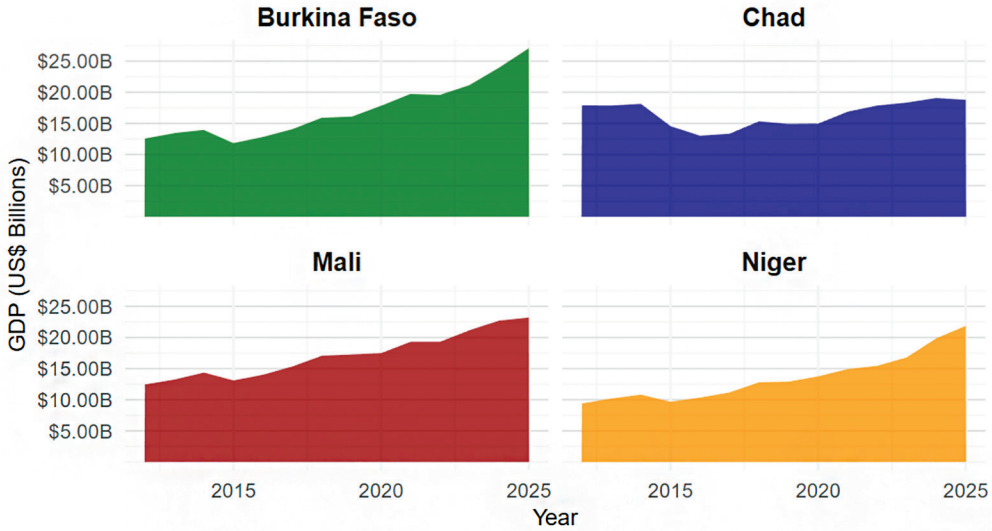


Figure 1: Nominal GDP of Sahelian states (2012–2025)

Source: compiled by the author based on *World Development Indicators*. [online], World Bank DataBank, s. a. Source: databank.worldbank.org [06.04.2025]

It is prudent to note that, starting from 2013, the European Union launched a suite of military and civilian CSDP missions in Mali, Niger, and later Burkina Faso. These included EUCAP¹² Sahel Niger (2012), EUTM¹³ Mali (2013), and EUCAP Sahel Mali (2014), with EUCAP Sahel later extended to Burkina Faso. EUTM Mali, the core military training mission, remained active until its formal suspension in November 2022. Chad, by contrast, was excluded from this mission architecture throughout the period.

Table 1: Foreign aid directed to Sahelian states between 2014–2020

Country	EDF Paid (EUR M)	EDF Paid (USD M)	USAID Disbursed (USD M)	Total Foreign Aid (USD M)	Foreign Aid as % of Annual Revenue
Mali	608.4	669.2	1,280	1,949.2	57.3
Niger	605.1	665.6	603	1,268.6	60.4
Burkina Faso	633.1	696.4	314	1,010.4	30.6
Chad	383.2	421.5	424	845.5	42.3

Source: compiled by the author based on European Commission 2023; *Foreign Assistance Dashboard*. [online], U.S. Department of State – USAID, s. a. Source: foreignassistance.gov [06.04.2025] and *Government Finance Statistics (GFS) Data Explorer*. [online], International Monetary Fund, s. a. Source: data.imf.org [06.04.2025]

¹² European Union Capacity Building Mission.

¹³ European Union Training Mission.

This omission reflected a strategic judgment: despite its role in regional counterterrorism operations, Chad faced less intensive internal insurgency than its neighbours and maintained sufficient internal control to avoid direct EU governance assistance.¹⁴

The European Development Fund (EDF) served as the EU's main development instrument, with the 11th EDF (2014–2020) covering almost the full research period. As no 12th EDF was launched, this remains the last complete funding cycle. In parallel to the EU's mission-based engagement, USAID was present throughout the region with its own set of priorities. For comparability, yearly USAID disbursements were summed for the same period to produce a cumulative total for each country. Mali received by far the largest amount – 1.95 billion USD – followed by Niger, Burkina Faso, and lastly Chad with 845.5 million USD. Over this period, foreign aid equalled more than 50% of average annual government revenue in Mali and Niger, while in Chad the ratio was 42.3% – a substantially lower share, and one that parallels its stagnant economic performance.

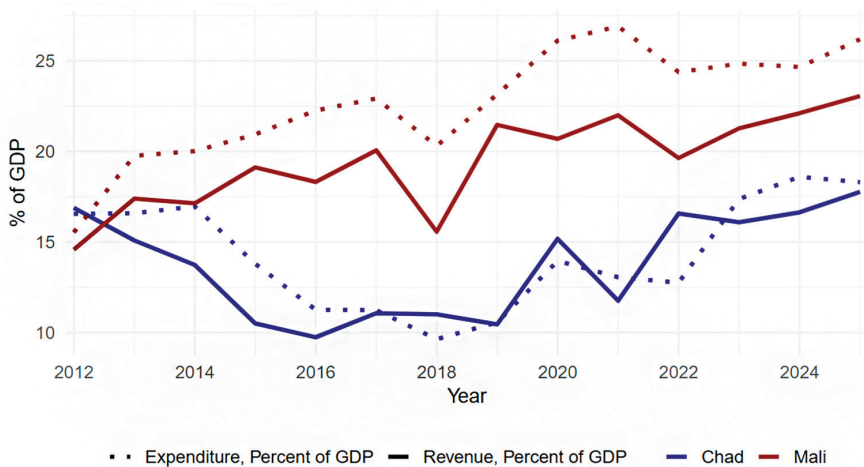


Figure 2: Government revenue vs. expenditure, captured as share of GDP

Source: compiled by the author based on International Monetary Fund s. a. and *World Development Indicators*. [online], World Bank DataBank, s. a. Source: databank.worldbank.org [06.04.2025]

Despite its stronger economic growth, Mali experienced a steady erosion of domestic control, as the government's ability to align revenue with expenditure collapsed into a permanent imbalance. The civil war institutionalised this gap, and rather than improving after the 2015 Algiers peace agreement with the MNLA,¹⁵ the situation deteriorated further following the 2020 and 2021 coups. A sharp decline in 2018 likely reflected the fiscal strain of the post-accord period, as EU funding slowed with French military operations under Operation Barkhane winding down after 2016. Chad, by contrast, preserved

¹⁴ Baldaro–Strazzari 2023: 639–649.

¹⁵ Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) / National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad.

a higher degree of domestic control, maintaining a more consistent alignment between revenue and expenditure from 2017 onward. Even with fewer resources, its regime retained authority over how they were collected and spent – avoiding the fiscal drift that consumed Mali’s post-conflict governments.

The persistent gap between revenue and expenditure – already visible in the immediate aftermath of the civil war – widened further after 2015. As EU funding commitments began to wind down¹⁶ and external coverage of state expenditure diminished, Mali’s reliance on foreign assistance became more structurally visible. While the regime remained operational, the revenue trajectory in the fiscal balance chart indicates a steady loss of internal control over state financing. In this environment, parts of the elite began to question the long-term viability of existing sponsor relationships. The political base of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta slowly eroded, not through a single rupture, but through cumulative loss of confidence – setting the conditions for eventual realignment.

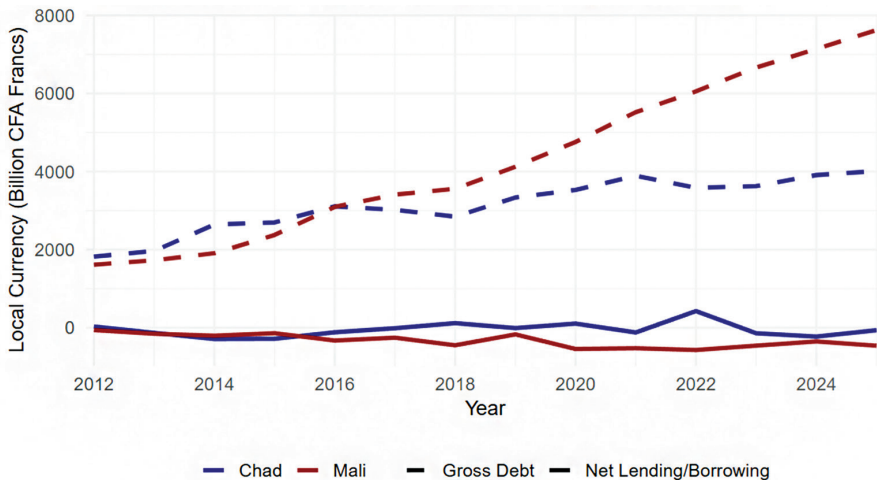


Figure 3: Fiscal leverage in domestic currency

Source: compiled by the author based on *International Monetary Fund s. a.*

As a result, gross public debt in Mali spiralled throughout the decade – the cumulative effect of a persistently negative net lending ratio. Unlike revenue, which stagnated relative to GDP, debt accumulation accelerated even after the 2015 peace deal – signalling not recovery, but deeper fiscal dependence. Chad’s public debt also increased, but at a slower, more controlled pace – reinforcing its relative insulation from externally induced fiscal imbalances.

This trajectory supports Sara Plana’s observation that overdependence on external sponsors can undermine internal control and contribute to destabilising realignment,

¹⁶ *Annual Accounts of the European Development Fund for the Financial Year 2022*. [online], European Commission, 28.06.2023. Source: europa.eu [05.04.2025], 6.

especially when resource flows are insufficient to maintain elite loyalty.¹⁷ In other words, too much aid can create a structural dependency that backfires once support is scaled back – as proven by Mali’s case.

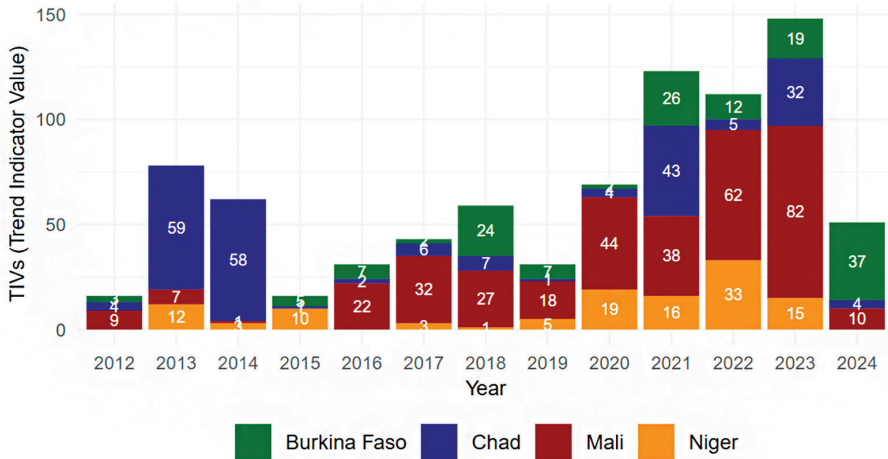


Figure 4: Arms imports by country (TIVs)¹⁸

Source: compiled by the author based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

Arms imports offer another layer of insight into external dependency and domestic control, as captured through the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database. Between 2012 and 2024, Mali registered the highest cumulative volume of arms imports among the four Sahelian states, with sharp peaks from 2020 to 2023. This surge represented not only a visible security shift following the 2020 military coup, but also an additional layer of fiscal burden atop Mali’s already deteriorating government budget.

Over the course of the 2010s – despite the presence of Western military missions and substantial aid inflows – no effective conditions were placed on the origin of arms purchases. Instead, Sahelian regimes leaned toward affordable and proven Russian designs, often delivered through Central and Eastern European exporters. In Mali’s case, Bulgaria and Czechia were the primary suppliers in the early 2010s. The decisive turn began in 2017, when Russia directly supplied over 45% of Mali’s total arms imports for that year – marking the entry of Russian influence well before the collapse of EU training missions. This early shift reflects the agency of Mali’s military leadership, which would later seize power, in pre-positioning new strategic alignments – a sign which European

¹⁷ Plana 2024: 220–221.

¹⁸ SIPRI has developed a unique pricing system to measure the volume of deliveries of major conventional weapons and components using a common unit – the SIPRI trend-indicator value (TIV). The TIV of an item being delivered is intended to reflect its military capability rather than its financial value. This common unit can be used to measure trends in the flow of arms between particular countries and regions over time – in effect, a military capability price index. The TIV is derived from the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons. *SIPRI Arms Transfers Database – Sources and Methods*. [online], Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, s. a. Source: sipri.org [07.04.2025].

sponsors failed to react to. From 2020 to 2023, Russia further consolidated this position, accounting for roughly 73% of all arms transfers, as Western presence declined.¹⁹

Chad, by contrast, sourced more modest volumes with greater supplier diversity. Its top three partners – Ukraine (2013–2014), China (2021), and Türkiye (2023) – accounted for a combined 64% of Chad’s imports between 2012 and 2024, without a single dominant supplier.²⁰ This underscores Chad’s more measured procurement behaviour, marked by lower volumes and diversified, cost-conscious sourcing.

To conclude our quantitative section, the question arises: what anchors domestic control in fractured states when foreign funding dries up? In Mali, the answer was – at least in part – that nothing replaced it. Or rather, that another sponsor stepped in to fill the void.

The cost of control

While Mali’s export revenues come primarily from raw minerals and Chad’s from crude oil, both countries exhibit oversized dependence on natural resources within their export structures. The critical difference lies in how these exports translate into domestic control. According to the data, natural resource rents represent a significantly higher share of GDP in Chad than in Mali – oscillating around 20% in Chad, while Mali remained closer to 5–8% throughout most of the observed period. This disparity matters. Despite having a smaller economy, Chad reached export revenue levels comparable to or higher than Mali, a reflection of more centralised state control over high-value resource flows. What this implies is not just greater fiscal efficiency but a fundamentally different revenue structure. Chad’s elite could rely on a high-margin, internally captured export base to maintain domestic control, while Mali could not.

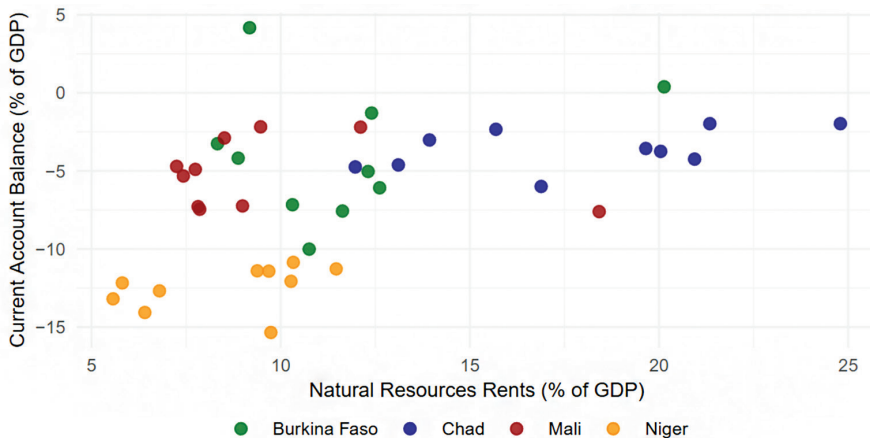


Figure 5: Natural resource dependence vs. external balance

Source: compiled by the author based on International Monetary Fund s. a.

¹⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute s. a.

²⁰ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute s. a.

In conclusion: who controls Chad's oil revenue – and how does that reinforce domestic control? As the 2024 publication of Verhoeven and Pouget-Abadie documents, oil rents are monopolised by the presidency and distributed through a militarised patronage network. From the early 2000s, partnerships with ExxonMobil, Petronas, and CNPC were structured to consolidate executive control, not development. In 2005, President Déby dismantled the World Bank's oversight system, reasserting full authority over oil revenues under the justification of national sovereignty. Since then, oil rents have flowed through elite-controlled channels, financing security forces and sustaining regime cohesion.²¹ Public services remained underdeveloped – electrification hovered around 10%, with privileged access routed through the national utility service. Western oil companies embedded themselves in this structure, enabling elite survival rather than reform. In Chad, domestic control is not merely supported by resource rents – it is built on the political management of their distribution.²²

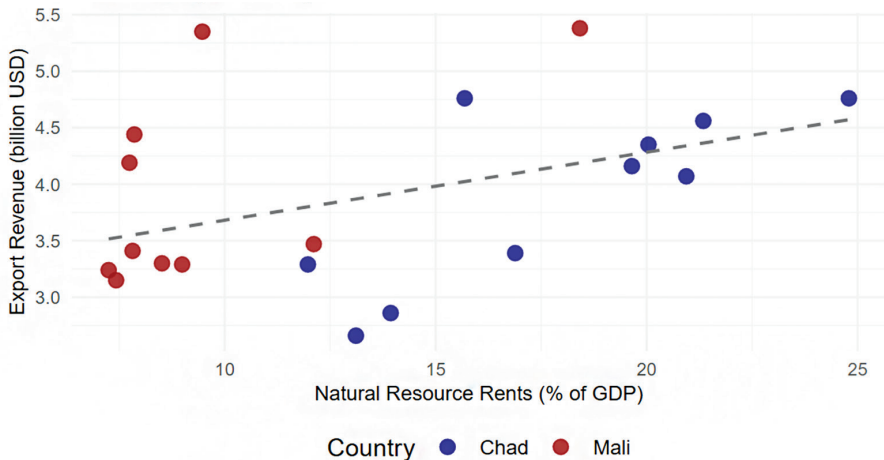


Figure 6: Natural resource rents vs. export revenue

Source: compiled by the author based on International Monetary Fund s. a.

The takeaway is structural. In Mali, domestic control was tied precariously to the continuity of Western fiscal support. When that support began to erode, no equivalent internal resource base existed to fill the gap. The government's survival required either renewed sponsor engagement or a shift in alignment. In Chad, by contrast, domestic control was not contingent on external funding streams. Despite facing similar geographic fragmentation and social division, the regime maintained autonomy through direct control over resource rents.

This distinction matters for proxy war alignment. In Mali, elite loyalty had to be underwritten by foreign support. In Chad, the conditions for alignment were already in place. The sponsor didn't need to create a new support base – it could work through the one that

²¹ Verhoeven, Harry – Pouget-Abadie, Théophile: *(No) Power to the People: Oil and the Politics of Energy Access in Chad*. [online], Center on Global Energy Policy, 05.02.2024. Source: energypolicy.columbia.edu [06.04.2025], 3–6.

²² Verhoeven – Pouget-Abadie 2024: 5.

already existed. Control over high-margin oil exports, filtered through a loyal security apparatus, allowed the regime to act with minimal external dependency. In this context, external actors were not patrons enabling stability; they were tolerated participants in a system already consolidated from within.

Both outcomes come at the cost of domestic inequality and the relative absence of internal development – one entrenched through elite consolidation, the other prolonged by recurring civil war. But the consequences diverge: one at least enables the possibility of continued Western alignment, the other contributes to destabilising realignment. This argument moves beyond the scope of this paper, yet it raises a deeper point: perhaps domestic crises, even when shaped by external sponsorship, are best addressed within the bounds of national sovereignty. External actors may influence internal dynamics, but the case studies suggest they are neither suited nor entitled to resolve them.

The limits of military partnership

After evaluating a selected range of theoretical frameworks and economic indicators, one area this proxy war paper has not yet addressed is military operations themselves. One reason for this omission is that organised violence in the region appears to be cyclical.

Chad continues to face Salafi-jihadi insurgencies in the Lake Chad Basin and intermittent clashes with northern rebel groups. Its domestic control remains intact, but the regional environment has shifted. France completed its military withdrawal from the region in 2024, leaving Chad without a Western security partner. Russia has since begun courting the Déby regime – offering arms, diplomatic support, and regime protection. In early 2024, a Chadian delegation visited Bamako to explore alignment with the pro-Russian Alliance des États du Sahel. While Chad has not formally realigned, its isolation and strategic relevance make it a likely next target – though any future shift would reflect broader great power confrontation, not solely sponsor-proxy decoupling anymore.²³

Mali experienced two coups in quick succession – first in August 2020 when Colonel Assimi Goïta removed President Keïta, and again in May 2021 when he deposed the civilian transitional authorities. Disagreements with France escalated when the Malian junta sought to conduct operations in Kidal, which French forces refused to back, citing their support for international agreements with Tuareg factions. In contrast, Russian Wagner operatives, deployed to the country by late 2021, operated directly under Malian command and engaged in over 390 joint actions, often in brutal fashion. In November 2023, Malian and Russian forces jointly retook Kidal, triggering celebrations in Bamako. This was followed a few weeks later by the formation of the Alliance des États du Sahel between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, in addition to a high-profile visit by Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov. Early 2024 saw Mali's formal exit from

²³ Karr, Liam – Gianitsos, Matthew: *Africa File, April 18, 2024: Chad is the Kremlin's Next Target in the Sahel; al Qaeda's Sahelian Affiliate Weaponizes Drones*. [online], Critical Threats Project, 18.04.2024. Source: criticalthreats.org [06.04.2025].

ECOWAS, consolidating its break from Western structures. By 2025, Russian advisors, operatives, and contracts had fully replaced European missions in Mali.²⁴

By early 2025, Tuareg separatists and militants – notably Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) – had intensified asymmetric attacks, including a significant assault on Bamako in September 2024 resulting in over 70 casualties. Meanwhile, the Wagner Group continued to expand its operational presence around Bamako's Airbase 101, constructing new barracks, fortified storage zones, and formal entrances, signalling Russia's long-term entrenchment in Mali.²⁵

Although the events above may suggest that France's failure was operational – tied to mismanagement or tactical disagreement – this paper argues that the real break preceded the crisis. The gradual unravelling of sponsor-proxy alignment took place between 2017 and 2020, as France's political allies in Bamako lost the ability to centralise control. The French acceptance of the 2020 coup was not a disruption of partnership but the beginning of the end in a succession of concessions. By the time Paris refused to support operations in Kidal, it was already resisting from a position of weakness – defending a ceasefire it could no longer enforce.

Though beyond the goals and scope of this study, it is worth briefly noting that democratic governance initiatives were unlikely to succeed in generating the necessary domestic control. These efforts faced structural limits: socially and culturally incompatible models of governance, and the absence of an established, politically active middle class either interested in or capable of sustaining the political regime. In this context, Mali's realignment was not merely the result of external disruption but the outcome of a political order that could not sustain itself. The absence of economic autonomy and elite bargains – particularly with the military – left the sponsor-proxy relationship hollow years before it formally collapsed.

The sponsor might have pursued a different approach – pragmatically siding with the military elite – but that would have meant completely forsaking the political goals of eight years of intervention. From Paris's perspective, this appeared not only as a breach of principle but as a loss of credibility as an international security provider – which, ironically, occurred either way.

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²⁴ Watling–Wilén 2024: 66–73.

²⁵ Palmer, Jared Thompson – Bermudez, Joseph S. Jr. – Jun, Jennifer: *Base Development in Mali Indicates Continued Russian Involvement*. [online], CSIS, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10.12.2024. Source: [csis.org](https://www.csis.org/analysis/base-development-in-mali-indicates-continued-russian-involvement) [06.04.2025].

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