

Research Report

Forum: Security Council
Issue: Addressing the rise of Proxy warfare in the
contemporary Sahel region
Student Officer: Lotus Veltman
Position: Main Chair



LMUNA

Lorentz Lyceum
Model United Nations
Arnhem

Introduction

“Addressing the Rise of Proxy Warfare in the Contemporary Sahel Region”

Proxy warfare is a way for powerful countries to influence or fight in conflicts without directly fighting themselves. They can support other groups or governments with money, weapons, training or military support. This can be beneficial for the countries involved, because they have less risk for their own soldiers and less political consequences. However, the people living in the conflict area often experience most of the consequences.

The Sahel is a good example of this. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have experienced years of instability, insurgencies and involvement from foreign powers. France, the United States and Russia have all been involved in different ways, while groups such as JNIM and ISSP continue to operate in the region. Despite many attempts to improve the situation, the conflict and instability continue.

This raises the question of whether foreign involvement and proxy warfare are helping to solve the conflict in the Sahel, or whether they are contributing to its continuation. In this document, we will look at the causes and consequences of proxy warfare in the Sahel, previous attempts to solve the conflict and possible alternative solutions.

Definitions of key terms

Proxy warfare

A conflict in which external parties support local or regional ones to weaken the underlying third party or to pursue their own political interest without direct engagement in warfare itself.

Alliance of Sahel States

A political and security alliance formed by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso

Africa corps

A Russian state-controlled military/security structure that operates in several African countries and took over many of the functions previously associated with Wagner in Africa.

Foreign intervention

The involvement of another external state in the affairs of another country; politically, economically or on military base.

Insurgency

An organized attempt by an armed group to challenge or overthrow a government or its authority.

Jihadist groups

Armed groups that use a militant interpretation of jihad as justification for political or territorial objectives.

General overview

While proxy warfare often offers advantages for the governments of countries from afar, it results in many casualties at places where victims couldn't defend themselves. Often the count of victims is seemingly higher in the countries where the war takes place rather than the countries supporting the conflict. With this, countries have more influence and less victims, making it more attractive to take a step further, without its political risks. Due to this chain, proxy warfare often escalates beyond its original intentions, with a higher count of casualties and harm.

Proxy warfare

The term proxy warfare comes from the Middle English word *procuracie*, meaning the office or agency of someone who acts as a substitute. Present-day, the word *proxy* means almost the same: a person, document or system authorized to act as a substitute for another.

The concept of proxy warfare in total is a military conflict in which outside parties' support the combatants without the direct use of forces or engaging into significant fighting. The third parties often singularly support the fighting party to indirectly fight the other third party, supporting the other sight. Often engaging in these acts makes war more complicated, it takes risks with it, resulting in direct victims, loss of money, significant economic downfall.

Proxy warfare allows powerful countries to indirectly weaken their rivals without directly engaging in war. By providing weapons, training, funding or other resources to a proxy, a country can increase the pressure on its opponent while avoiding the risks of direct confrontation. This can be especially attractive when the opposing country is also a powerful state, as direct conflict could result in major military, economic and political consequences. In this way, proxy warfare can be used as a strategy to reduce a rival's influence or military capabilities without directly attacking them.

Proxy warfare is often attractive for high achieving and powerful countries due some of the following reasons.

- Less risks for own soldiers; while countries are joining and supporting the war, it does not take place on their own territory, meaning they do not feel obligated to use own soldiers in the current fight. While they often use trained military forces as resources for the fighting parties, they significantly have less to lose.
- Limit political consequences; countries directly involved in a war often suffer not only physical damage, but also significant political consequences. Direct involvement often leads to criticism, limitations, sanctions and opposition from other parties. Proxy warfare gives an opportunity to reduce these consequences, while still perusing their interests and goals.
- More cost-effective; the amount of money can come up to millions, even billions of euros to make a military operation possible. It takes materials (how they were made, maintenance, components), infrastructure and its surroundings, personnel (training,

equipment, care), etc. All ask for continuous money input. By using a proxy these will not be your first requirement and concerns to participate in a war.

Status quo in Sahel region

The current status quo in the Sahel region has been considered far from stable. Different weaponed conflicts are taking place as well as terroristic groups taking the lead in a variety of places. There are weak and instable government who can't fully keep the power to themselves while changing up diversion in power. Combining its weak state institutions:

- insurgent groups
- terrorist organizations
- militias
- foreign-backed armed groups

with the current conflicts in the regio which makes it a weak link to its surroundings and inhabitants, creating a pleasing weak link to gain power and regard.

The area is not only seen as a weak link to inhabitants and powerful surrounding groups, but it has also been a great way for powerful countries to make a move further into their economy, giving them the opportunity to take over and fight against other world powers. Take for instance China, USA, Russia and a variety of European countries, who each take part in supporting warfare on its own manners. They support their party, supply tactics, money, materials and people in order to strengthen their sides.

Further than its weak economy, the Sahel region is targeted for its many economic advantages. It contains of sever resources, including the winnings of uranium, gold and oil. Moreover, powerful countries use it often as a step stool to get more involvement. The region offers it strategic trade routes which open the world and deliver loads of resources.

Statistics, trends and case studies

Modern examples of sanctuaries include China for the United States during the Korean War; Pakistan for both Soviet and US troops during their respective deployments in Afghanistan; Syria and Iran for US troops during the Iraq War; and Poland for Russian forces in the current Ukraine war.

In each of those instances, the safe adjacent sanctuary territory allowed the proxy a virtually indestructible ability to regenerate and resupply their forces. During the Korean War, North Korean troops could slip into China to avoid being targeted by UN forces. During the Afghanistan campaign, Taliban fighters could retreat into Pakistan to regroup and rearm, with little risk of Pakistani or US pursuit.

Furthermore, the proxy warfare has been a tactic used in all centuries, including today's. Currently some significant proxies are the Ukrainian war, the middle east, Yemen's civil conflict and in Syria where Western coalitions, Russia, Turkey and Iran support various domestic groups.

Human, Social economic and Political impact

Consequently, the status quo in the region makes it a risky situation for the population to live in. Repeatedly war, influence of powerful countries and political plays take a toll on its region as well as its inhabitants. Loads of civilian casualties take place, resulting in uncountable amounts of deaths, losses of homes and family members. Heartbreaking ground such as displacements. Human rights violation and economic instability take direct consequences on those who first lived their, considered the place as their home. In addition, not only lives are taken, but the foundation of them as well. While wars are happening, in the Sahel region infrastructure is destructed and prolonged conflicts take place, all results of higher powers who set a step further because they do not have a lot to lose.

Major parties involved

Alliance of Sahel States (AES): Mali, Niger & Burkina Faso

Officially the Confederation of Sahel states, made up on September 23rd. It is a joint military force with skilled up significantly in personnel. The main goal is to combat regional Jihadist insurgencies linked to ISIL.

They expelled the French and US military from the territories to secure cooperations and back from external partners such as Russia.

Russia

Russia is one of the major parties in the proxy wars of the Sahel regions. It expelled Western influence to become the primary security partner for local military regimes. They secure a strategic foothold against NATO and western influence and with its tactics try to counter both. Moreover, they replaced the French and U.S. troops after coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

France

Because of the colonial past, the French were historically the region's dominant political, economic and military superpower. It stayed and kept an enormous influence on the region. They tried to make peace beforehand with different kind of coups; however, Russia successfully found its loss a weak point and tried to blame France as an occupying, exploitative force.

USA

USA is one of the most prominent participants of the proxy warfare, in which its goal is to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda. Furthermore, is the USA one of the most funding and active countries in the region, in which drones, soldiers and significant amounts of money are transmitted to certain regions.

JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin)

JNIM, or in English “group for the support of Islam and Muslims” fights to overthrow local governments and aim to implement strict Islamic law. The name is a fusion from 4 Jihadistic groups

African Union

The African Union aims to deescalate and help where necessary. It works as a political mediator and logistics coordinator. It is formally a bridge between military groups and countries. The African Union helps with rebuild, holding up conflicts and more.

Timeline of Key Events

2013	French intervention in Mali; Operation Serval. France is directly taking military action towards the jihadists and rebel groups which marks the beginning of a prolonged involvement of significant foreign military involvement within the region.
2017	Formation of JNIM: eventually developing into the center were external support and military interventions circle around.
2020-21	Military coups brought a junta to power and led to increasingly strained relations with France and other Western partners, creating greater space for Russian involvement.
2022	Military coups in Burkina Faso which further weakened the Western influence, creating more space for the Russian federation.
2023	Coup in Niger and Western withdrawal
2023-24	Expansion of Russian involvement, with Wagner Group and Africa corps providing security support to governments in the region.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

French military intervention > Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane

France intervened directly in Mali in 2013 through a special operation: Operation Serval, where

jihadist forces advanced toward the south. The immediate objective of stopping the advance and taking the northern areas was intervened and stopped successfully, however its underlying political and governance problems remained a problematic area, staying unresolved. In 2014, the operation was stopped and replaced by a larger, more regional operation: Operation Barkhane

Involvement and the support of the Russians and the shift away from Western intervention

After the military governments made French and other Western forces take a step back from involvement, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger turned towards Russia for military assistance and tactical involvement. Russia representing a form of external involvement and can therefore be seen part of the wider proxy-warfare dynamic. However, increased military support has not stopped the expansion of JNIM and ISSP, therefore, still not solving the current problem.

Regional cooperation through G5 Sahel and ECOWAS

Regional states attempted to coordinate their response through organizations such as the **G5 Sahel**, while ECOWAS used diplomatic and economic pressure, particularly after military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These efforts were intended to create regional stability, but political disagreements and the coups weakened regional cooperation. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger eventually withdrew from ECOWAS in January 2025 and formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Possible solutions

For possible solution, we encourage to avoid simply searching for solutions in “more military cooperation”, looking back into previous failed attempts, these were often failed attempts. Instead, try to argue on amendments where you investigate why proxy warfare keeps becoming necessary in the first place.

Furthermore, here are several options to investigate.

□ **Strengthen local governance and state legitimacy**

□ **Reduce reliance on militias and proxies**

Governments should be discouraged from outsourcing security to poorly controlled militias. Such groups can commit abuses against civilians and intensify ethnic tensions, creating new grievances and potentially helping groups such as JNIM recruit.

□ **Invest in local conflict resolution**

□ **Improve regional cooperation**

Because JNIM and ISSP operate across national borders, individual states cannot effectively deal with the problem alone. Greater intelligence sharing, coordinated border security and regional diplomacy could prevent armed groups from exploiting gaps between countries. This would be especially important given the growing cross-border activity of both groups.

□ **Make foreign assistance conditional on accountability**

Foreign countries can still provide military and economic assistance, but this support could be conditional on human-rights standards, civilian protection and political reforms.

Further reading

- 1) <https://borgenproject.org/proxy-wars-and-their-impacts/>
- 2) <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/time-running-out-civilians-africas-sahel-region-attacks-multiply>
- 3) <https://www.hoover.org/news/hoover-military-experts-chart-history-proxy-wars-ancient-greece-ukraine-and-gaza>
- 4) <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/twenty-first-century-proxy-warfare-confronting-strategic-innovation-multipolar-world/a-new-age-of-proxy-warfare/>
- 5) <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/sahel-alliance/>
- 6) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/29/what-role-has-russia-played-in-malis-security-and-the-sahel-region>

Bibliography

And further reading...

- 1) *Proxy war can have dangerous consequences*. (2014, 25 juli). The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/25/proxy-war-can-have-dangerous-consequences/>

- 2) Baugh, L.S. (2026, June 23). proxy war. Encyclopedia Britannica.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/proxy-war>
- 3) *Time running out for civilians in Africa's Sahel region as attacks multiply*. (2020, 11 juni). UNHRC. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/time-running-out-civilians-africas-sahel-region-attacks-multiply>
- 4) Rauta, V. (2026, 15 maart). *How to Think about Proxy Wars in the Twenty-first Century*. Irregular Warfare Initiative. <https://www.irregularwarfare.org/how-to-think-about-proxy-wars-in-the-twenty-first-century/>
- 5) *Wagner in the Sahel: A paramilitary, demographic, and informational threat to European security in Africa*. (2025, 14 november). Defensa. https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2383976/wagner_en_el_sahel_2025_dieceem04_eng.pdf/13fddeef-48fd-5ac2-0c66-2d2080c521b0?t=1762505869108
- 6) Alliance Sahel. (2026, 6 februari). *The Sahel Alliance, international coordination platform*. <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/sahel-alliance/>
- 7) Staff, A. J. (2026, 29 april). What role has Russia played in Mali's security and the Sahel region? *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/29/what-role-has-russia-played-in-malis-security-and-the-sahel-region>
- 8) Today, P. (2025, 15 augustus). *Russia Deepens Ties with Sahel Countries in Military Talks - Politics Today*. Politics Today. <https://politicstoday.org/russia-deepens-ties-with-sahel-countries-in-military-talks/>