

## Strategic Retrenchment and Great Power Competition in the Sahel. External Actors and the Limits of Security Governance

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### ABSTRACT

The Sahel has become one of the most prominent theatres of contemporary great power competition, where external actors pursue overlapping and often conflicting security, political, and economic agendas. Over the past decade, the region has witnessed an unprecedented concentration of international interventions, ranging from multilateral peacekeeping missions to bilateral military operations and security assistance programs. Despite this extensive external engagement, security conditions across the Sahel have continued to deteriorate.

This article examines how growing great power competition shapes security governance in fragile regions, using the Sahel as a critical case study. Drawing on the concepts of security governance and strategic retrenchment, the article argues that increasing geopolitical rivalry among external actors, particularly France, the United States, Russia, and China, has contributed to the fragmentation rather than consolidation of security governance arrangements in the region. Rather than enhancing stability, competing external strategies have undermined coordination, weakened multilateral frameworks, and reduced the effectiveness of international interventions.

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Empirically, the article analyses the evolution of external engagement in the Sahel, focusing on the withdrawal of Western military forces, the termination of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the expanding presence of non-Western actors. The findings suggest that external actors increasingly prioritize risk avoidance, domestic political considerations, and strategic signalling over long-term governance and stabilization objectives.

By situating the Sahel within the broader context of global power shifts, the article contributes to debates on the limits of external intervention and the changing nature of security governance in the Global South. It concludes that strategic retrenchment, rather than sustained engagement or effective substitution by new external actors, has become the dominant pattern shaping security outcomes in the Sahel. These dynamics offer broader insights into the challenges facing fragile regions exposed to intensified geopolitical competition.

**Keywords:** Sahel, security governance, great power competition, strategic retrenchment, external intervention

### **Repliegue estratégico y competencia entre grandes potencias en el Sahel. Los actores externos y los límites de la gobernanza de la seguridad**

#### **RESUMEN**

El Sahel se ha convertido en uno de los escenarios más prominentes de la competencia contemporánea entre grandes potencias, donde actores externos persiguen agendas de seguridad, políticas y económicas que se superponen y, a menudo, entran en conflicto. Durante la última década, la región ha sido testigo de una concentración sin precedentes de intervenciones internacionales, que van desde misiones multilaterales de mantenimiento de la paz hasta operaciones militares bilaterales y programas de asistencia en materia de seguridad. A pesar de este extenso compromiso externo, las condiciones de seguridad en todo el Sahel han seguido deteriorándose.

Este artículo examina cómo la creciente competencia entre grandes potencias configura la gobernanza de la seguridad en regiones frágiles, utilizando al Sahel como un estudio de caso crítico. Basándose en los conceptos de gobernanza de la seguridad y repliegue estratégico (*strategic retrenchment*), el artículo sostiene que la creciente rivalidad geopolítica entre los actores externos, particularmente Francia, Estados Unidos, Rusia y China, ha contribuido a la fragmentación en lugar de a la consolidación de los acuerdos de gobernanza de la seguridad en la región. En vez de mejorar la estabilidad, las estrategias externas contrapuestas han socavado la coordinación, debilitado los marcos multilaterales y reducido la efectividad de las intervenciones internacionales.

Empíricamente, el artículo analiza la evolución del compromiso externo en el Sahel, centrándose en la retirada de las fuerzas militares occidentales, la finalización de la Misión Multidimensional Integrada de Estabilización de las Naciones Unidas en Malí (MINUSMA) y la expansión de la presencia de actores no occidentales. Los hallazgos sugieren que los actores externos priorizan cada vez más la evitación del riesgo, las consideraciones políticas internas y la señalización estratégica por encima de los objetivos de estabilización y gobernanza a largo plazo.

Al situar al Sahel dentro del contexto más amplio de los cambios en el poder global, el artículo contribuye a los debates sobre los límites de la intervención externa y la naturaleza cambiante de la gobernanza de la seguridad en el sur global. Concluye que el repliegue estratégico, más que un compromiso sostenido o una sustitución efectiva por parte de nuevos actores externos, se ha convertido en el patrón dominante que define los resultados de seguridad en el Sahel. Estas dinámicas ofrecen perspectivas más amplias sobre los desafíos que enfrentan las regiones frágiles expuestas a una competencia geopolítica intensificada.

**Palabras clave:** Sahel, gobernanza de la seguridad, competencia entre grandes potencias, repliegue estratégico, intervención externa

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the Sahel has emerged as one of the most intensively internationalized security spaces in the contemporary international system. Spanning several fragile states characterized by weak governance, porous borders, and persistent insurgencies, the region has attracted sustained engagement from a wide range of external actors. Multilateral organizations, Western powers, and an increasing number of non-Western actors have sought to shape security outcomes through military interventions, peacekeeping operations, and extensive security assistance programs (International Crisis Group, 2022). Despite this dense and prolonged external presence, levels of violence and political instability across the Sahel have continued to rise, raising fundamental questions about the effectiveness of international intervention in fragile regions (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

Existing explanations for insecurity in the Sahel have traditionally emphasized local and regional drivers, including state fragility, socioeconomic marginalization, environmental stress, and the proliferation of non-state armed groups (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). While these factors remain central to understanding the region's instability, they provide only a partial account of recent developments. Increasingly, the Sahel must also be understood as a site of global geopolitical competition, where external actors pursue strategic interests that extend beyond immediate security concerns. The growing involvement of Russia and China, alongside the recalibration of Western engagement, reflects broader shifts in the international system and the renewed salience of great power rivalry (Stronski, 2019).

This article argues that the intersection of great power competition and security governance is essential for understanding contemporary dynamics in the Sahel. Rather than leading to more effective or diversified security arrangements, intensified geopolitical rivalry has contributed to the fragmentation of security governance structures. Competing external strategies have undermined coordination, weakened

multilateral frameworks, and reduced the coherence of international responses. As a result, security governance in the Sahel has become increasingly disjointed, characterized by overlapping mandates, inconsistent objectives, and declining legitimacy among local actors (Krahmann, 2003).

A central concept advanced in this article is strategic retrenchment. Faced with rising operational costs, domestic political constraints, and limited tangible results, external actors have gradually reduced their direct commitments while maintaining a selective or symbolic presence in the region. This pattern is evident in the withdrawal of Western military forces, the termination of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the growing reliance on bilateral and ad hoc security arrangements (United Nations Security Council, 2023). Contrary to expectations that new external actors would compensate for Western retrenchment, their involvement has often reinforced existing fragmentation rather than providing effective alternatives (Stronski, 2019).

By examining the Sahel as a critical case, this article contributes to broader debates on the limits of external intervention and the transformation of security governance in the Global South. It asks how great power competition reshapes patterns of external engagement in fragile regions and what consequences this has for long-term stability. The central argument is that strategic retrenchment, rather than sustained engagement or effective substitution by new external actors, has become the dominant logic shaping security outcomes in the Sahel under conditions of intensified geopolitical rivalry.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on the literature on security governance, strategic retrenchment, and great power competition. Subsequent sections analyse the roles of key external actors in the Sahel and examine how their interactions have contributed to the fragmentation of security governance. The final sections discuss the broader implications of these findings for fragile regions in the Global South and offer concluding reflections on the future of external intervention in an increasingly competitive international environment.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article analyses external engagement in the Sahel through a combined theoretical framework drawing on security governance, strategic retrenchment, and great power competition. These approaches allow for an examination of how external actors interact in fragile regions under conditions of intensified geopolitical rivalry and how such interactions shape security outcomes. Rather than treating intervention

as a linear or technical process, the framework emphasizes fragmentation, political constraints, and systemic pressures originating in the international system.

### **2.1. Security Governance in Fragile Regions**

The concept of security governance emerged in response to the growing complexity of security provision in the post–Cold War international system. It departs from state-centric models by highlighting the dispersion of authority among multiple actors, including states, international organizations, regional institutions, and non-state actors (Krahmann, 2003). In fragile regions, security governance is typically characterized by overlapping mandates, hybrid institutional arrangements, and limited hierarchical control.

Security governance frameworks emphasize coordination, shared norms, and legitimacy as key conditions for effective security provision (Avant, Finnemore, & Sell, 2010). However, in contexts marked by weak state capacity and contested authority, these conditions are rarely met. As a result, governance arrangements often remain externally driven and insufficiently embedded in local political structures. This dynamic is particularly evident in the Sahel, where security is produced through a combination of national armed forces, multilateral peacekeeping missions, bilateral military operations, and informal local actors.

Existing research demonstrates that plural security arrangements do not automatically translate into improved outcomes (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). Instead, fragmented governance frequently leads to duplication of efforts, competition among external actors, and inconsistent operational logics. In the absence of strong coordination mechanisms, security governance becomes vulnerable to political manipulation and legitimacy erosion. This article builds on the security governance literature by emphasizing that fragmentation is not only an institutional problem but also a consequence of broader geopolitical dynamics.

### **2.2. Strategic Retrenchment as a Pattern of External Engagement**

Strategic retrenchment refers to the recalibration or reduction of external commitments in response to rising costs, domestic political constraints, and limited effectiveness of intervention. Unlike abrupt withdrawal, retrenchment involves selective disengagement combined with symbolic presence, indirect influence, or reliance on local partners (Mearsheimer, 2001). It represents a strategy of risk management rather than abandonment.

In recent years, strategic retrenchment has become increasingly visible in external engagement across fragile regions. Western actors, in particular, have faced growing

scepticism toward prolonged military interventions and stabilization missions. These pressures have resulted in a shift away from large-scale deployments toward advisory roles, capacity-building initiatives, and short-term security partnerships (International Crisis Group, 2022).

In the Sahel, strategic retrenchment is evident in the drawdown of Western military forces, the termination of multilateral missions such as MINUSMA, and the increasing preference for bilateral security arrangements. Importantly, retrenchment does not necessarily signal declining strategic interest. External actors often maintain rhetorical commitments to regional stability while minimizing exposure to political and operational risks. This pattern contributes to the weakening of multilateral frameworks and reinforces fragmented governance structures.

### 2.3. Great Power Competition and the Fragmentation of Security Governance

The resurgence of great power competition constitutes a defining feature of the contemporary international system. From a realist perspective, intensified rivalry among major powers reshapes patterns of engagement across regions previously considered peripheral (Mearsheimer, 2001). The Sahel has increasingly become such a space, attracting attention from Western and non-Western actors seeking strategic influence.

Great power competition affects security governance through several mechanisms. First, rivalry undermines coordination among external actors by prioritizing relative gains over collective outcomes (Charbonneau, 2017). Second, competition encourages bilateralization, as states seek flexibility and autonomy in their engagements. Third, rivalry reduces incentives to invest in inclusive and durable governance arrangements, particularly when short-term strategic signalling offers greater returns.

In the Sahel, the growing involvement of actors such as Russia and China, has coincided with Western retrenchment rather than effective substitution (Stronski, 2019). While these actors have expanded their presence through security cooperation and economic engagement, their involvement has not compensated for the erosion of multilateral governance structures. Instead, competition among external actors has amplified institutional weaknesses and legitimacy deficits.

By integrating realist insights with the security governance literature, this article argues that great power competition accelerates strategic retrenchment and deepens governance fragmentation. Rather than producing alternative governance models, intensified rivalry undermines existing arrangements and limits the effectiveness of external intervention. This dynamic provides the analytical foundation for the empirical analysis of external actors in the Sahel presented in the following section.

### 3. EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE SAHEL

This section examines the roles of key external actors in the Sahel, France, the United States, Russia, and China, and analyses how their interactions have shaped security governance in the region. Rather than treating these actors in isolation, the section emphasizes how their differing strategic priorities and modes of engagement have contributed to the fragmentation of security governance and reinforced patterns of strategic retrenchment.

#### 3.1. France: From Military Leadership to Strategic Retrenchment

For more than a decade, France has been the most prominent external security actor in the Sahel. Through operations such as *Serval* and *Barkhane*, France assumed a leading role in counterterrorism efforts, positioning itself as the primary guarantor of regional stability (Charbonneau, 2017). French engagement combined direct military intervention with efforts to strengthen regional security architectures, particularly through cooperation with Sahelian governments and support for multi-lateral initiatives.

Despite its central role, French intervention faced mounting challenges. Persistent insecurity, limited progress in state-building, and growing anti-French sentiment among local populations undermined the legitimacy of France's presence (International Crisis Group, 2022). At the domestic level, rising political costs and scepticism regarding the effectiveness of prolonged military engagement contributed to a reassessment of France's strategy. These pressures culminated in a gradual drawdown of French forces and the eventual termination of Operation *Barkhane*.

From the perspective of security governance, France's retrenchment had significant implications. As the dominant external actor, France had functioned as a coordinating hub for multilateral and bilateral security efforts. Its withdrawal weakened existing coordination mechanisms and accelerated the shift toward bilateral and ad hoc arrangements (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). Rather than enabling a transition to more inclusive governance structures, French retrenchment contributed to institutional vacuums that other actors were ill-equipped to fill.

#### 3.2. The United States: Selective Engagement and Risk Management

The United States has maintained a lower profile but strategically significant presence in the Sahel. U.S. engagement has focused primarily on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building, often operating in support of French-led initiatives.

Unlike France, the United States avoided large-scale deployments, favouring a model of selective engagement aimed at minimizing operational risks (Mearsheimer, 2001).

In recent years, U.S. policy toward the Sahel has reflected broader trends of strategic prioritization and retrenchment. Faced with competing global commitments and limited domestic support for peripheral engagements, Washington has reduced its footprint while preserving critical capabilities. This approach emphasizes flexibility and risk avoidance but offers limited support for long-term governance and stabilization efforts.

The U.S. model of engagement has reinforced fragmentation in security governance. By prioritizing bilateral partnerships and narrowly defined security objectives, U.S. involvement has contributed to a patchwork of uncoordinated initiatives rather than a coherent governance framework (Avant, Finnemore, & Sell, 2010). While this approach aligns with strategic retrenchment, it has further weakened multilateral mechanisms and reduced opportunities for sustained institutional development.

### **3.3. Russia: Security Substitution and Transactional Engagement**

Russia's growing presence in the Sahel has been widely interpreted as evidence of a broader geopolitical shift and the erosion of Western influence. Russian engagement has taken the form of security cooperation, arms transfers, and the deployment of private military actors, often framed as an alternative to Western intervention models (Stronski, 2019). This approach has resonated with Sahelian authorities seeking greater autonomy and fewer political conditions.

However, Russia's involvement has not compensated for Western retrenchment in terms of security governance. Russian engagement is predominantly transactional and narrowly focused on regime security rather than broader stabilization or governance objectives. As a result, it offers limited support for coordination or institutional development (International Crisis Group, 2022).

From a governance perspective, Russia's role has amplified fragmentation by encouraging bilateral security arrangements and undermining multilateral frameworks. Rather than providing an alternative model of security governance, Russian involvement has reinforced existing patterns of disjointed engagement and contributed to the erosion of international norms underpinning multilateral intervention.

### 3.4. China: Limited Security Engagement and Strategic Caution

China's role in the Sahel differs markedly from that of other external actors. While China has expanded its economic and diplomatic presence across Africa, its direct involvement in security governance in the Sahel remains limited. Chinese engagement has focused primarily on economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions (Brautigam, 2020).

China's cautious approach reflects a broader strategy of risk aversion and non-interference. Although Chinese actors have increased their visibility within multilateral frameworks, they have largely avoided assuming leadership roles in regional security governance. This restraint limits China's capacity to substitute for Western retrenchment or to address governance gaps resulting from the withdrawal of other actors.

Consequently, China's engagement neither mitigates nor resolves the fragmentation of security governance in the Sahel. Instead, it coexists with other external strategies without providing a cohesive alternative. This reinforces the overall pattern of strategic retrenchment and underscores the absence of a coordinating actor capable of sustaining effective governance arrangements.

### 3.5. External Actors and the Fragmentation of Security Governance

Taken together, the strategies of external actors in the Sahel reveal a convergence toward selective engagement and strategic retrenchment. While their approaches differ in form and intensity, none have demonstrated a sustained commitment to building inclusive and coordinated security governance structures. Competition among external actors has further reduced incentives for cooperation, accelerating the erosion of multilateral frameworks and deepening governance fragmentation (Krahmann, 2003).

The interaction of retrenchment and competition has produced a paradoxical outcome: external engagement remains symbolically significant but substantively limited. This dynamic has profound implications for security outcomes in the Sahel and provides a critical lens through which to assess the broader limits of external intervention in fragile regions.

## 4. FRAGMENTATION OF SECURITY GOVERNANCE IN PRACTICE

This section examines how the interaction of external actors has translated into concrete patterns of fragmented security governance in the Sahel. It focuses on three interrelated dynamics: the erosion and termination of multilateral frameworks, the

shift toward bilateralized security arrangements, and the growing agency of local actors in shaping security outcomes. Together, these processes illustrate how strategic retrenchment and great power competition have reshaped security governance on the ground.

#### **4.1. MINUSMA and the Limits of Multilateral Security Governance**

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) represented the most comprehensive multilateral attempt to provide security governance in the Sahel. Mandated to support political stabilization, protect civilians, and assist state authorities, MINUSMA functioned as a central coordinating framework linking international, regional, and national actors (United Nations Security Council, 2023). Its presence symbolized a commitment to multilateralism and comprehensive security governance.

Despite its ambitious mandate, MINUSMA faced persistent structural constraints. Limited operational capacity, dependence on host-state consent, and an increasingly hostile political environment undermined its effectiveness (International Crisis Group, 2022). As insecurity intensified and relations between Malian authorities and external partners deteriorated, the mission's ability to coordinate security efforts weakened. The eventual termination of MINUSMA in 2023 marked a critical rupture in the multilateral governance architecture of the Sahel.

From a governance perspective, the withdrawal of MINUSMA created significant coordination gaps. Rather than being replaced by an alternative multilateral framework, its termination accelerated the disintegration of existing governance arrangements. External actors shifted toward narrower mandates and bilateral engagements, further reducing opportunities for collective action. The end of MINUSMA thus exemplifies how strategic retrenchment can hollow out multilateral institutions without generating viable substitutes.

#### **4.2. The Shift toward Bilateral and Ad Hoc Security Arrangements**

As multilateral mechanisms weakened, security governance in the Sahel increasingly moved toward bilateral and ad hoc arrangements. External actors prioritized flexible partnerships tailored to specific strategic objectives, often at the expense of coordination and long-term institutional development (Krahmann, 2003). This shift reflects a broader trend toward risk management and selective engagement under conditions of heightened geopolitical competition.

Bilateralization has allowed external actors to maintain influence while minimizing political and operational exposure. However, it has also contributed to the

fragmentation of security governance by creating parallel and often incompatible security arrangements. Without overarching coordination mechanisms, bilateral initiatives have reinforced inconsistencies in objectives, operational standards, and accountability.

Moreover, bilateral security cooperation has tended to focus narrowly on regime security and counterterrorism, sidelining broader governance and stabilization goals. This narrowing of scope has reduced the capacity of external engagement to address the structural drivers of insecurity and has further weakened the legitimacy of international involvement. As a result, security governance has become increasingly transactional and short-term in orientation.

#### **4.3. Local Actors and the Reconfiguration of Security Authority**

The fragmentation of security governance has also reshaped the role of local actors in the Sahel. As external frameworks weakened, Sahelian governments and non-state actors gained greater room for maneuver in negotiating security partnerships. Local authorities have increasingly leveraged competition among external actors to extract resources, resist conditionality, and assert political autonomy (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020).

This reconfiguration of security authority has had ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it reflects a partial reassertion of local agency in a context long dominated by external intervention. On the other hand, the absence of coherent governance frameworks has enabled the consolidation of authoritarian practices and the marginalization of civilian oversight. Security provision has increasingly prioritized regime survival over inclusive governance, further complicating stabilization efforts.

Non-state armed groups have also adapted to fragmented security environments, exploiting gaps between competing external and domestic actors. In the absence of coordinated responses, these groups have expanded their operational space and undermined state authority. Fragmented governance thus not only reflects external dynamics but actively shapes local conflict trajectories.

#### **4.4. Fragmentation as an Outcome of Competition and Retrenchment**

Taken together, the erosion of multilateral frameworks, the bilateralization of security engagement, and the reconfiguration of local authority illustrate how fragmentation has become a defining feature of security governance in the Sahel. Rather than being a temporary or transitional condition, fragmentation reflects structural constraints imposed by strategic retrenchment and great power competition (Avant, Finnemore, & Sell, 2010).

External actors remain present in the region, but their engagement is increasingly symbolic, selective, and uncoordinated. The result is a governance landscape characterized by overlapping initiatives, limited accountability, and declining effectiveness. These dynamics underscore the limits of external intervention in fragile regions and highlights the challenges of sustaining security governance under conditions of intensified geopolitical rivalry.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The dynamics observed in the Sahel are not unique to West Africa. Rather, they reflect broader structural trends shaping security governance across the Global South under conditions of intensified geopolitical competition. The interaction of strategic retrenchment, fragmented external engagement, and contested local authority offers insights that extend beyond the Sahel and resonate with experiences in regions such as Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Southeast Asia.

### 5.1. Transferability of Fragmented Security Governance

One of the key implications of the Sahelian case is that fragmented security governance is not merely a product of local fragility but a systemic outcome of external engagement under competitive international conditions. As great power rivalry intensifies, external actors increasingly prioritize flexibility, bilateralism, and short-term risk management over coordinated governance frameworks (Krahmann, 2003). This pattern is likely to recur in other fragile or strategically contested regions where external interests intersect.

In Latin America, similar dynamics can be observed in areas affected by transnational organized crime, border insecurity, and weak state capacity. External engagement, whether in the form of security assistance, counter-narcotics cooperation, or capacity-building, often operates through bilateral arrangements with limited coordination and accountability. While the security challenges differ from those of the Sahel, the underlying governance logic shows comparable features of fragmentation and selective engagement.

The Sahelian case thus underscores the need to analyse security governance not only through regional lenses but also through systemic pressures emanating from the international system. Fragmentation emerges as a predictable outcome when external actors operate under conditions of competition and retrenchment rather than shared strategic commitment.

## 5.2. External Intervention Fatigue and Strategic Retrenchment

A second implication concerns the growing prevalence of intervention fatigue among external actors. Prolonged engagements with limited measurable success have generated scepticism toward large-scale stabilization efforts across the Global South (International Crisis Group, 2022). This scepticism has translated into strategies of retrenchment that emphasize symbolic presence and indirect influence over sustained governance-building.

In Latin America, where historical sensitivities to external intervention remain strong, retrenchment often takes the form of low-visibility engagement framed as partnership or technical assistance. While this approach reduces political costs for external actors, it also limits their capacity to contribute meaningfully to long-term security governance. The Sahel illustrates how such retrenchment can hollow out existing frameworks without providing viable alternatives.

Importantly, retrenchment does not imply disengagement from the Global South. Rather, it reflects a recalibration of external involvement shaped by domestic constraints, strategic prioritization, and global competition. Understanding retrenchment as a structural feature of contemporary intervention is therefore essential for assessing future security trajectories in fragile regions.

## 5.3. Local Agency under Conditions of Competition

The fragmentation of security governance also reshapes the agency of local actors. In the Sahel, governments and non-state actors have increasingly leveraged competition among external powers to negotiate favourable security arrangements, resist conditionality, and consolidate political control (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020). While this can enhance short-term autonomy, it often undermines accountability and inclusive governance.

Comparable patterns can be observed in parts of the Global South where external actors compete for influence. Local elites may exploit rivalries to diversify partnerships and extract resources, but such strategies rarely translate into sustainable security governance. Instead, they tend to reinforce transactional relationships and weaken institutional development.

The Sahelian experience thus highlights the ambivalent consequences of increased local agency under fragmented governance conditions. While competition among external actors expands local bargaining space, it also reduces incentives for long-term reforms and coordination, ultimately exacerbating insecurity.

#### 5.4. Rethinking Security Governance in the Global South

Taken together, these findings suggest that security governance in the Global South is increasingly shaped by systemic rather than purely regional factors. Great power competition and strategic retrenchment constrain the scope of external intervention and undermine multilateral approaches (Mearsheimer, 2001). As a result, security governance becomes more fragmented, selective, and vulnerable to political manipulation.

For scholars and practitioners, the Sahel serves as a cautionary case. It demonstrates that external engagement under conditions of competition is unlikely to produce coherent governance outcomes without sustained coordination and commitment. This insight is particularly relevant for regions such as Latin America, where external involvement often intersects with complex domestic security challenges.

Ultimately, the Sahel underscores the limits of externally driven security governance in an increasingly competitive international environment. Addressing insecurity in the Global South will require not only regional solutions but also a reassessment of how global power dynamics shape the possibilities and constraints of external intervention.

### 6. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the transformation of security governance in the Sahel through the lens of strategic retrenchment and great power competition. By analysing the roles and interactions of key external actors and their effects on multilateral frameworks, bilateral arrangements, and local agency, the article has argued that fragmentation has become the dominant pattern shaping security outcomes in the region. Rather than representing a temporary disruption or transitional phase, this fragmentation reflects deeper structural constraints imposed by changes in the international system.

The Sahel illustrates how intensified geopolitical competition reshapes external engagement in fragile regions. While external actors remain present and rhetorically committed to regional stability, their strategies increasingly prioritize risk management, flexibility, and short-term objectives over coordinated governance and long-term stabilization. The erosion and termination of multilateral frameworks such as MINUSMA, combined with the bilateralization of security cooperation, demonstrate how strategic retrenchment hollowed out existing governance arrangements without producing effective substitutes (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

A central finding of this article is that great power competition does not generate alternative or complementary models of security governance in the Sahel. Instead, rivalry among external actors undermines coordination, weakens institutional legitimacy, and amplifies fragmentation. Western retrenchment has not been offset by the involvement of non-Western actors; rather, their engagement has often reinforced transactional and regime-centered approaches to security provision (Stronski, 2019). These dynamic challenges assumptions that multipolarity will automatically diversify or improve governance outcomes in fragile regions.

The Sahelian case also highlights the ambivalent role of local agency under fragmented governance conditions. While competition among external actors expands the bargaining space of local authorities, it simultaneously reduces incentives for inclusive governance and accountability. As a result, security provision increasingly prioritizes regime survival and short-term stability over structural reforms. Fragmentation thus not only reflects external dynamics but actively shapes local political trajectories and conflict patterns (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen, 2020).

Beyond its regional specificity, the Sahel offers broader insights into the limits of external intervention in the Global South. Similar patterns of selective engagement, bilateralization, and governance erosion can be observed in other fragile or strategically contested regions, including parts of Latin America. The findings of this article suggest that without sustained coordination and shared strategic commitment, external involvement is unlikely to produce durable security governance outcomes (Avant, Finnemore, & Sell, 2010).

In conclusion, the Sahel demonstrates that security governance under conditions of intensified great power competition is increasingly constrained by strategic retrenchment and fragmentation. External actors face growing limits in their ability to shape security environments through intervention, particularly when governance frameworks are undermined by rivalry and declining multilateralism. Future research should further explore how these systemic pressures affect other regions of the Global South and examine whether alternative forms of regional or locally driven governance can emerge in response to the retreat of coordinated external engagement.

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