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## **Françafrique in Decline? An Analysis of French Influence in Francophone West and Central Africa (2000-2025)**

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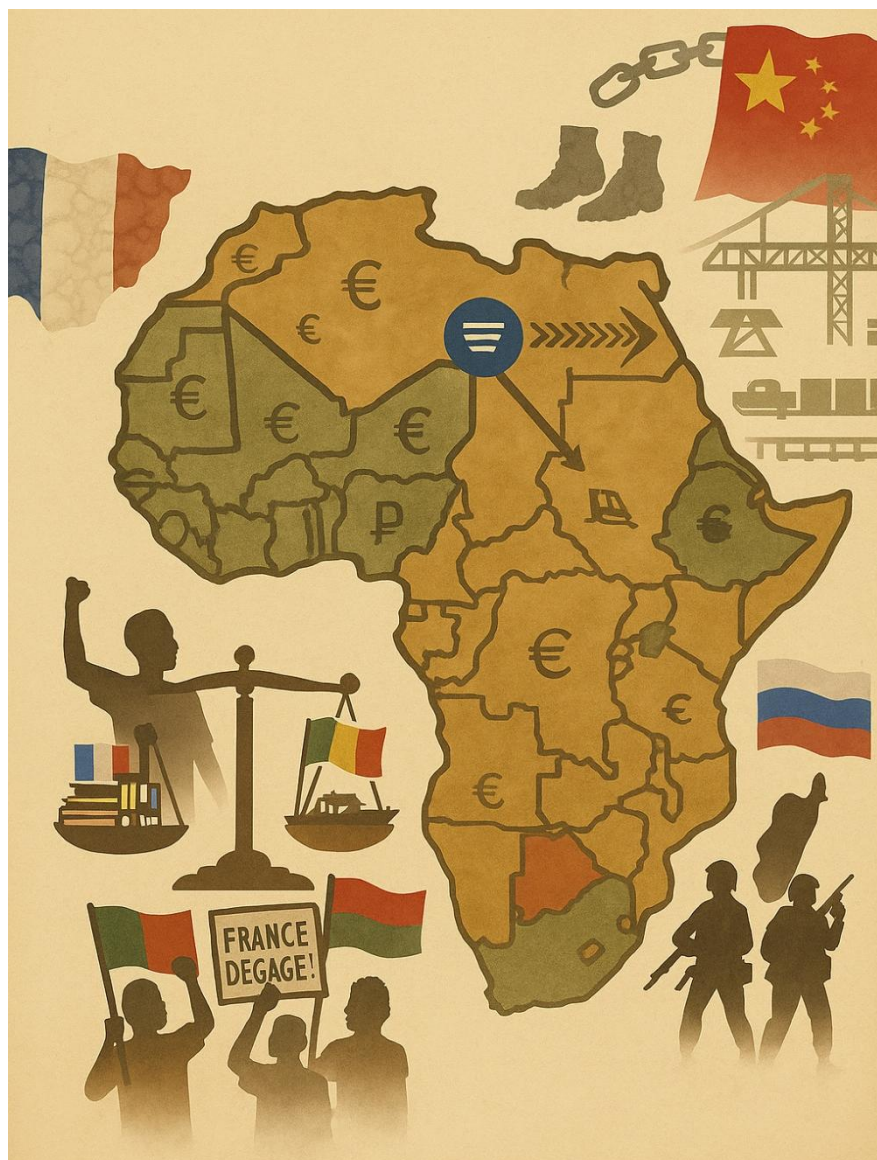
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## Françafrique in Decline?

### An Analysis of French Influence in Francophone West and Central Africa (2000-2025)



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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the decline of French influence in its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa from 2000 to 2025, focusing on the military, economic, and political dimensions. France historically maintained its dominance over the region via the derogatively called *Françafrique* system, which included military cooperation agreements, economic dependency through the CFA franc and French multinationals, and cultural influence via education and language. However, recent developments, especially the rise of global competitors, increasing anti-French sentiment, and a wave of military coups, suggest a major geopolitical reconfiguration.

Using a mixed-methods approach grounded in neocolonial theory, the study uses qualitative case studies alongside quantitative data to measure the decline of French influence. The military analysis reveals a sharp decline in France's presence, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where military coups have led to the expulsion of French troops and the arrival of Russian mercenaries. Even traditional allies such as Senegal and Ivory Coast have begun phasing out French bases. At the same time, arms exports have risen, indicating a strategic shift from direct intervention to transactional influence and assistance.

Economically, countries such as Senegal, Gabon, and Mali have gravitated from France toward China and other global and regional partners. France's once-dominant trade position has been eroded by infrastructure investments from China and increasing trade within Africa. Politically, voting alignment with France at the United Nations has declined.

Overall, the findings illustrate that French influence in the region is not merely waning but being actively replaced by alternative actors and growing calls for autonomy. This transformation signifies a broader decolonial shift and a potential *second independence* for many Francophone African nations.

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## Introduction

This thesis is about the measurement of France's influence in its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa. French influence is still prevalent through the dominance of the French language and French private businesses in key sectors, good personal relations of many African leaders with France and, deeply rooted trade relations. However, events in the recent decades, such as the ousting of French military troops in the Sahel region, the arrival of other great powers, such as China and Russia, and economic diversification have visibly shaken the long-standing French dominance over Western and Central Francophone Africa, which has lasted for more than 130 years.

Although French control over parts of West Africa started already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, French colonial control over Francophone West and Central Africa was consolidated at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which formalized European territorial claims. In the following decades, France increased its grip on the region through its two colonial empires in West and Equatorial Africa. After decolonization in 1960, France gave its African colonial territories official independence but it maintained control through its neocolonial system derogatively called *Françafrique*. This term refers to the informal and opaque political, economic, military, and cultural networks that allowed France to maintain their control over their former colonies after decolonization in 1960 in several ways.

Economically, France has ensured with these networks continued access to Africa's vast natural resources, such as oil, uranium, and precious minerals, which were vital for its industries and energy security. The maintenance of the colonial currency CFA franc reinforced monetary and economic dependence. French multinational companies also have dominated key sectors, including banking, telecommunications, and energy, maintaining control over large portions of African economies (Etogho 2023).

Politically, France has nurtured close and mafia-like relationships with African elites, often supporting pro-French regimes through diplomatic backing or direct intervention. On the French side, the African ties were managed by a cell comprising French presidents, business communities and the French secret service, under the leadership of Jacques Foccart from 1958 to 1974. This cell operated mainly in the dark, without the awareness of the French parliament, its civil society organisation or the public. During the Cold War, France justified these alliances to counter communism, but they also served to protect French business interests. Many African leaders who aligned with France received financial and military support, ensuring their hold on power.

In return, they upheld policies favourable to French influence, creating an informal but powerful network of mutual benefit (Manboah-Rockson 2024).

Military cooperation played a crucial role as well. France has signed defence agreements with many former colonies, allowing it to maintain military bases across Africa and intervene when necessary. French troops were deployed multiple times to prevent coups, support allied governments, or stabilize regions critical to French interests. This direct involvement reinforced France's role as a security guarantor for many African states (Dzekashu 2021).

Culturally, the French language and educational system have continued to shape African societies. Through institutions like the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)*, France promoted its language and culture, strengthening its soft power. The education system in the former colonies is still heavily influenced by the French schooling system and reliant on French teachers. In addition, many African leaders and intellectuals studied in French universities, further deepening personal and institutional ties (Kehinde 2024).

While the *Françafrique* system has significantly increased France's ranking among the most powerful nations in the world, it has been heavily criticised for its negative effects on the African countries. According to the 2021 Democracy Index, eight *Françafrique* countries are under the 25 least democratic countries in the world. Violent conflicts are also a big problem for this region. While *Françafrique* only comprises six percent of the global population, 44 percent of the medium-intensity conflicts occur in those countries (Etogho 2023). In addition, 6 out of the 14 Francophone countries are among the poorest 20 countries in the world (Global Finance 2024).

In recent years, however, France's influence in its former colonies in Francophone Africa has notably declined. This trend has accelerated in the 2020s, exemplified by numerous military coups in the Sahel zone, French military withdrawal and the arrival of other great powers on the continent (Kohnert 2023). This thesis investigates, therefore, the development of the *Françafrique* system with the following research question: *To which extent has France been losing influence in its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa since 2000?*

The analysis will be separated into three distinct but interrelated dimensions: military, economic and political. In the analysis of the military dimension, the change in number of troops and bases over the last three decades will be investigated, while in the economic section, the focus will be on the changing trade volumes of three African countries with France and China in the last 30 years. In the political section, I will analyse the change of voting alignment of all twelve

countries in the region. Unlike previous studies that focus on one area, this thesis analyses France's declining influence across military, economic, and political domains in an integrated framework.

The results show a clear trend of diminishing French influence in the region, which has accelerated in the recent years. While the reduction of political and military influence is more evident, the once dominant position of French companies and imports are decreasing as well.

# 1. Theoretical Framework

This study uses the theoretical framework of neocolonialism to examine the remaining colonial legacies of French influence in Francophone Africa. Coined by Kwame Nkrumah (1965), neocolonialism refers to a system where the former colonial powers maintain their economic, political, military, and cultural control over their former colonies after decolonization. In the case of France, this influence has been maintained through mechanisms, such as military cooperation agreements, economic dependency via the CFA franc and preferential trade agreements, and cultural and linguistic hegemony through institutions like the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* and *France Médias Monde*.

Influence is defined here as France's abilities to shape the policies, governance and economic development of its former colonies through direct and indirect means. Influence can be observed through hard-power strategies, such as military presence or economic control. But it also includes soft power, such as trade and all forms of ideological and cultural domination that maintain and legitimize the continued presence of French interests in the region (Tschotschua 2024).

The theory of neocolonialism is especially useful in the analysis of how colonial hierarchies and legacies are produced through the maintenance of elite education in France, the domination of French companies in strategic sectors or the near monopoly of French media in the region. Frantz Fanon points out in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) how colonialism leaves behind a psychological and institutional legacy that enables continued domination, even after political independence. In the same vein, Edward Said's concept of cultural imperialism describes how French narratives and education systems continue to have a privileged position over indigenous ways of knowledge in Francophone Africa (1993).

In addition, Achille Mbembe's (2001) concept of the *postcolony* can be used to describe how France's colonial legacy endures in its former African colonies and was transformed after decolonization into a complex web of domination and cooperation to maintain French control over the region. This perspective can explain the behavior of African politicians and administrators to help France exploit their respective countries and undermine their sovereignty (Manboah-Rockson 2024).

By using the theory of neocolonialism as a guiding framework, this thesis will first show how France's influence in its former colonies did not end with decolonization but endured much longer through a strategic and adaptable system of domination. The gradual unraveling of this

dominance in the 21st century – which will be analyzed in this thesis – would not only mean a geopolitical realignment but also poses an opportunity for the former colonies for decolonization from French cultural impositions and institutions, the often-desired *second independence* (Cheeseman 2015).

## 2. Literature Review

This section will go deeper into the debate on the extent to which France has lost, maintained, or gained influence in Francophone Africa since 2000. First, I will reproduce the argument that France has been maintaining and even gaining influence in its former colonies in this region, and afterwards I will lay out the argument that France's influence in the region has been declining.

### 2.1. Arguments for the maintenance and expansion of French influence in the region

There are several arguments that France has maintained or even increased its influence in its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa. The most obvious area of continued French domination of this region lies in the economic domain, where France has adapted its strategies to maintain its dominant position through corporate presence, legal frameworks, and economic structures that continue to uphold the neocolonial system. These structures represent neocolonial continuities, which have allowed France to sustain its influence through multinational companies and preferential arrangements.

Concerning the economic dimension of the neocolonial *Françafrique* system, France maintained a firm control over the economic structures of its former colonies after their official independence. A prime example of this dynamic is the Bolloré Group, which for decades has maintained a dominant position across Francophone and broader African markets. For example, Bolloré Africa Logistics has possessed a virtual monopoly in Ivory Coast, Togo, Cameroon and Senegal through an extensive infrastructure network of ports, railways, and container facilities. In addition, the Bolloré leadership fostered close ties with high-ranking French and African politicians to maintain their dominance and to secure long-term concessions, showcasing the intertwined nature of politics and economics in the *Françafrique* system. In the same vein, French construction and infrastructure companies, such as Bouygues, Vinci, and Eiffage always have always won huge public contracts for roads, bridges, airports, and public buildings. These firms are still heavily embedded in the development funding cycles, especially with French and European development banks (Ondriaš et al. 2024).

In the petroleum and extractive sectors – which historically have been of utmost importance for the mainland - France has more than upheld its strategic hold. The French oil company Total Energies, which is the globe's second-largest oil and gas company, continues to be the dominant

player in petroleum production in Francophone Africa—specifically in Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, and Chad. It enjoys decades-long production-sharing contracts, favourable taxation, and privileged access to new offshore and onshore fields. Total's extensive embeddedness in state budgets and export earnings gives it disproportionate leverage over national economies (Ondriaš et al. 2024). Moreover, Total has even expanded its activity in the region through its growing investments in liquified natural gas (LNG) ventures in Mozambique and Senegal, showcasing a new chapter of French energy production in Africa (Bloomberg 2025).

Another strong example of France's ongoing domination of its former colonies is the French monopoly over Niger's uranium mining through its state-owned company Orano. Although France is reliant on Niger's uranium as fuel for its nuclear plants - due to the lopsided and neocolonial market structure - Niger has for a long time received little more than a portion of the worth extracted, and suffers radioactive contamination, environmental destruction, and health crises in mines such as Arlit and Akokan (Ondriaš et al. 2024). Despite its still far-reaching control over the Nigerian uranium mines, the military junta – in power since the military coup in 2023 – has revoked France's concession to a mining site, which is yet to be explored but is believed to be one of the biggest uranium mines worldwide (World Nuclear Association 2024).

In the telecommunication sector, France maintains a strong position through Orange, a telecom company with presence in over dozen African countries. Through decades of little competition, the company has maintained a strong grip on mobile, and internet services and increasingly shapes digital banking and data infrastructure. However, this control is increasingly challenged by the South-African based MTN Group and the Indian company Airtel (Dike & Iddy 2023).

In addition, what helps these French companies thrive in Francophone West and Central Africa is the legal environment under which business is done in the region. Currently, there are 17 African countries that share the OHADA legal system, which is rooted in French civil law. While it offers a stable legal environment for foreign investors, it also advantages those who have experience and connections to French legal experts. This establishes a business climate where French businesses are institutionally favoured, and local businessmen must deal with foreign and often rigid legal structures (Martor et al. 2022).

The dominance of French private companies in the region in combination with the legal framework proves that France has not only retained influence in West and Central Africa but, in many ways, has consolidated and expanded it through economic and institutional means. French businesses still enjoy a first-mover advantage, political ties, and legal continuity. (Kohnert 2022a).

It is important to add that French private companies are not formal agents of the state. However, their continued dominance in key African markets often contributes to the endurance of French influence on the continent. This form of economic influence may work independently of, or in combination with, state interests, which blurs the line between the interests of the French state and of French private businesses (Badel 2014).

In addition to the continuing dominance of French companies in key African sectors, France has adapted its approach against challenges from other powers, such as China, to maintain strategic relationships and its dominance in the region. In response to China's expansive infrastructure investments, France under President Macron has pursued a containment strategy—demonising Chinese influence as exploitative while framing France's own involvement as protective and altruistic. This involves, for example, restructuring its aid policies to be more generous and efficiently targeted. This shift aims to present France as a more attractive partner for African nations, emphasizing sustainable development and mutual benefit (France 24 2021). In addition, Macron has courted African leaders through frequent visits, bolstered French business interests, and invoked security and cultural bonds to sustain *Françafrique*'s relevance. For example, in Gabon - following the 2023 coup - France refrained from imposing sanctions and engaged with the transitional government, signalling a pragmatic shift to preserve influence (Kane 2024). Meanwhile, China seems very cautious not to provoke direct confrontation with France, especially in Francophone countries that are important for its Belt and Road Initiative, such as Cameroon and Senegal (Ma'abo Che 2019).

Another dimension of French dominance of this region is the monetary influence through the maintenance of the colonial currency, the CFA Franc. There are two monetary unions in the CFA zone, namely the West African Economic and Monetary Union WAEMU in francophone West Africa (in French: UEMOA), managed by the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO), and the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), managed by the Bank of Central African States. While the currency is managed by the respective central banks, it has been pegged first to the French franc and now to the Euro. In addition, 50% of CFA Franc reserves are deposited in the French Treasury. The advantages of this arrangement are that it ensures predictable exchange rates, low inflation, economic stability and facilitates free trade and economic integration within the two CFA unions. According to its proponents, this is the best manner to stimulate economic growth in the region. However, critics argue that this system makes these countries dependent upon France, since they cannot set their own monetary policies, with their decisions being influenced by France and the European Central Bank.

Furthermore, this system limits the control over their own foreign reserves, reinforcing neocolonial economic ties and preventing financial independence. Moreover, the pegging to the euro makes the currency stronger than the local economies would require, making exports more expensive than those of Ghana or Nigeria for example (Kohnert 2022a). An example of the devastation this system can bring, happened in 1994. In this year, the French national government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) devalued the CFA Franc by 50% to fix the economic stagnation of the CFA zone brought about by the prolonged artificially high exchange rate. However, this change did not stimulate the expected economic growth and only exacerbated economic hardship in the short term, disproportionately affecting the poor and worsening inequality in the affected countries (Kohnert 2023).

These criticisms led to France's and Ivory Coasts's declaration that WAEMU is willing to join the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ) in creating a single monetary zone for ECOWAS in 2019. This would also include the abolishing of foreign exchange reserves with the French Treasury and taking away the seats granted to France within the BCEAO. While some hail this change as a step to greater autonomy, countries like Nigeria suspected France of trying to maintain their post-colonial relations under the guise of assisting an *independent* West African currency, mentioning the proposed maintenance of the guaranteed fixed parity with the euro (UGCC Africa 2024). Some CEMAC countries have not signed up for it and due to the COVID-19 crisis and difficulties of some member states to meet the necessary convergence criteria, the implementation has been rescheduled to 2027 (Reuters 2021). Although there have been attempts of the Francophone African nations to distance themselves from the CFA Franc, for now, France's monetary control over its former colonies is still quite strong.

Culturally, France retains a strong influence in the region through the French language and educational system, which continue to shape African societies. Through institutions like the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)*, France has promoted its language and culture, strengthening its soft power. Many African leaders and intellectuals studied in French universities, further deepening personal and institutional ties (Kehinde 2024).

In conclusion, looking at the economic and landscape, France has sustained a strong influence through the operation of its multinationals and the maintenance of its CFA Franc system. In addition, the French language and education system are still pervasive in the region, which binds these African countries to France. Those are strong arguments that France has managed to maintain its economic and cultural roots in the region. As shown in this section, there are many articles about the continuing presence of French influence in Francophone Africa and its

negative effects. However, France's maintenance of influence in the region can only be substantiated in some instances, while the increase of influence can hardly be supported by the existing literature.

## 2.2. Arguments for the decline of French influence in the region

While there is an argument to be made for the maintenance of French influence in the region, there is mounting evidence for the decline of French influence in the region. Many scholars have analysed the French retreat in the economic sector, especially through the arrival of other economic superpowers on the continent like China. A similar trend is observable in the military dimension in the Sahel region. Politically, African nations seem to have become more independent from France and to align themselves more with other powers, such as China or Russia. In the cultural dimension, anti-French sentiment has steadily risen over the years, which has caused a backlash against French media and French cultural institutions in the region.

As described above, France has maintained a strong economic influence on the region. However, this economic dominance is challenged by another wave of a scramble for Africa, as argued by Jobson Ewalefoh (2022). While the current scramble is imperialist in nature just as the first one, it limits itself to the access to Africa's vast natural resources. In addition, the new scramble is more subtle and indirect. Instead of conquest and direct rule, the competing countries use soft power tools like infrastructure investments, humanitarian aid or the signing of preferential and benevolent trade agreements.

France's strongest rival on the continent has become China, whose strategy in Francophone West and Central Africa combines economic engagement with geopolitical calculation, aiming to increase its influence in the historically French-dominated region. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road, China channels significant investments into infrastructure, digital technologies, energy, and cultural exchanges, often offering less politically conditional aid than Western counterparts (Carrozza & Sandnes 2022). Senegal, for example, has seen rising Chinese involvement in digital infrastructure via partnerships with Huawei, as well as projects like the National Wrestling Arena and new railways. However, China's presence is stronger in Anglophone states like Ghana, largely due to France's enduring neo-colonial grip over Francophone Africa (Ma'abo Che 2019).

Furthermore, other countries have established themselves as important economic players on the continent, such as the USA, India, Brazil, Malaysia, South Korea, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia,

or the United Arab Emirates. All those countries are participating in the scramble for Africa, challenging France's prioritized economic position in the region (Manboah-Rockson 2024).

In addition to outside forces, the African nations themselves, especially through the framework of the African Union, are planning to increase economic and political integration on the continent, reducing the historical influence of colonial powers like France. For this goal, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), brokered by the African Union, was signed in 2018 by 44 African nations and by July 2019, 54 of 55 African countries agreed to the deal (Meldrum 2019). This agreement will eliminate tariffs on most goods, create a single, liberalised market, facilitate investment through the reduction of barriers to capital and labour, with the overall goal to increase socio-economic development and to reduce poverty on the continent (US ITA 2022).

Andrew Meldrum (2019) outlines how the African countries are hoping to significantly increase inner-African trade, which currently sits only at 16% of all trade, compared to 40% amongst Asian countries and 65% amongst European Union member states. This would mean that African countries will become important trading partners for countries in Francophone West Africa. In fact, for 9 countries in this region, another African country belongs to the 3 most important trading partners (Kohnert 2022a). This would also imply an increased economic independence from outside forces.

While countries like China, the USA or other African countries through the AfCFTA are threatening France's economic influence in the region, there is a vast literature on Russia undermining France's control in *Françafrique* through expanding their military engagement. Russia's strategy to strengthen diplomatic, military and economic ties with African countries is to deliver arms sales, offer support to authoritarian leaders and guarantee these countries' security (Paczyńska 2020).

Central to Russian re-engagement on the African continent was the 2019 Russia–Africa Summit and Economic Forum held in Sochi. The summit was attended by representatives of all 54 African states, with 43 heads of states present. The summit produced 92 agreements worth around 1 trillion rubles (around \$11 billion), including military equipment contracts with more than 30 countries (Summit Africa 2019). The Russian appeal for African nations lies in the fact that Russia favours political stability over democratic governance on the continent. Unlike Western states, it allows African states to pursue their own path, free from Western conditionalities and domestic interferences. On the contrary, since Russia mainly operates in weak yet natural-resource rich countries, it focusses on supporting the authoritarian strongmen

in power (Guensburg 2022). However, Russia lacks the economic capacity to compete with the powerhouses USA or China, and even many other countries concerning trade and soft diplomacy. Therefore, Russia primarily offers military support to conflict-affected or diplomatically isolated states (Lawler 2019).

While Russia employs several private military companies in Africa to reach their military goals, such as Convoy, Redut or Patriot Group, the main military arm of Russia is the Wagner Group (renamed into Africa Corps in 2023, after Prigozhin's mutiny and death; now under more direct Kremlin control). With the help of the Wagner Group, Russia has developed relationships with African governments across the continent, especially by offering security guarantees and military in exchange for access to mining rights and political elites (Neethling 2023). In addition, Russian military engagement in the Sahel region is a part of Moscow's larger plan of increasing its presence on the continent and to weaken NATO/EU influence in Africa at the same time, characterized by a combination of arms sales, political backing for authoritarian regimes, and security partnerships in return for access to mining rights, commercial opportunities, and diplomatic support. For this aim, Moscow is pursuing a dual-track strategy of employing state actors, state-backed conglomerates and businesses, while also using non-state private companies like the Wagner Group to provide security and knowledge regarding media control and propaganda (Clifford 2021, Paczyńska 2020). Coupled with the already damaged French reputation from its failed military operations in the past, public opinion in the Sahel countries has turned against France and towards Russia. This has led to the so-called *coup epidemic* in the Sahel region and to French military cooperation exchanged against Russian (Antwi-Boasiako 2022).

While Russia is by the greatest threat to French military dominance in the region, there are also other countries and regional and international organisations that have launched military missions or military support in other forms. The more China's economic involvement in the African continent grows, the more it is concerned with securing access to natural resources and protecting its investments. China has more troops in Africa than any other continent and deploys the most soldiers in United Nations missions of all permanent UN Security Council members (Nantulya 2024).

Turkey has become another significant player in Francophone Africa, supplying military equipment such as drones or armored vehicles, and providing training to armed forces in Niger or Senegal, partnering with countries in the Sahel region to fight against terrorist groups like Boko

Haram and ISIS. They are especially present in countries with large Muslim populations and leverage these religious ties to build influence in the region (Almizan & Donelli 2023).

The United States are another that is involved in counterterrorism in the region with their Africa Command (AFRICOM). Africa Command (AFRICOM). It conducts counterterrorism operations, provides training, and supports regional forces in combating groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and ISIS-West Africa (Munir 2023).

In addition, not only foreign powers have increased their military foothold in the region, but also the African Union has sought to address security challenges in the regions themselves, emphasizing *African solutions to African problems*, often in collaboration with ECOWAS (Suzuki 2020).

Similarly, the European Union has launched several missions in Francophone West Africa, such as the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and European Capacity Building Mission in the Sahel (EUCAP Sahel), providing training and support to local forces. This is part of the EU's Strategic Autonomy plan to increase defence and security, not only in Europe but also in Africa (Recchia and Tardy 2020).

Except for the example of the EU, it should be obvious that the engagement of these actors has a negative impact on French military influence in the region. How far the EU challenges French military influence is unclear, since France takes a leading role in this mission, although it will not allow France to only defend its own interests

In addition to France's loss of military and economic influence, French cultural influence has also suffered due to rising anti-French sentiment in the region. Though this sentiment has existed since independence, it has surged recently as broader segments of civil society view France's practices as exploitative—particularly due to its privileged access to natural resources and financial control over the CFA Franc (Konté 2023). This resurgence is further driven by the youth: over the past 60 years, the number of young people aged 15-24 in *Françafrique* has grown from 6.2 million to 34.7 million. Facing high unemployment and feeling overlooked by Western powers, today's young Africans are increasingly prepared to challenge the neocolonial structures and siding with countries and organisations that are willing to help them. Social media has played a critical role in amplifying their voices, allowing them to bypass French-influenced media and organize a movement toward a *second independence* (Pigeaud and Sylla 2024). For many Panafricanists in this region, this second independence is also about linguistic

decolonization, with the current Francophone agenda being met with hostility. Although Emmanuel Macron has tried to separate the Francophonie from its (neo)colonial legacy, this strategy is viewed by Africans as another way to promote the French empire through the linguistic element (Chrisafis 2018). The linguistic decolonization can be seen in some Francophone countries adopting English as a second official language and even wanting to join the Commonwealth like Togo or Gabon (Etogho 2023). The anti-French sentiment has also been exacerbated by Russia, especially in the Sahel region and surrounding Francophone countries by using Russian state media (RT, Sputnik) and Wagner-linked troll farms that spread propaganda, accusing France of stealing African resources (gold, uranium) and sabotaging development (Pigeaud and Sylla 2024).

While France could previously reinforce their soft power in the region through promoting French language, culture, and perspectives mainly through the France Médias Monde, the rise of local media, competition from other countries and the anti-French sentiment in general has severely weakened France's ability to project a positive picture of itself in the region (Endong 2023).

Based on the existing literature on French influence in its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa, France has experienced a notable decline in influence in the last decades. However, there is no literature that analyses this decline along more than one dimension. Therefore, this thesis sets out to offer one of the first comprehensive analyses that systematically evaluates the changes of all three dimensions together over the last 25 years.

### 3. Methodology

This study uses a multi-dimensional and mixed-methods approach to analyse the declining influence of France in its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa. I have chosen to include all African countries that were former French colonies in Africa and are currently part of the CFA Franc zone. Those countries include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Gabon, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. The research combines qualitative case study analysis with the use of quantitative indicators to analyse changes in military, economic, and political relations over the last 25 years. The analysis is conducted from a neocolonial theoretical framework which focusses on how post-colonial power structures continue to shape the colonized countries and how they have gotten looser in the recent decades.

#### 3.1. Research Design

The research is structured around a comparative qualitative case study design that analyses France's influence across three distinct but interconnected domains: military, economic, and political. The goal is to trace both structural transformations and specific events along these three dimensions that reflect a broader process of French loss of influence in the region. The analysis is supplemented by quantitative data to support and to contextualise the trends in each case. In the military sections, qualitative content analysis and process tracing are used to understand how historical ties, education systems, and defence agreements evolved over time and how they reflect broader geopolitical shifts.

#### 3.2. Case Selection

For the military and economic dimension, different countries were selected for the case studies, since each country has experienced France's influence differently across these domains. Therefore, selecting the same set of countries for both sections would not have painted the best overall picture. Instead, case selection in each dimension were aimed ensuring representativeness and variation, including examples of both continuity and change in French influence in the analysed dimension.

The military section is prefaced by a historical account of France's military operations and how this affected its military reputation in the region. For the case study, the selected countries are Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal. While Mali and Burkina Faso experienced a direct rupture in their political and military relationship after their respective coups, Senegal continues to be a loyal French ally but has reassessed its military relationship with France in the recent years.

For the economic dimension, I focus on Senegal, Gabon, and Mali, which were chosen to reflect a spectrum of trajectories: Senegal remains a key French ally, Gabon has cooled relations following the 2023 coup, and Mali has largely severed ties. This triad thus offers a useful cross-section of economic reorientation in the region.

In the political dimension, the voting alignment in the United Nations General Assembly of all twelve countries in the region has been analysed. While this is an imperfect proxy for political alignment, it offers a quantifiable measure of diplomatic orientation over time.

### 3.3. Data Sources

This research relies primarily on secondary data that was collected from a wide range of sources. For the qualitative analysis, I utilised government documents and strategic reviews, including France's *2021 Stratégie de Défense* and its shift toward a *Partenariat Militaire Opérationnel (PMO)*, media and think tank reports, such as Al Jazeera, France 24, Le Monde Afrique, BBC, and the International Crisis Group, and academic literature on postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, and international relations in the Francophone African context. For the quantitative analysis, official statistics and datasets were used, such as the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) or the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

### 3.4. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is made up by neocolonial theory. French influence is separated into three measurable dimensions:

- Military influence, operationalized through troop deployments, military bases, defense cooperation agreements, and arms transfers.
- Economic influence, measured through the change of bilateral trade flows, the evolution of major trading partners, and trade asymmetries over time.
- Political influence, analysed through diplomatic alignment in the UN General Assembly.

The study emphasizes not only the decline of French presence but also the active replacement of French influence by new actors, notably China and Russia, and by rising national demands for autonomy.

### 3.5. Quantitative Analysis and Tools

In the analysis of all three sections, quantitative data were processed, such as the weapons transfer data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). In the economic section, trade data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) was

analysed to identify trends in import and export volumes between the selected African countries and France, as well as their diversification toward other trading partners, such as China.

For the analysis of the UNGA voting alignment data, I have edited the 34<sup>th</sup> version of the United Nations General Assembly Voting Data from Eric Voeten's dataverse (Voeten et al. 2024) in the statistic programme R to create the barplots depicted in the political section. To measure voting alignment, Voeten's dataset used the Ideal Point Distance (IPD) method, which measures every country's position in a multi-dimensional policy space (e.g. left-right, interventionistic/sovereigntist) based on their vote. Therefore, the closer two countries are in this space, the more similar positions they have, and the higher their voting alignment. In the graph, a lower IPD score indicates a higher degree of alignment. The advantage of this method is that it goes beyond simple same-vote/different-vote counts and is adept at tracking changes over time (Voeten et al. 2024).

### 3.6. Temporal Scope

The study focuses on the period between 2000 and 2025, with specific attention to the years 2000, 2010, and 2023 as benchmarks to capture long-term trends and recent developments. The analysis over time allows the identification of key changes in the postcolonial structure and new political, economic and military alignments in the region.

### 3.7. Limitations

While this study aims to offer a comprehensive picture of the decline of French influence, it is based on publicly available data and secondary sources. Some metrics, such as elite networks or informal political influence, are inherently difficult to quantify and are therefore assessed through proxy variables, such as leadership education or UNGA voting alignment. While UNGA voting alignment is a commonly used proxy for affinity, it has certain limitations. Voting behavior can be influenced by issue-specific positions, regional blocs, or strategic abstentions rather than direct bilateral alignment. Nonetheless, longitudinal voting trends across a large set of resolutions still offer valuable insights into broader geopolitical orientations and shifts in diplomatic alliances.

Despite these challenges, the triangulation of multiple data sources along the three dimensions allows for a meaningful conclusion about the changing French influence in the region.

## 4. Decline of Military Influence

In this section, the decline of French military influence will be measured through France's troop presence and arms transfer in the region. The first section of this chapter will examine the historical foundations of France's military presence in the region to understand the recent decline of French military influence in Francophone West and Central Africa. For decades, this presence was institutionalized through formal defense agreements and repeated interventions, which enabled France to position itself as the principal guarantor of regional security. A historical perspective thus provides essential context for analysing the structural and geopolitical shifts that have led to France's decreasing military importance to the region. In the second part, a case study will be conducted to examine the French military presence. In the third part, I analyse the volume and direction of arms transfers into the region since 2000. This not only illustrates how France and other global powers have adapted their military engagement but also reveals which external actors have emerged as the region's new strategic and security partners.

France established after decolonization formal defense agreements with its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa. These pacts - often secretive and unequal - allowed France to station troops, intervene in domestic conflicts, and prop up compliant regimes, maintaining military, economic and political dominance in their former colonies in exchange for security guarantees. In 1995, France maintained military agreements with 23 Francophone African states: Burkina Faso, Benin, Benin, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Comores, Congo, Djibouti, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Gunea-Conakry, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritius, Mauritania, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Togo and Zaire. Countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Gabon signed formal accords permitting permanent French military bases (for example in Port-Bouët, Dakar or Libreville) and rapid intervention clauses. Senegal signed with France agreements to host French naval and air bases in Dakar with 1300 soldiers and to engage in joint military training and counterterrorism operations. France also had 3500 troops in Djibouti, 610 in Gabon, 580 in Ivory Coast, and 1500 in the Central African Republic and 850 troops in Chad (Gregory 2000). From a neocolonial point of view, France maintains these military bases under the guise of *security partnerships* but in reality, the French military presence serves to protect economic interests and prop up compliant regimes, for example Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire or Omar Bongo in Gabon, resulting in 19 French military interventions from 1960 to 2000 (Manboah-Rockson 2024).

However, France's military monopoly on its former colonies started to decline in the mid-1990s due to numerous failed military operations which tarnished its reputation and legitimacy on the continent, coupled with consequent rise of geopolitical competitors and African demands for sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

Since the 1990s, France undertook several failed military operations in Africa that damaged its reputation, leading to a loss of military influence in the region. The first one, was the failed military intervention in Rwanda in 1994, in which France's military response – *Operation Amaryllis* and *Turquoise* – did not intend to stop the genocide. Its aim was rather to support the crumbling Hutu government and to stop the Anglophone Uganda-backed FPR from intruding into France's sphere of influence. In addition, it served its own interest by evacuating French nationals and Rwandan government officials close to France. As a response, the FPR – who emerged victorious from the civil war – completely rejected French influence by expelling French officials, shifting from French to English as an official language, and joining the Commonwealth. These military interventions not only destroyed all ties with Rwanda but also heavily damaged its reputation in whole Francophone Africa (Gregory 2000).

Another blow to France's military influence and reputation followed the failed military operations *Serval* (2013-2014) and *Barkhane* (2014-2022), which aimed to halt the advance of Islamist insurgents in the Sahel region. While *Serval* initially succeeded in pushing jihadists out of Mali's cities, it failed to establish lasting stability, revealing the limits of French military power. As a response, France deployed 5100 troops through *Opération Barkhane* in 2014 in the Sahel region, comprising the countries of Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Niger, assisting the national governments in their fight against the Islamist threat (Godó 2021).

However, during the intervention, the French military made some conceptual, strategic, operational and political mistakes, eventually leading to the failure of the operation. For example, the French aimed to defeat the Islamist insurgents without addressing the underlying problems, such as ethnic tensions or weak and corrupt national governments. And as the conflict dragged on and there was no clear victory in sight, local populations grew increasingly hostile toward France. Civilian casualties from French airstrikes, accusations of neo-colonialism, and support for unpopular governments fuelled massive anti-French protests across the Sahel. These events led to a strong anti-French sentiment in the region, fuelling mass protests, with crowds demanding *France dégage* (France, get out!) (Powell 2022).

The failed military interventions and the rising anti-French sentiment opened the door for increased Russian military involvement in the region. The countries plagued by the Islamist

insurgents in the Sahel region such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Mauritania, decided to ask Russia for military assistance. Russian military engagement in the Sahel region is a part of Moscow's larger plan of increasing its presence on the continent and to weaken NATO/EU influence in Africa at the same time, characterized by a combination of arms sales, political backing for authoritarian regimes, and security partnerships in return for access to mining rights, commercial opportunities, and diplomatic support (Paczyńska 2020).

#### 4.1. Case Studies

In the following section, I will analyse three countries and describe what happened with the French military presence in each. While Mali and Burkina Faso's worsening political relations with France have culminated in a complete rupture following their military coups, Senegal's case shows a more gradual and democratic disentanglement with France's military. This case selection ensures a balanced analysis and offers the most comprehensive view of France's declining military influence. In the following section, I will compare which countries ousted French troops, when, and under what conditions, summarising the change in troop numbers in a table.

##### Case study 1: Mali

In August 2020, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's government was ousted by a group of officers calling themselves the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP). The public largely supported the coup since it resented the close ties between the government and France and was dissatisfied with Keita's corrupt governance, especially after the 2020 parliamentary elections, which were marred by irregularities and perceived manipulation. Ten months later, in May 2021, the same military faction staged a second coup, removing the transitional civilian leaders amid escalating tensions over power-sharing and reform pace. Due to the anti-French sentiment and the increasingly pro-Russian stance of the junta, the military government decided to oust French troops and to invite the Wagner Group mercenaries (Van der Perre & Tessier 2019, Lorgerie 2022).

##### Case Study 2: Burkina Faso

Inspired or emboldened by Mali's moves, Burkina Faso followed suit. The country suffered two coups in 2022. The first, in January, deposed President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who was widely criticized for his failure to contain jihadist violence, which had spread across much of the country. The new military leader, Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Damiba, promised to restore order but achieved little. Amid mounting frustration within the military and society, Capt. Ibrahim Traoré

led a second coup in September 2022, ousting Damiba. The junta leaned further into civilian militias (VDPs) and began expressing stronger pro-Russian sentiments, including public demonstrations with Russian flags. In January 2023, Burkina formally announced that it has terminated all of its military agreements with, demanding a complete French military withdrawal of all troops within a one-month period (Al Jazeera 2023, France 24 2023).

### Case Study 3: Senegal

In the same year, Senegal announced its decision to terminate the presence of approximately 350 French troops stationed on its territory, marking the first time a democratically governed nation in the region formally requested a French military withdrawal. The timing of the announcement coincided with the 80th anniversary of the Thiaroye massacre during which between 35 and 300 West African soldiers in the French Army were killed by French forces after protesting poor treatment and unpaid wages. President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, elected on a platform centred on national and economic sovereignty and calling for reparations from France for historical injustices, outlined a timeline for the full withdrawal of French forces by the end of 2025. As part of this process, on March 7, 2025, France began transferring military facilities back to Senegalese authorities—an important step in ending a military presence that had existed since the country's independence in 1960 (Al Jazeera 2024).

Table 4.1.1.: Comparison of French Troop Numbers in Francophone Africa between their Peak and Today.

Country	Peak Troop Deployment (Year)	Number of Troops 2025	Status
Burkina Faso	400 (2022)	0	Forced withdrawal in 2023
Mali	5100 (2020-2021)	0	Forced withdrawal in 2022
Senegal	350	0	All forces to be withdrawn by end of 2025

As a response, France revisited its military strategy on the African continent before the military coups and the termination of defence and security cooperation with its *Strategic Update* in 2021. This document signals a fundamental change in its military strategy in its former colonies in West and Central Africa. Instead of maintaining its historical role as the dominant external actor in regional security, France has shifted to promoting a strategy centered on partnership and shared responsibility. This shift reflects an intent to distance itself from the paternalistic dynamics long associated with *Francafrique*. The review emphasizes a new framework—the

*Partenariat Militaire Opérationnel* (PMO)—focused on enabling African states to autonomously manage their own security through support in training, equipping, and advising their armed forces. France has explicitly moved away from unilateral interventionism toward a collaborative approach that supports local sovereignty and regional capacity building (Ministère des Armées 2021). This can be observed in the agreement signed between France and Benin in July 2022, which focus on security cooperation in face of the rising threats of Islamist extremists (Ahissou 2022).

This evolution is also tied to France's broader aim of redefining its influence in Africa: not through control, but through cooperation. While it retains strong ties and interests, France acknowledges the changing geopolitical landscape and the need to respect African agency. In essence, the 2021 review reframes France's Africa policy, marking a significant ideological and strategic departure from *Francafrique* toward a post-colonial model of equitable partnership (Ministère des Armées 2021).

As a part of this strategy, France has been seeking to *Europeanise* its interventions through a European Union framework. This means that the EU's growing involvement in the Sahel has diminished France's singular military dominance by spreading the operational and political burden among EU institutions and member states. Initially, France led unilateral interventions, but over time, the EU's deployment of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and financial backing for regional forces like the G5 Sahel shifted the spotlight from France alone to a broader European engagement. By supporting regional initiatives, training local security forces, and coordinating international donor efforts, the EU helped legitimize multilateral, non-French frameworks, thus reducing France's visibility as the sole security guarantor (Plank and Bergmann 2021).

## 4.2. Arms Transfers

However, while France has lost its large parts of its direct military presence in Francophone West and Central Africa, it has seen a huge increase in its arms exports to the region (SIPRI 2025).

Table 4.2.1.: Total volume of arms transfers from France, Russia, China, the USA and Turkiye into Francophone West and Central Africa since 2000, in millions of SIPRI trend-indicator values (TIVs)

Year	France	Russia	China	USA	Turkiye
2000-2008	9	64	23	13	0
2009-2016	117	93	286	37	0
2017-2024	264	227	171	82	160
Total	390	384	480	132	160

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (2025):

The apparent contradiction between France's military withdrawal from several West and Central African countries and its simultaneous increase in arms exports to the region can be interpreted as an attempt by France to move away from its role as the dominant security guarantor to a more transactional, commercially driven form of influence rooted in arms diplomacy. This suggests that France is not retreating entirely from the region but rather repositioning itself, moving from direct intervention to a more transactional, commercially driven form of influence rooted in arms diplomacy. This strategy represents a deliberate shift away from costly, unpopular ground deployments toward a strategy that maintains relevance without direct military exposure.

However, not only France has increased its arms transfers into the region, but also other arms-producing countries have done so. This can be explained by the growing insecurity across the Sahel and parts of Central Africa. The persistent threat of jihadist insurgencies, rising communal violence, and weak state institutions have prompted an arms race among regional governments (International Crisis Group, 2021). Coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) brought military regimes to power that view robust force as essential to regime survival and territorial control (Chafer, Cumming & van der Velde 2020). Their urgent need for arms and equipment makes them eager buyers in the global arms market, even as they sever formal defense partnerships with France. In this climate, arms imports have risen across the board,

with countries increasingly buying weapons from a range of suppliers, including China, Russia, Turkey, and the United States (Wezeman 2024).

Moreover, arms sales may also serve as a hedge against complete disengagement. By continuing to equip militaries in Francophone Africa, France retains levers of influence that can be activated diplomatically or strategically in the future. Rather than signifying a loss of all influence, it illustrates a recalibration—from visible, politically sensitive operations to a more discreet, commercially grounded presence. This approach aligns with broader trends in international relations, where states increasingly use defense exports as instruments of soft power and geopolitical signaling (Wezeman, Kuimova & Wezeman 2021).

However, it must also be noted the majority of the French weapon equipment was imported by only four countries: Senegal, Benin, Ivory Coast and Cameroon, with Senegal taking in most of the weapons, while Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Chad and Gabon have only imported 28 million SIPRI TIVs in the last 10 years. This stands in striking comparison to the fact that Mali alone imported 136 TIVs from Russia in the same timeframe. Although it must be noted that, the volume of arms transfers into the region only represents a very small fraction of the supplying countries, ranging from 3,5% for Turkiye, 0,6% for France, and 0,01% for the USA and Russia (SIPRI 2025).

In conclusion, a strong decline of French military influence in the region can be observed through the replacement of French troops against Russian military contractors in the Sahel region as well as demilitarisation in traditionally allied countries. These recent developments have led to a stark reduction of French troops in the region. While France remains an important arms exporter to the region, it is mainly able to export its weapons to its traditional allies, such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Benin and Cameroon.

## 5. Decline of Economic Influence

In this section, France's loss of economic power will be investigated by analyzing France's trade volume with its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa. From the 1960s to the 1990s, trade relations between France and these countries were marked by strong asymmetry and a high degree of dependency. France remained the principal trading partner for many of these countries, a legacy of colonial integration that was institutionalized through mechanisms such as the Franc Zone and preferential trade agreements. Franco-African trade relations had a strong centre-periphery dynamic, where the African exports to France largely consisted of raw materials, such as cocoa, coffee, oil, uranium, and timber. In turn, France turned these raw materials into high-value goods which were sold back to Africa.

In the 1990s and 2000s, however, the strong French grip over the economies of its former colonies in West and Central Africa started to loosen. As described above, the main reasons for the loss of economic influence in the region are the rise of alternative global powers on the continent like China, Turkey, the Gulf states, Russia, Africa's economic diversification via African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and, the rising anti-French sentiment, especially against the domination of French firms of key sectors and the maintenance of the CFA Franc.

### 5.1. Case Studies

In this section, I will conduct a case study of the three Francophone African countries of Senegal, Gabon and Mali. I will look at their change in main trading partners as well as their trading volume to analyse the declining economic importance of France for these countries. These three countries have been chosen for their different relationship with France. Senegal has remained a close political and economic ally of France since its independence. Gabon – another strong ally of France – has gradually distanced itself politically and economically from its former colonizer, especially following the coup that ended the Bongo dynasty's rule in 2023. Mali on the other hand, distanced itself very early from France and ended all military and political relations following the military coup in 2020.

### Case Study 1: Senegal

Senegal is a West African nation on the Atlantic coast, known for its political stability, democratic governance, and active role in regional organizations and strong ties to France. As of the early 2000s, its economy was largely driven by agriculture, fishing, and services, with groundnuts being a historically significant export crop (Diaw & Tran 2009).

In 2000, Senegal imported a total of \$1.98B, of which 24.3% were imported from France, with machines, chemical products and transportation vehicles like cars and trucks being the three most imported goods. Imports from China in that year made up 2,4%, of which vegetable products and textiles represents the majority. Regarding exports, Senegal was the 131<sup>st</sup> biggest exporting country with \$855 million, with Mali (\$167 millions), France (\$148 millions) and Italy (\$84 millions) the biggest trading partner. Senegal exported mostly animal products, animal and vegetable biproducts, while the exports to China (\$13,7 millions) represented only animal products (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

In 2010, Senegal imported a total of \$6.17B, of which 16% arrived from France, with machines, refined petroleum and chemical products being three biggest products, while 8% of products were imported from China, with machines, textiles and metals being imported most. Regarding exports, Mali was by far Senegal's most important trading partner with importing 27% of its total exports, mainly refined petroleum. While Senegal exported the same type of products to both France and China, exports to France fell by \$17 million, while they quadrupled to China, reaching \$52 million (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

In 2023, Senegal imported a total of \$15.1B, of which 19.4% arrived from China. This marked a significant rise compared to 2010 and made China Senegal's biggest trading partner by a distance. The most imported goods were infrastructure equipment, such as machines and vehicles, and textiles. Senegal's second largest trading partner was France with a share of 9.3%, with machines, vehicles and chemical products the most imported. Regarding exports, Senegal shifted mainly to the selling of gold and refined petroleum, which Mali being still the biggest importer of petroleum. China imported mainly vegetable products and minerals from its 5.41% share, while France imported mainly vegetable and animal products, making up 1.47% of total Senegalese exports (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

Table 5.1.1.: Senegal's imports and exports with France in the year 2000, 2010 and 2023.

Senegal - France	Imports			Exports		
	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank
2000	482	24,3%	1.	148	17,3%	2.
2010	991	16,0%	1.	131	5,7%	4.
2023	1400	9,3%	2.	83,9	1,47%	14.

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)

Table: 5.1.2.: Senegal's imports and exports with China in the year 2000, 2010 and 2023.

Senegal - China	Imports			Exports		
	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank
2000	48,2	2,43%	13.	13,7	1,60%	14.
2010	504	8,17%	3.	52,2	2,28%	11.
2023	2930	19,40%	1.	310	5,41%	4.

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)

This short description shows Senegal's market transformation in its trade dynamics over the last decades. While France was by far Senegal's biggest trading partner in the 2000s, its dominant role has been taken over by China in 2023 (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

This shift is largely driven by Senegal's national development strategy, the *Plan Sénégal Émergent (PSE)*, launched in 2014. Focused on infrastructure, industrialization, and energy, the *PSE* opened the door for new international partnerships. China responded with major investments in roads, industrial zones, and energy projects, establishing itself as a key supplier of affordable goods and construction expertise (Adewuyi 2012)

Meanwhile, France's influence gradually declined, due in part to strategic retrenchment by French firms and banks from African markets and rising public scepticism of France's neocolonial role. China's competitive pricing, financing models, and willingness to engage in large-scale infrastructure projects made it an attractive alternative for Senegal (Oxford Analytica 2021).

In addition, to the rise of China's rise, Senegal has also diversified its trade, with the discovery of oil and gold, and the production of phosphoric acid, which has significantly increased its

exports to Mali, Switzerland and India respectively (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

In conclusion, Senegal has shown a deliberate economic diversification strategy in the last 25 years, aimed to increase economic growth and to reduce dependence on one single partner. While France remains an important partner for Senegal, a stark increase in trade relations with China and a reorientation of its economy toward emerging economies and South-South cooperation can be observed.

### Case Study 2: Gabon

Located on Central Africa's Atlantic coast, Gabon is one of the continent's most resource-rich countries, particularly known for its vast reserves of oil, manganese, and timber. Despite a relatively small population, Gabon has historically enjoyed one of the highest GDPs per capita in sub-Saharan Africa, largely due to its richness in natural resources. However, in recent decades, Gabon has sought to diversify its economy and expand relations beyond its traditional partners (Tur'inskaya 2022). While the country has historically been a key French ally in the region, their relationship has been strained in the last years, amplified by the military coup in 2023 and the rising anti-French sentiment in the country (Pigeaud & Sylla 2024).

In 2000, French economic domination of the country was evident, with 42,8% of all Gabonese imports coming from France, mainly through machines, transportation vehicles and chemical products. China at the same time only accounted for 0,78% of all Gabonese imports. Regarding exports, crude petroleum was by far the most important good, accounting for 77,5% of its total exports. Most of this product was sold to the USA, who accounted for 60% of total Gabonese exports. China was Gabon's second biggest buyer, importing crude petroleum and rough wood, while France was the third biggest, buying rough wood, crude petroleum and manganese ore (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

In 2010, the majority of Gabon's imports still came from France, but fell from 42,8% to 24,5%, while China increased its market share to 6,45% by selling mainly machines, metals and cement. Gabon's exports in 2010 were still to 70% crude petroleum, but more diversified with 30% going to the USA, and the rest going to Malaysia, China, Australia and Europe. Gabonese exports to France stayed mainly the same, while they increased to China (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

In 2023, even though France's market share decreased even further, they remained Gabon's biggest trading partner for imports, mainly with the same products. However, China has drastically increased their exports to Gabon, mainly through infrastructure equipment and vehicles, just as in Senegal. Regarding Gabonese exports, a drastic shift happened in the 2010s, with the USA turning away from buying Gabonese oil in favour of other countries and their own shale oil boom (S&P Global; Ventures 2023). This led to a reduction in the export of crude petroleum (54,1% of all exports) but also to China becoming the biggest buyer of Gabonese oil (29,1%) and Gabonese goods in general (26%). While the country also mainly exports crude petroleum to France, French imports have become less important for the country (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2025).

Table 5.1.3.: Gabon's imports and exports with France in the year 2000, 2010 and 2023.

Gabon - France	Imports			Exports		
	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank
2000	458	42,8%	1.	257	6,9%	3.
2010	891	24,5%	1.	417	5,5%	4.
2023	648	14,5%	1.	347	3,3%	9.

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)

Table 5.1.4.: Gabon's imports and exports with China in the year 2000, 2010 and 2023.

Gabon - China	Imports			Exports		
	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank
2000	8,3	0,78%	15.	299	8,1%	2.
2010	235	6,45%	5.	949	12,5%	2.
2023	562	12,5%	2.	2770	26%	1.

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)

Historically one of France's closest allies in Africa, Gabon has undergone significant political and economic changes that have reduced its dependency on France and opened the door to new global partners—particularly China. While France remains a very important trading partner for Gabon, its dominance – especially regarding Gabonese imports – has been reduced through Gabon's economic diversification. Another reason is the military coup in 2023, which ended

the 55 years of dynastic rule of the Bongo family, which were close allies of France. China has emerged as a key partner, offering large-scale investments in infrastructure, mining, and public works - often without the political conditions attached to Western aid. Chinese companies have become dominant players in sectors like timber, manganese, and construction, while also providing roads, ports, and public buildings (Sabrina 2019).

### Case Study 3: Mali

Mali is a landlocked country in the Sahel region, whose economy until the late 1990s was largely based around the export of cotton. In the year 2000, the export of gold became increasingly important to the country, which resulted in South Africa and Switzerland becoming Mali's most important exporting countries. France, who accounted only for 2,37% of Mali's exports, mainly bought vegetable products, chemical products, and paper goods. China's only product that it bought from Mali at the time was raw cotton, accounting for only 0,067% of Mali's exports. Mali's imports came mainly from Ivory Coast (37,8%), Senegal (16%) and France (12,3%), with the former two countries mainly delivering refined petroleum to the country, while France as always shipped machines, chemical products and transportation vehicles. China accounted only for 2.55% of all Malian imports, with half of them being helicopters, planes and/or spacecraft (OEC 2025).

In the year 2010, Mali's exports heavily relied on the export of gold, accounting for 67,3% of all sold goods. 80% of the gold was bought by South Africa, while 16% was bought by Switzerland, resulting in 54% of all exports being bought by South Africa. While China accounted for 5% of exports, buying mainly raw and prepared cotton, France accounted only for 1%, mainly buying machine parts, vegetables and raw cotton. Regarding imports, Mali's biggest trading partners were Senegal (13,9%), France (11,8%) and China (11%), and its biggest import was refined petroleum, mainly from Benin and Senegal. France mainly sold medicaments, machine parts and wheat to Mali, while China mainly delivered machine parts, transportation vehicles and metals (OEC 2025).

In 2023, Mali's shift from a textile-producing to a gold-exporting country is more than evident, with 94,5% of its export being gold, mainly to the United Arab Emirates (72,8%) and Switzerland (15,4%). France, who only accounts for 0,51% of Malian exports, mainly buys gold and aerospace vehicles, while China's share of 1,18% are mainly composed of raw cotton, seedy oils and iron ore (OEC 2025).

Table 5.1.5.: Mali's imports and exports to France in 2000, 2010 and 2023.

Mali - France	Imports			Exports		
	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank
2000	128	12,30%	3.	14,6	2,37%	8.
2010	527	11,80%	2.	21,2	1%	13.
2023	335	5,20%	4.	33,7	0,51%	7.

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)

Table 5.1.6: Mali's imports and exports to China in 2000, 2010 and 2023.

Mali - China	Imports			Exports		
	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank	Value in millions (USD)	As a % of total volume	Rank
2000	26,6	2,55%	7.	0,46	0,06%	30.
2010	490	11%	3.	105	5%	3.
2023	803	12,4	3.	78,50	1,2%	4.

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)

Mali has done a remarkable shift from a primarily exporting agricultural products like cotton, livestock and cereals to an economy based on the export of gold. The reason for this shift is the volatile global cotton prices, unfair competition from subsidized producers and environmental degradation, which has made the growing of cotton unsustainable (Theriat & Sterns 2012).

Today, gold accounts for over 70% of Mali's export revenue, making the country one of Africa's leading gold producers. This shift was supported by foreign investment, particularly from Canadian, South African, and Australian mining companies, and by national policies aiming to diversify away from vulnerable agricultural exports (Mainguy 2011). Today, the United Arab Emirates are by far the biggest buyer of Malian gold, accounting for almost three quarters of total exports. Economic diversification can also be observed in Mali's imports, where African nations, such as Ivory Coast and Senegal have taken up a bigger share of Mali's bought goods (OEC 2025).

In addition to the forced military withdrawal from the country, Mali's economic diversification has further reduced its political and economic dependence on France. As with Senegal and Gabon, the role of China and other trading partners has been continuously increasing, while the

one of France has been steadily declining. In this context, Mali's shift from cotton to gold reflects broader efforts to diversify its economy, reduce dependency on traditional partners, and engage with a wider, multipolar group of trade allies that better align with its strategic and economic goals.

## 6. Decline of Political Influence

The aim of this section is to analyse the voting behaviour of all countries in the region in the UN General Assembly to see if their historical voting alignment with France has changed or is remaining. For this goal, I used the Voeten et al. (2024) dataset and edited it in the statistics programme R to create the barplots below.

From a postcolonial view, political influence is defined as the ability of the former coloniser to shape the political landscape of its former colonies even after their formal independence by influencing institutional frameworks, governance models, leadership choices and the foreign policy of its former colonies. Unlike military or economic control, political control is maintained through softer mechanisms, such as elite networks, diplomatic pressures, ideological affinities or constitutional frameworks. It is often subtle and less visible than other forms of control and operates mainly through personal relationships, legal systems, and administrative traditions inherited from the colonial period (Etogho 2023).

### 6.1. Changes in Voting Alignment in the UNGA

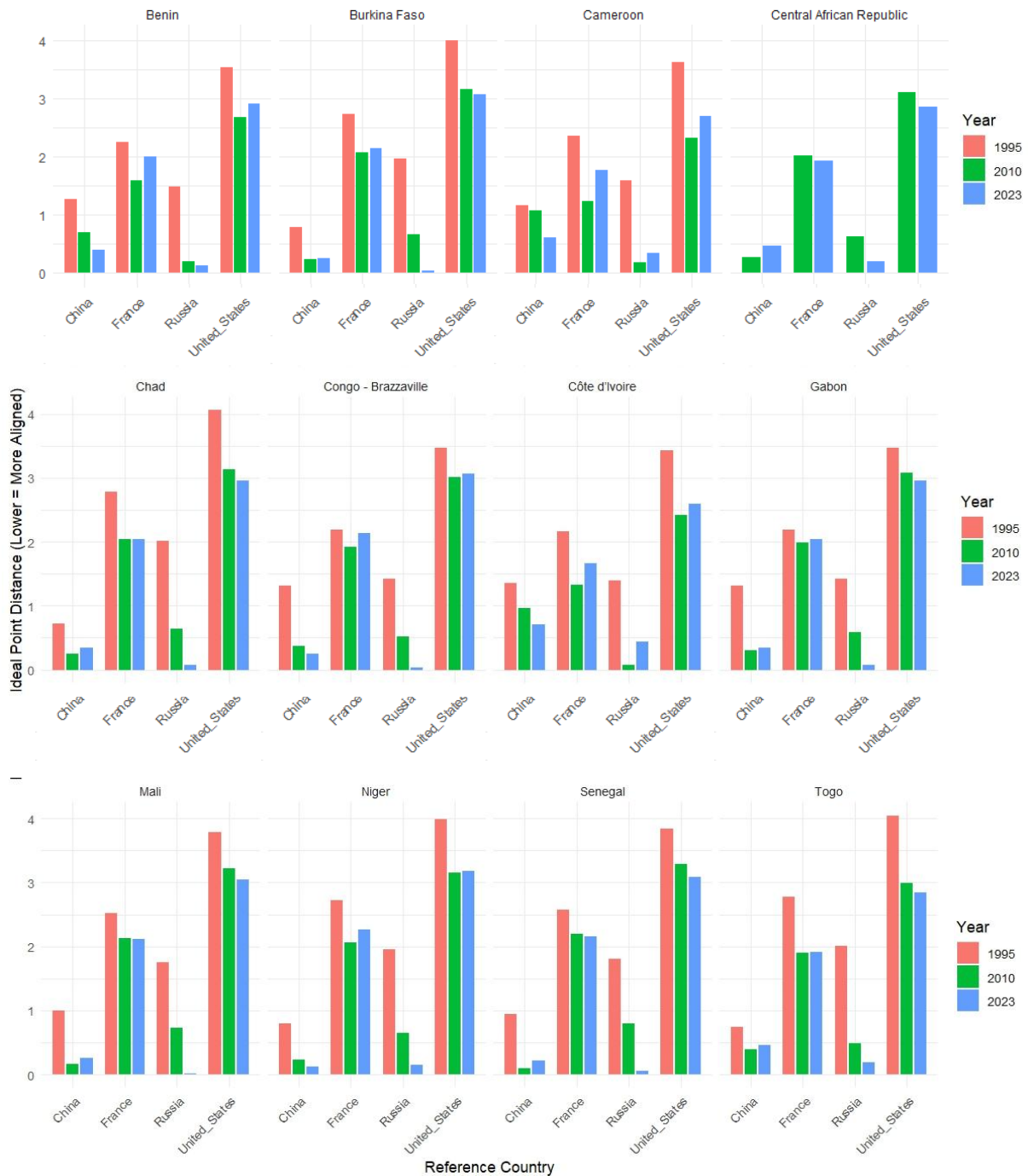
The salience of examining changes in UN General Assembly voting alignment is that countries with close diplomatic and political relationships tend to vote similarly. Therefore, a change in this indicator would most likely mean a changing political and diplomatic relation between two countries (Moreno León & Fajardo-Heyward 2024).

Historically, France and its former colonies in Africa maintained a strong political alignment through the post-colonial *Françafrique* system described above, which also could be observed in the UNGA. This meant that between the 1960s until the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980, France could dictate the voting behaviour of around 15-20 African countries. This voting bloc allowed France with the help of these additional votes to steer resolutions in the UNGA in their favour - especially regarding Cold War-related issues or garnering support for French proposals or French candidates for high-ranking positions in international organizations. In the 1990s, however, this voting bloc increasingly became looser and African countries' voting behaviour became more issue-specific and less dependent upon France (Bayart 1996).

The graph below shows the voting alignment of all African countries relevant for my analysis with China, France, Russia and the United States in the year 1995 (beginning of the dataset), 2010 and 2023. The reason for this selection is that I want to analyse if the voting behaviour (and in consequence their political and diplomatic alignment) of the analysed African nations with China, Russia and France has changed over the past 30 years. I have included the United

States since it is another major power in the region and as another Western country, it has a high voting alignment with France. In this manner, a lower voting alignment with France can be separated from a reduced alignment with Western positions in general.

Table 6.1.1.: Voting Alignment of Francophone African Countries with Major Powers in 1995, 2010 and 2023. Lower Barplot means higher Alignment.



Source: Voeten et al. (2024)

By 1995, the process of declining French influence along the military, economic and political dimension had already begun, which can also be observed in its low voting alignment with African countries. At this time, many African nations were wary of Western-led interventionism and stopped voting for their resolutions, especially after the Rwandan Genocide (1994), the U.S. military engagement in Somalia, and France's selective military engagement in Africa (Melvern 2000). On the other hand, China and Russia aligned better with the political concerns of African regimes at the time through their principles of sovereignty and non-interference (Ewalefoh 2022). This meant that the position in the UNGA of all analysed African countries was already closer to China and Russia than to France or the USA (Voeten et al. 2024).

In 2010, a closer voting alignment of African nations with all major powers can be observed, although their voting alignment with the USA and France only rose a little compared to the voting alignment with China and, especially Russia. This is very indicative of Russia's re-engagement strategy in Africa in the late 2000s and 2010s and China's rise as an economic partner on the African continent.

In 2023, the trend of the 2010s continue, with China's economic dominance of Africa through its Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's growing military engagement with countries in the Sahel region and beyond. The barplots clearly show that when it comes to the voting behaviour in the UNGA, Francophone African countries are much closer aligned to Russia and China than to France and the USA (Voeten, et al. 2024).

For Russia, this is a clear strategy in Africa, where it seeks to actively engage with these countries to secure their votes in the UNGA, especially after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. This engagement is part of a broader Russian effort to build diplomatic support, counter Western narratives, and secure allies in international forums (Kohnert 2022c). A striking example of African support for Russia is the resolution to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which 81% of countries outside Africa voted for, but only 51% in Africa (White & Holtz 2022).

While China seeks to influence their votes as well, it generally does so less overtly than Russia. China's approach is more long-term, institutionalized, and economically focused, using diplomatic, economic, and symbolic tools to encourage alignment - especially on issues it considers core to its interests, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, human rights or non-intervention (Martinez 2015).

Concerning the resolutions in the UNGA, France can no longer expect its former African colonies to align their votes with France. On the opposite, these nations seem much more aligned with Russia and China, supporting resolutions that might go against French and Western interests in general.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the decline of French influence in its former colonies in Francophone West and Central Africa from 2000 along the political, economic and military dimensions, using a neocolonial framework. The findings across all three dimensions show a clear and accelerating erosion of France's ability to shape the regions, economic, strategic and diplomatic orientations.

Militarily, the failed military missions over the last thirty years have severely damaged France's legitimacy as a security guarantor in the region, starting with Rwanda in 1994, Mali in 2013 and Operation Barkhane between 2014 and 2022. These failures coupled with the rising anti-French sentiment have led to the replacement of French troops through Russia's private military organizations in the region. Although France retains an important function as an arms exporter to its allies, the shift from direct military presence to an indirect form of assistance marks the end of a key pillar of the *Françafrique* system.

Economically, while French corporations such as Total, Bolloré, and Orano still dominate key sectors, trade data shows that France's centrality as a trading partner has declined. China has overtaken France as the most important trading partner with even historically close allies of France, such as Senegal and Gabon. In addition, African countries increasingly trade among themselves, supported by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This diversification strategy reflects Africa's growing desire for economic sovereignty and independence in international trade relations. France's monetary influence via the CFA Franc system still exists but mounting criticism and gradual reforms make the end of the region's monetary dependence highly probable in the future.

Politically, a shift towards non-alignment or realignment with new powers, such as China and Russia can be observed through the analysis of voting behaviour in the region. These developments are accompanied by the rise of anti-French sentiment and a growing demand for a second independence through a cultural, linguistic and political decolonization. As a response, France has adapted its strategy to become a more equal partner that emphasises cooperation and indirect assistance rather than outright political or military domination.

In combination, these trends do not suggest a mere retreat of French influence in the region but rather a broader realignment of Africa's agency and positioning in the international sphere. However, France's decline does not automatically mean an increased autonomy of these African countries. It might mean that the once dominant position of France will be taken over by new actors, such as China, Russia or Turkey, who might impose their own neocolonial system through strategic investments, military partnerships, or soft power.

In conclusion, these findings align with the growing body of scholarly literature that argues France has been steadily losing influence in Francophone West and Central Africa. The military, economic, and political trends observed in this study confirm that the neocolonial structures underpinning *Françafrique* are being dismantled, both by internal resistance and the rise of alternative global powers. These developments are not a marginal geopolitical shift. It is a historic turning point that signals the end of the *Françafrique* system and 130 years of French dominance in the region. While this shift may lead to the emergence of a multipolar and sovereign Africa, it might just lead to the dependence on a different country. While this question remains to be answered, one thing is clear: the age of unquestioned French dominance in West and Central Africa is over.

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