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The Russo-Malian Cooperation: A Win or Loss for France?

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Abstract: The Republic of Mali is a country of the African continent. The country is situated in a landlocked region in West Africa with Bamako as its capital city. It is worthy to note that the contemporary Mali was an integral part of the then great West African empires. These empires namely; the Ghana Empire, the Mali Empire and the Songhai Empire controlled the trans-Saharan trade. Mali has for a long time been under the control of France, especially with the events of the late 19th century scramble for and partitioning of Africa among some European powers. Over the years, there have been varying debates on the presence of France in Mali as compared with other great powers. Although Russia tried to move in the direction of Mali during the era of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), contemporary Russian Federation has been somehow distanced from Mali until Vladimir Putin assumed the leadership role of Russia. Thus, this paper is carried out to dissect the Pacts between Moscow and Bamako and the implications on France interest. Cultural Theory of International Relations was used. The study relied on interpretive design. Primary and secondary data were collected. Data were subjected to content analysis. It is uncovered that Moscow challenged Paris, whose dominance is fast depreciating in Mali. Mali and France enjoyed mutual relationship until the closure of 5000 Berkane mission in Kidal, northern Mali over alleged sympathy for terrorists and economic sabotage. Putin's Russia therefore capitalized on Mali's face off with France.

Keywords: Russo-Malian; France; Russia; Terrorists; Communist; Mali

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1. Introduction

The closest Russia ever got to Africa since the fall of Soviet Union was Central African Republic (CAR) in 2018. In the summer of 2018, three Russian journalists who were on a special visit to the beleaguered African Republic were ambushed and murdered (Matusevich, 2019). The journalists, as we were meant to believe were in the region to pursue a story on the “Wagner Group”, a Russian paramilitary firm, said to have a link to the Kremlin’s Landlord, President Putin, and who were also alleged to be actively involved in CAR’s civil war (Matusevich, 2019). During the post communist era, (1991-2000), Russia significantly scaled back its activities in Development Assistance Programmes in the whole of African region. And now is the time for Putin’s Russia to catch up with the West and China. Although communist Russia came with the toga of socialist ideology against the ills of capitalism, it has since gone with the tide (Vadim et al, 2019). The communist Russia’s respect for African sovereignty dates back to its participation in Angolan struggle for independence and fight against apartheid in South Africa. The events of 2011 upsurge in state sponsored insurrections, popularly called Arab Spring furthered added to the world insecurity and rise in the activities of non state actors such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and Al-Shabab in the Middle East and Africa (Abimbola et al, 2021). Russia won’t watch the Ghaddafi type faith befall long time ally in Damascus and Tehran. Young officers in Military elsewhere in West Africa are beginning to rely on Moscow’s strength and fire power for stability instead of France.

Russia’s relations with Mali, being the epic centre of Russian presence in francophone West Africa is pivotal in the discourse of her relations in the African continent in the contemporary international politics. In February 2013, French forces were deployed to Timbuktu, northern Mali on the order of President François Hollande of France to help fight insurgents. Surprisingly, Malians took to the streets to protest alleged French involvements in destabilizing the beleaguered West African country for economic and political gains. France was accused of both sympathizing, funding or abetting terrorism and extremism for its own interests in the Sahel while on anti-terrorism missions. There has been growing resentment for France and its long anti-terrorism mission that clearly doesn’t seem to bear any fruits in that region. The people of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso now want Paris to withdraw its forces and leave them alone. The people, Malians to be precise are calling for collaborations with Moscow instead. Mali has been plagued by a conflict that began as a separatist movement in the north of the country in 2012, but devolved into a multitude of armed

groups jockeying for control in the central and northern regions. As may be recalled, the French Military in March 2021 started preparing for a return of major conflict involving the full range operation on a wider scale, not seen for decades. Their plans were to collaborate with Nigeria and other West African countries with strong French interest. In March 2021, France offered to train Nigerian Navy to tackle piracy in the gulf of Guinea when President Emmanuel Macron came to Nigeria on state visit to President Muhammadu Buhari. During one of her reconnaissance missions, a French man was arrested while repairing Bokoharam terrorists fighting equipments in Sambisa, a forest twice the size of Belgium by Nigerian army operatives.

The sudden arrest of the French man forced authorities in Abuja to abandoned talks with Paris and look to Moscow for immediate Military Technical Cooperation in August 2021. Sometimes in September 2021, president Macron accused Algiers of attempt to re-write history of its colonization with Paris, he said “Algeria did not exist before French colonial rule”. In response, Algeria closed her airspace to French aircrafts and threatened to shoot down French aircrafts should there be violation. The correlation here is that, France is looking for alternative source of getting uranium out of west Africa, using Mali as alternative route, haven fallen out with Algiers, and Kazakhstan, a Russian speaking country in Asia with abundance of uranium is a no go area. On 5th September, 2021, president Alpha Conde of Guinea was toppled in a military coup orchestrated by a French trained officer with dual citizenship. And on first October of year 2021, Mali’s partnership with Russia led to a sale of four Mi-17E helicopters, which did not go down well with France. Meanwhile, Mali’s Prime Minister, Chiquel Kokalla was said to have told sputnik News, that Mali has evidence of France support and training of Ansar al.Din, a terror group in Kidal. In the words of Minister Kodalla, “Mali has no access to Kidal, this is an enclave controlled by France, and the Malian military is banned from entering the territory. They have armed groups trained by French officers; we have evidence and do not understand the situation”. France’s 5000 Barkhane mission ended following these allegations and calls from Malians for them to leave their country.

Although a top European Union Envoy, Josep Borrell Fontelles believes the accusations about Europe, France involvements in terrorism or regime change in West Africa was part of disinformation campaigns against the Union’s missions in Africa to help the people of the Sahel region to fight terrorism. Following the misunderstanding with France, Malian authorities contracted Russia’s security firm, the Wagner group to provide security despite vehement protest from France, Britain

and other European countries. As at December 2021, no fewer than 500 fighters have arrived Mali, getting ready to be deployed to different locations, while some are engaged as personal body guards to the Malian VIPs. As a result of this decision, French president, Emmanuel Macron condemns the move and says the Malian government he once supported when the going was good is illegitimate, that the intervention of Russia would be incompatible with the efforts carried out by Mali's Sahelian and international partners engaged in the Coalition for the Sahel security and development of the regions. So far, Mali has aborted diplomatic ties with France completely, declaring the ambassador a persona non grata, and ordered him out of Mali within 72hrs. The presence of Russia in Mali would no doubt accelerate its push as alternative to traditional western powers like France and United States. Their presence has a wider campaign to check the long standing dominance of France and China in West Africa.

2. Research Methodology

This paper discussed Russian-Malian Military Cooperation and its implications on France. Specifically, this was done in relation to geo-politics of dominance of one country over the other. In the process, data used were carefully sourced through primary and secondary sources. Purposively selected people were interviewed and their contributions and suggestions contributed to the bulk of the study. Also, published books, articles in reputable journals, paper reviews, and theses were used. The study adopted historical method of research. The interpretive design was used. Data were subjected to content analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework

Holsti's (2010) Cultural Theory of International Relations formed the theoretical basis for the paper. This theory was particularly devised for the study as it relates to two sovereign independent states (Russia and Mali). While Russia is stable politically and economically, the same cannot be said for Mali that is witnessing chaos and uncertainty. Holsti (2010) espoused "liberalism and Marxism as being rooted in appetite, and so is realism at one remove". Cultural theory of International Relations is a paradigm based on fear, and the theories within it contend that, in anarchical environments such as that of Mali and Syria, actors must make security their first concern, and only then can they begin to indulge in their desires for

material well-being (Holsti, 2010). One cannot be less in agreement with this theory since state actors have mastered the act of fortifying themselves with the best of security apparatus. For instance, Assad invited the Russians to Damascus to help shore up his wobbling regime from being overthrown by the western backed insurrection that has since metamorphosed into civil war, as actors cannot effectively function in an atmosphere laced with chaos and uncertainty. The first thing the Malian junta, Col Assimi Goita implemented on assumption was to lay the foundation for the arrival of Russian mercenaries. There is no paradigm or theory that builds on the motive of the spirit and human need for self esteem. The description of the ways by which zeal for honour and standing affluent among actors often shape political behaviour of states (Holsti, 2010). The Malian junta feared he could be toppled like other democratically elected presidents and Prime Ministers, and feels his countrymen would honour and respect him with a change in the ways things are done. Goita's government signed protective military agreement that enable the Russian to put their boots on the ground and set the people against the French government. This justified the application of a Tradition Diplomacy Theory of International Relation Theory.

4. The Russo-Malian Diplomatic Contacts in Brief

Although, the Soviet Union first arrived Africa at the peak of cold war with the west, and on heels of African decolonization, but those aims presented an uneasy mixture of idealistic aspirations and sober pragmatism, (Matusevich, 2019). As may be recalled, few developments affected the soviet's position in the Third World as much as coups d'état (David, 1986). While the overwhelming numbers of Third World Countries that have turned towards the USSR or realigned towards it have done so as a results of coups, given the frequency of instability and the propensity of the soviets to exploit them when they arises. While the views espoused by this scholar (David, 1986), might not be totally acceptable because of his political and ideological linings. The soviets did emphasize their stand against racism and colonialism in Africa. While the symbiosis relationship between the USSR and Africa lasted, more than 50,000 African students attended tertiary education in the Soviet Union, and tens of thousands studied in other Eastern Bloc countries (Constantin, 2021). It was also established that, throughout the decades of its existence, the Soviet Union did not fail to emphasize the contrast between its own ideological commitments to anti-racism and colonialism, (Matusevich, 2019).

That been said, October 14 1960 marked the beginning of diplomatic relationships between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), now Russia and Mali, haven earlier recognized Mali as an independent nation in October of the same year (*Ginsburgs & Slusser, 1981*). When the Malian Federation seizes to exist, and due to France solidarity with Senegal, President Modibo Keita, sought closer ties with the Soviet Union (*Bingen et al 2000*). The Soviet Union and Mali signed trade and cultural agreements and Mali was granted loans and other aid. Among them was two Ilushin passenger aircrafts for Air Mali in 1961. Under the cultural pact, Russia was allowed to dispatch Soviet circus performers, sports trainers and a soccer team to Mali in the same year (*Guttery, 1998*). As result of the coup d'état in Mali, Keita's government was toppled by Moussa Traoré and his loyalists in 1968. Traoré improved relations with France and other Western countries afterward but remained tied to the apron strings of the Soviet Union for arms supply and military training. Close to fifty Soviets military advisors, amour, artillery and parachute training were offered to Mali by Moscow, in addition to flying training of Mali's pilots.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Mali recognized the Russian federation as the legal successor, and since then, the two parties have always exchanged mutual correspondence. Most of the African leaders who were loyal to French interests during the cold war in the 60s are no longer in power (*Farhoui et al, 2013*). France, one of the western traditional powers in Africa feels their interest to be increasingly vulnerable, especially with the wave of anti French plotters in its former colonies. Poor governance, weak central authority, ethnic rifts, and fast rising terrorism is a reflection of international competition over Africa by major powers, France inclusive (*Farhoui et. al, 2013*). The crisis in Mali is strongly linked to other geopolitical and geo-economics interaction in other parts of the world like Indian Ocean and Eastern Europe. Development in Mali is as a result of rising power's scramble to include Mali and other African countries in their military strategies because of its wide spread natural resources-like oil and uranium (*Farhoui et al, 2013*). These great powers are doing these to acquire Mali's resources and have them transported safely to their economy through the military routes they have created. What worries Paris and its western allies is that, China, and now Russia's economic relations with Africa are accompanied by military pacts (*Farhoui et al, 2013*). What happened in Mozambique, CAR, and now Mali is a concern for the west, given how Moscow handles its business in Syria and Central African Republic.

5. Why are the Russians now in Mali?

The People keep asking what the Russians are looking for in Mali, a landlocked French speaking West African country that is not as viable economically as Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Senegal and other others in the region. But, Moscow's interest in Bamako can be traced to the 60s when the Cold War (CW) was at its zenith (Matusevich, 2019). Their interests then stems from Russia's assessments of the crisis in northern Mali as a turning point for Moscow in the region (Farhoui et al, 2013). And rather than viewing Africa from a geo-political Perspective of the "Cold War", Russia now approaches the situation in northern Mali as a "geo-economic perspective" because of its rich solid/natural resources. Going by the statements of a Russian official, Mikhail Margelov who had once predicted war in Mali, the abundant natural resources of the Francophone nation, may one day be considered a likely field for future wars between the traditional powers (Russia, France, Britain, USA and China, because there are still untapped reserves of Uranium and Gold in the north of the west African nation, where the current problem started from. For instance, Gold dominates Mali's natural resources sector, and the francophone country is the fourth largest producer in Africa behind Ghana, South Africa, and Sudan. Gold constitutes over 80 percent of Mali's total exports in 2020 alone.

In exchange for the goodies, the Russians provided the Malian juntas with security and military hardware to help exert control over the country's north, which is in their best interest, and a huge loss for the French authorities, who are now worried that, the Uranium they are obtaining from Niger for nuclear power generation back home in France may be at big risk (Farhoui et al, 2013).

Chart showing the Malian gold resources market estimation from 2017-2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total Local Production	≈ 50 tons	\$2 billion	65.1 tons	65.2 tons
Total Exports	\$2 billion	60.8 tons	\$2.5 billion	\$3.2 billion

6. Trade

According to the 2021 data from the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, Moscow's trade surplus widened to a record \$26.72 billion (USD) in December of 2021 from \$10.82 billion (USD) in the corresponding month of the previous year.

Exports surged 60 percent to USD 57.38 billion, a new high for the series, boosted by sales to non Commonwealth of Independent States including Mali and Nigeria. Russia exported planes and Helicopters worth \$26.7 Million (USD) to Mali, Wheat totaling \$21.5 Million (USD) in value, and Nitrogenous Fertilizers in the region of \$2.33 Million (USD). Russian Exports to Mali have increased in volume at an annualized rate of 25.3 percent, from \$319 thousand in 1996 to \$57.1 Million (USD) 23 years after, (2019). Russia exported services worth \$33.8 million (USD) to Mali in 2018, with transportation taken the front seat as the largest in terms of value. The Malians on their part exported goods worth \$5.48 Million (USD) to the Russian federation in 2019. The main products that Mali exported to Russia was agricultural produce like tropical fruits said to worth \$125 thousand (USD), and integrated circuits that were worth \$19.5 thousand United States Dollars.

7. Conclusion

Following the fall of Communist rule in Russia and several other States that made up the Soviet Union (Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova) in December 1991, Russia's participation in Africa reduced. As the legal successor to the Soviet Union, Moscow was no longer able to meet up with diplomatic obligations abroad due to severe economic crisis. Fortunately, there was huge rise in prices of crude oil at the international market in the years 2000s. This rise in oil price afforded Russian leaders led by Vladimir Putin the opportunity to build an economically self sufficient and militarily assertive nation that is again challenging the unilateral decisions of the US and NATO on global issues, such as the Syrian crisis and ongoing special military operations in Ukraine. Having now announced its presence in Mali, Moscow is poised for show down with Paris, whose dominance is fast depreciating in the continent. It would be recall that, Mali and France enjoyed mutual relationship until the closure of 5000 Berkane mission in Kidal, northern Mali over alleged sympathy for terrorists and economic sabotage. The French ambassador was declared persona non grata, and this heightened tension between the two nations.

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