



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Sahel Becomes New Focal Point in Russia-Ukraine Geopolitical Rivalry



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Summary

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is escalating, with Ukraine reportedly launching a surprise attack on Russia's Kursk region in August 2024, while Russian forces continue advances in Donbas and Kharkiv. Concurrently, tensions in the African Sahel are increasing as Mali and Niger have severed diplomatic ties with Ukraine. This follows reports alleging Kyiv's support for armed groups operating against the Malian army and Wagner forces. This situation reflects a growing geopolitical rivalry, with Ukraine seeking to enhance its influence in Africa through diplomatic initiatives, while Russia strengthens its economic and military partner-

ships on the continent. A regional alliance involving Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso aims to reduce reliance on Western powers, which are facing increasing rejection in the region. Concerns are mounting that the Sahel may become a new arena for the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with Moscow accusing Kyiv of supporting terrorism. Ukraine, however, faces significant challenges in building alliances in Africa compared to Russia, which has capitalized on Western withdrawals. These developments could further escalate the power struggle between Russia and Ukraine for influence in Africa.

Main Points

- **Escalation of the Russia-Ukraine War and Its Impact on Africa:**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has intensified, with reports of Ukrainian forces advancing into Russia's Kursk region while Russian attacks continue in Donbas. Simultaneously, tensions in the Sahel region have risen following accusations that Ukraine supported rebel groups against the Malian army and Wagner forces, reflecting growing geopolitical competition in Africa.

- **Diplomatic Break Between Sahel States and Ukraine:**

Mali and Niger announced the severance of diplomatic ties with Ukraine after reports alleged Kyiv's involvement in an attack on Malian forces. This move highlights escalating tensions between Western-aligned interests and Russia in Africa, as Moscow strengthens its influence while Paris and Washington face increasing resistance in the region.

- **Ukrainian Foreign Minister's African Tour:**

Ukraine's foreign minister embarked on a tour of African countries to strengthen diplomatic ties and gain support in international forums. However, this initiative coincided with growing tensions in the Sahel, potentially hindering Kyiv's efforts to counter Russian influence and establish new strategic partnerships on the continent.

- **Western Retreat and Russian Expansion in Africa:**

The gradual withdrawal of U.S. and French forces from countries like Mali and Niger has created a perceived power vacuum, allowing Russia to

expand its military and economic footprint, partly through Wagner forces and security agreements. This shift has bolstered Moscow's role as a potential partner, capitalizing on some African discontent with Western influence.

- **Accusations Against Ukraine of Supporting Terrorism:**

Ukraine's reported implicit acknowledgment of providing intelligence to Malian rebels has sparked controversy, with Moscow accusing Kyiv of opening a new front against Russia. Mali views its diplomatic break with Ukraine as a defense of its sovereignty, though some observers suggest it may also serve as a distraction from the government's military setbacks.

- **Russia's Strategic Gains from the African Crisis:**

Moscow is leveraging the situation to solidify its presence in Africa, positioning itself as a security and economic partner. Russia is expanding its investments in infrastructure and arms sales while also potentially benefiting from Africa's voting bloc in international forums, which could strengthen its global stance amid the ongoing war with Ukraine.

- **Potential Consequences for Ukraine-Africa Relations:**

These developments could weaken Ukraine's standing in Africa while fueling anti-Western sentiment, potentially benefiting Russia. The situation may also lead to stronger regional alliances among Sahel states, which could deepen international divisions and escalate the geopolitical struggle between global powers for influence on the continent.

The African Sahel: A New Front in the Russia-Ukraine War

The Russian-Ukrainian war has escalated significantly, particularly following reports of Ukraine's sudden and unexpected attack on Russia's Kursk region in the southwest on August 6, 2024, and continued Russian advances on the main eastern front (Donbas front), where they have reportedly accumulated incremental gains. Fighting persists across all frontlines, including the southern front and the area around Kharkiv, alongside an intensification of mutual airstrikes and missile attacks targeting infrastructure, military, and logistical facilities.

Simultaneously, the African Sahel region has witnessed developments that appear to reflect the repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This follows Mali and Niger's announcement of severing diplomatic ties with Ukraine, amid reports implicating Ukraine in an attack carried out by "Tuareg groups" allegedly allied with "Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin" (JNIM) against Malian army formations and Wagner forces in July 2024. The attack reportedly resulted in the deaths of 47 Malian soldiers and 84 members of the Russian Wagner forces—a significant death toll since Wagner's reported arrival in Mali in 2021.

In this context, questions arise about the possibility of the Sahel region becoming a new arena for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, or whether Ukraine's role in Africa is merely that of a proxy for the United States and Western nations seeking to restore their influence in the Sahel and counter Russia's growing regional presence. This can be explored through several axes:

Axis One: Escalating Tensions in the Region

The escalating situation in the African Sahel has raised international concerns about the potential spillover of the Russia-Ukraine war into the region. These fears have been amplified by reports suggesting Ukrainian involvement in the recent attack in Mali, which resulted in dozens of casualties among Malian army forces and members of the Russian private security group, Wagner. The timing of this crisis highlights several key factors:

01 Losses from the Attack on Mali

The conflict in Mali has escalated with the increasing attacks by armed groups, prompting the government to seek support from Russia's Wagner forces to strengthen its military capabilities. Despite Wagner's assistance, deadly attacks continue, highlighting the complexity of the security landscape and the local forces' inability to maintain control.



02 Military and Diplomatic Presence



Surprise Ukrainian attack on Russia's Kursk region

August 6, 2024



Complete U.S. withdrawal from Niger

August 6, 2024



Ukrainian Foreign Minister's tour of Zambia, Malawi, Mauritius to strengthen relations

August 6, 2024



1. Renewed Escalation in the Russia-Ukraine War:

These regional tensions coincide with an intensification of military operations between Russia and Ukraine. Ukrainian forces reportedly advanced across the Russian border, capturing parts of western Kursk in a surprise offensive—marking a deep Ukrainian incursion into Russian territory since the war began in 2022. This development could strengthen Ukraine's position in potential ceasefire negotiations, which are speculated to take place after Trump won US Presidential Elections.

2. Severing Diplomatic Ties with Ukraine:

These tensions followed the decisions by Niger's military junta and Mali's transitional government to cut diplomatic relations with Ukraine. This move came in response to statements attributed to Andrii Yusov, spokesperson for Ukraine's military intelligence agency, regarding the late-July military operation against Malian forces and Wagner troops. Additionally, Ukraine's ambassador in Dakar reportedly shared Yusov's remarks via video, prompting Senegalese authorities to summon the ambassador for clarification. Meanwhile, Burkina Faso expressed solidarity with Mali's military leadership and deployed troops to help suppress insurgencies led by extremist groups in northern Mali.

3. Ukrainian Foreign Minister's African Tour:

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba conducted an African tour from August 4

to August 8, visiting Zambia, Malawi, and Mauritius. This effort represents Kyiv's attempt to strengthen ties with African nations and secure their support in international forums, particularly as Ukraine expands its diplomatic reach by opening new embassies across the continent.

4. U.S. Withdrawal from Niger: The U.S. Department of Defense announced on August 5 that Washington had completed its military withdrawal from Niger, bringing an end to its counterterrorism operations in Niamey. Despite ongoing instability in the region, increasing tensions between the two governments reportedly prevented the continuation of the U.S. military mission, which had been supporting Nigerien forces in their fight against jihadist groups in the Sahel.

5. France's Declining Influence in Africa:

France has been experiencing a decline in its influence and standing in Africa, particularly as anti-French sentiment continues to rise across the continent. Recent military transitions in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea illustrate this rejection, as these countries have moved to reduce ties with French-aligned leadership. Public demonstrations have increasingly opposed French involvement in African affairs, while at the same time expressing growing support for Russia, which is perceived by some as a potential alternative to fill the power vacuum left by France's retreat. The latest developments in the Sahel region underscore the deepening rejection of French influence in Africa.

1 Ukrainian "massive" drone attack on Russia's Lipetsk region – Sky News Arabia. Link

2 Niger joins Mali in severing diplomatic ties with Ukraine, The Financial Times.
<https://www.ft.com/content/52108d03-fefb-4eec-af3c-7c09c7aae3da>

3 Ukraine foreign minister heads to Africa to win support in war against Russia, 4 August 2024, Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-foreign-minister-heads-africa-win-support-war-against-russia-2024-08-04/>

4 The U.S. military completes its withdrawal from an important airbase in Niger – Link

Axis Two: Implications of the Crisis

The decision by Mali and Niger to sever diplomatic ties with Ukraine may seem insignificant to some, given the limited economic relations between Ukraine and the Sahel countries, including Burkina Faso. This raises several questions regarding the true motives behind this decision. However, the Ukrainian government strongly condemned Bamako's move, calling it hasty and short-sighted, while also rejecting allegations of Ukrainian support for international terrorism. Meanwhile, Kyiv continues to seek African support in its conflict against Moscow. Several key indicators help explain the growing hostility of some Sahel countries toward Ukraine, including:

- **Ukraine's Reported Implicit Admission of Involvement in the Mali Attack:**

Statements attributed to Andrii Yusov suggested that Kyiv had provided extensive intelligence to rebel groups for their attack on Malian forces and Wagner troops. Additionally, reports indicated that Ukraine's diplomatic corps welcomed the military operation against Russian security forces and Malian troops in northern Mali, raising suspicions about a possible connection between Ukraine and armed organizations in northern Mali. This reportedly led Malian authorities to sever diplomatic ties with Kyiv.

- **Mali's Stated Right to Defend Its Sovereignty:**

Mali has stated that it refuses to let its territory become a battleground for conflicts between foreign powers, particularly Ukraine and Russia. The country views such actions as an extension of geopolitical rivalries rather than a local issue. Like many other Sahel nations, Mali remains wary of any threats to its sovereignty, and its latest decision serves as a warning to international and regional actors—especially its direct neighbors—that similar diplomatic rifts could occur.

- **The Malian Transitional Government's Potential Attempt to Conceal Military Failures:**

The decision to cut ties with Ukraine may be an effort by Malian authorities to deflect attention from military defeats suffered by their forces and Wagner troops. By redirecting blame toward external actors, the government may seek to contain security threats and highlight perceived continued European support for insurgent groups—especially in the wake of France's military withdrawal from the region and Washington's exit from Niger—amid ongoing terrorist activity.

- **Signaling Continued Russian Support:**

Mali and Niger's decision to sever ties with Ukraine serves as a strong message of their alignment with Russia in its war against Kyiv. It also frames Ukraine, in their view, as a state that backs terrorism, which could provoke anger among certain nations and potentially damage Ukraine's international standing. This, in turn, might hinder Kyiv's recent efforts to expand its diplomatic footprint in Africa and counter Russia's influence on the continent.

- **Sustained Anti-European Sentiment in the Sahel:**

The latest developments reflect a broader rejection of European influence in the Sahel. Since the wave of military coups that began in Mali in 2020, relations between some Sahel states and Western powers—such as France, the U.S., and the European Union—have become increasingly strained. These nations are now seeking to end ties with some Western powers and forge new partnerships with Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran, aiming to reverse what they perceive as decades of European exploitation of Africa's wealth and resources.

Axis Three: Key International and Regional Reactions

There have been diverse reactions to the rising tensions between the Sahel states and Ukraine, summarized as follows:

- **The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS):** ECOWAS issued a statement on its official X (formerly Twitter) account, condemning foreign interference in Mali's internal affairs. The organization strongly opposed any external interventions that threaten peace and security in West Africa or attempt to draw the region into ongoing geopolitical confrontations. ECOWAS also denounced the reported terrorist attack in Mali.

- **Russia's Stance:** Moscow accused Ukrainian authorities of attempting to open new fronts in the war against Russia by supporting terrorist organizations in Africa. A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson claimed that, after failing to achieve desired results on the battlefield, Kyiv is now resorting to backing extremist groups in Africa to undermine Russian interests.

- **Ukraine's Stance:** The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry rejected Mali's allegations of involvement in the July 27 terrorist attack against Malian forces. It also condemned Bamako's decision to sever diplomatic ties, calling it hasty and short-sighted. Kyiv reiterated its opposition to what it terms Russia's unjustified aggression and emphasized its commitment to international law and global justice, particularly in supporting African nations' sovereignty and territorial integrity.

- **France's Reported Stance:** A Russian news outlet reported that a high-ranking French military official, speaking on LCI (a French television channel), stressed the need for Paris to support Ukraine in countering Russian influence in Africa. He reportedly highlighted the importance of providing financial aid to Kyiv to strengthen its ties with African nations and curb Moscow's expanding footprint on the continent.

- **Sweden's Stance:** Sweden's Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade announced that Stockholm would review its aid strategy for Mali, potentially cutting assistance following Bamako's decision to sever diplomatic relations with Ukraine. In response, Malian authorities summoned the Swedish ambassador, who was reportedly given 72 hours to leave the country due to Sweden's stance, which Mali deemed hostile.



6 ECOWAS opposed foreign interference in Mali's affairs, Russian news agency "African Initiative." <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/08/ecowas-opposed-foreign-interference-in-malis-affairs/>

7 Russia accuses Ukraine of opening a "second front" in Africa by supporting "terrorist groups" – African Readings. <https://n9.cl/tk1hu>

8 ECOWAS opposed foreign interference in Mali's affairs, *ibid.*

9 French military expert urged to help Ukraine fight Russian Federation in Africa, Russian news agency "African Initiative." <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/08/french-military-expert-urged-to-help-ukraine-fight-russian-federation-in-africa/>

10 Malian authorities demand the Swedish ambassador to leave the country – Russia Today. <https://n9.cl/alOqe>

Axis Four: Russia's Strategic Use of the Crisis

The recent tensions between the Sahel countries and Ukraine represent a significant potential shift in Russia's future engagement with Africa. Given the growing strategic importance of the continent, Moscow is poised to potentially benefit from the crisis in several ways:

- **Revitalizing Russian-African Relations:** These developments provide Moscow with an opportunity to strengthen its ties with African nations. Russia has recognized the strategic value of Africa, particularly amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, as the continent has become a focal point for international competition. Moscow aims to expand its political, economic, and strategic presence in Africa, viewing it as a crucial player in the emerging global order. This aligns with President Vladimir Putin's broader vision of enhancing Russia's geopolitical influence across the continent. This aligns with President Vladimir Putin's broader vision of enhancing Russia's geopolitical influence across the continent.

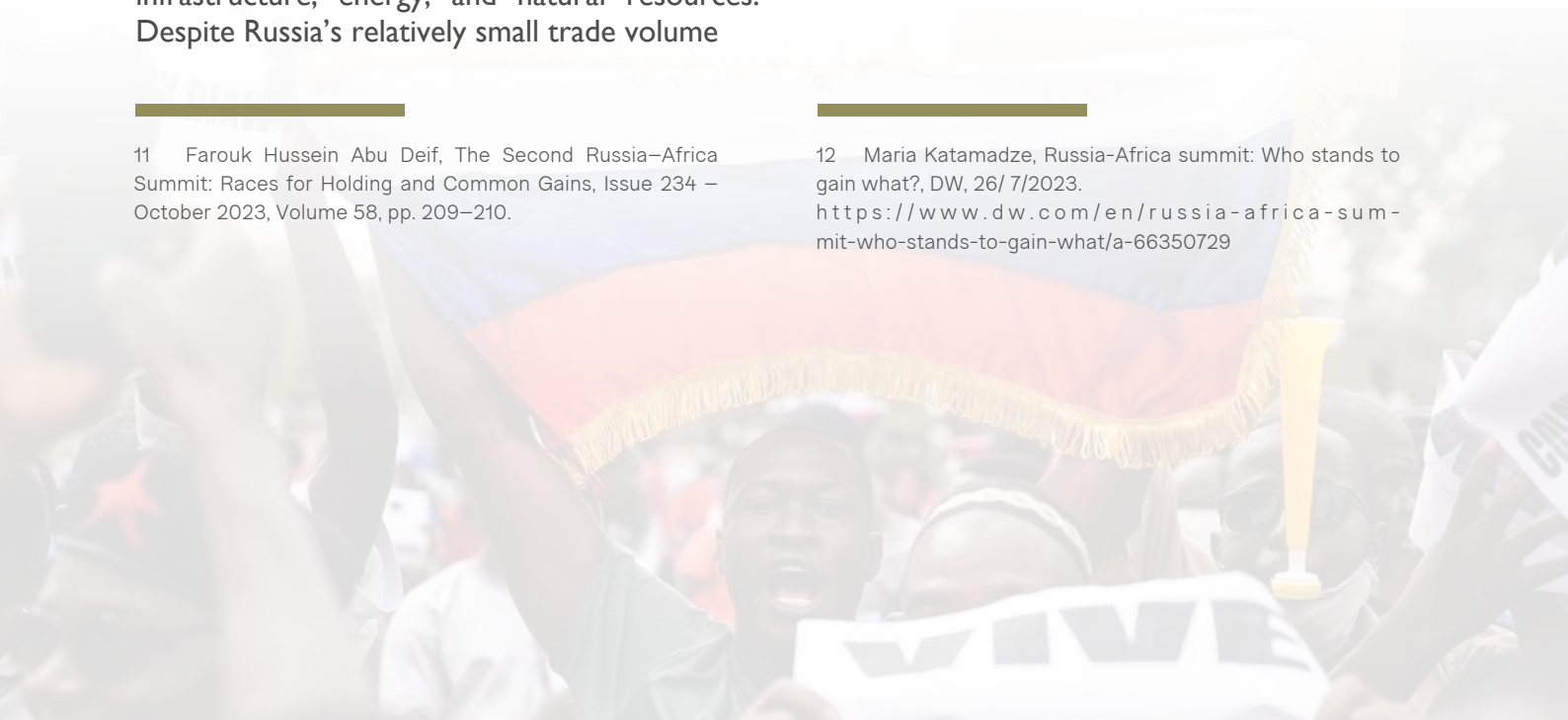
- **Expanding Economic Cooperation with Africa:** By leveraging this crisis, Russia seeks to increase its economic engagement with Africa through trade expansion and investment in infrastructure, energy, and natural resources. Despite Russia's relatively small trade volume

with Africa—reportedly \$18 billion as of 2022—compared to China's \$254 billion and the European Union's \$295 billion, Moscow aims to boost its economic presence. Encouraging Russian companies to invest in Africa could help Moscow diversify its trade partners, reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar, and strengthen the international standing of the Russian ruble.

- **Enhancing Russian Arms Exports to Africa:** Africa represents a significant market for military exports, which Moscow is eager to capitalize on. Russia has remained a major arms supplier to Africa despite a reported decline in global arms sales due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Currently, Russia is said to account for 40% of Africa's arms imports—making the continent its second-largest arms market after Asia—while the U.S., France, and China hold significantly smaller shares (reportedly 16%, 8%, and 1%, respectively). Additionally, the Wagner Group's presence in Africa serves as both a security contractor for some African governments and an informal tool of Russian foreign policy.

11 Farouk Hussein Abu Deif, The Second Russia–Africa Summit: Races for Holding and Common Gains, Issue 234 – October 2023, Volume 58, pp. 209–210.

12 Maria Katamadze, Russia–Africa summit: Who stands to gain what?, DW, 26/7/2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-africa-summit-who-stands-to-gain-what/a-66350729>





03 Russian Military and Economic Influence in Africa

Russia controls **47%** of Africa's arms market

Compared to:

16%

United States

8%

France

1%

China



Africa's trade volume:

295\$ billion

European Union

254\$ billion

China

18\$ billion

Russia

- **Leveraging African Voting Power in International Forums:**

Russia views Africa's 54-country voting bloc as a crucial asset in global governance institutions. The continent's influence was evident during U.N. General Assembly votes on the Ukraine war, where African nations played a pivotal role. Moscow is keen to strengthen these alliances to gain diplomatic backing on key international issues.

- **Supporting Africa's Push for Permanent U.N. Security Council Representation:**

Strengthening ties with Russia could be seen by some African nations as helpful in their bid to secure a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. This aligns with Africa's broader goal of achieving greater representation

in global decision-making bodies, such as the G20. Russia has signaled its support for Africa's inclusion in such forums, further solidifying its partnerships on the continent.

- **Countering Terrorism in Africa:**

Given Africa's persistent security challenges, Russia has positioned itself as a reliable partner in combating terrorism for some governments. Moscow has committed to supplying weapons to African governments—sometimes reportedly for free—to bolster regional stability. This strategy enables Russia to expand its military cooperation with African nations, particularly through intelligence-sharing agreements and security assistance programs. Wagner's presence in multiple African countries further reinforces Moscow's influence in counterterrorism operations for its clients.

13 IMahama Tawat, Russia-Ukraine war: decoding how African countries voted at the UN, the conversation, March 2023. <https://bit.ly/40VCpUn>

14 Will the Washington Summit restore the U.S. role in Africa? – Future Center for Advanced Research and Studies, January 11, 2023.

15 Summary of the results of the Second Russia-Africa Summit and Economic and Humanitarian Forum – ibid.

Axis Five: Potential Implications

It can be argued that the recent tensions between Ukraine on one side and Niger and Mali on the other, which led the two Sahel states to sever diplomatic relations with Ukraine, have triggered several potential repercussions at the local, regional, and international levels. These implications can be examined as follows:

- **Increased Internal Instability:**

These tensions may lead to increased internal instability in the Sahel states, particularly in Mali, where its military forces reportedly suffered a significant defeat at the hands of Azawadian armed factions. This could highlight the weaknesses of the Malian regime and heighten public concerns about the military's inability to secure the country, as well as questions about Russia's effectiveness in countering armed threats. This situation might be seen by some as a repetition of France's perceived failure to contain terrorism and could undermine the political legitimacy of the ruling military government in the coming period. Notably, this government came to power following a military coup partly driven by the previous regime's perceived failure to eliminate terrorism in northern and central Mali.

- **Escalated Anti-Western Sentiment:**

The tensions could further escalate African hostility toward some Western nations. It is expected that some Sahel states will emphasize the narrative that Western countries are fueling conflicts in the region to destabilize it and prevent its progress toward development. This will likely lead to renewed calls for disengagement from the West and a shift toward perceived more reliable international allies. Consequently, public resentment and rejection of Western influence may intensify, further strengthening Moscow's position in the region for some, despite any perceived failures to eliminate rebel groups in northern Mali.

- **Strengthened Regional Alliances:**

The situation highlights the significance of the regional Sahelian tripartite alliance between Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. These tensions could bring the Sahel Confederation states closer together in pursuit of their strategic objectives and push them to take swift and concrete steps toward solidifying their alliance. Strengthening this coalition could enhance its influence on a regional scale and potentially open the door for new members to join in addressing security challenges exacerbated by the alleged involvement of certain international actors.

- **Damage to Ukraine's Reputation in Africa:**

The Sahel states could successfully portray Ukraine as a supporter of terrorism in certain circles, leading to adverse consequences for Kyiv across the continent. This could increase African public resentment toward Ukraine's efforts to expand its diplomatic ties in the region, ultimately working to Moscow's advantage. By promoting the narrative that Ukraine is destabilizing African nations, these developments may hinder Ukraine's recent diplomatic outreach to African countries.

- **Exacerbated Hostilities with Western Nations:**

The tensions are likely to exacerbate hostilities between some Sahel states and Western nations. Mali and Niger's accusations that Ukraine supports terrorism in Africa could provoke strong reactions from Western countries, especially given Ukraine's critical situation amid escalating violence with Moscow. These dynamics may further deepen the rift between these Sahel states and the West, potentially benefiting other global players—such as Iran, Russia, and China—who seek to capitalize on the growing divide between some Western powers and African nations.



Conclusion

These developments are likely to raise concerns about the growing competition and power struggle between Russia and Ukraine in Africa, particularly in light of the United States and its Western allies seeking to regain influence on the continent after their withdrawal from some Sahel and Sahara countries. Meanwhile, Russia is actively working to strengthen its position in the region, which could lead to further escalation between Kyiv and Moscow over influence in the African Sahel, especially as the Russian-Ukrainian war intensifies.

Furthermore, Ukraine's influence in Africa remains limited compared to Russia's strategic moves across the continent. Moscow has expanded its presence through strengthened economic partnerships, support for certain political transitions, military agreements, and diplomatic visits. Additionally, Russia has sought to instill the perception among some African nations that Ukraine serves as a Western proxy in the region—another form of colonialism—particularly following the declining role of Western powers like France and the United States in certain areas. Kyiv, on the other hand, still faces significant challenges that may hinder its progress in Africa. Ukraine's presence on the continent appears to lack essential components and a clear strategy to consolidate its influence, especially when compared to Russia's approach. Moscow has effectively capitalized on the West's retreat from parts of Africa, positioning itself as a strong partner for some regional states while portraying itself as a supporter of African development across various sectors.