Galli Non Grata in Mali?

Explaining why France left Mali in August 2022

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Abstract

Based on the understanding that Mali and Russia will be unable to contain the jihadist security threat in Mali, this paper explains why France withdrew from Mali in 2022 and why the latter intensified its cooperation with Russia. Existing literature points to operational obstacles and grievances directed towards France’s presence in Mali, however, it falls short of explaining whether these are explanatory for France’s withdrawal, or why France wouldn’t have left earlier considering these hurdles. Through process tracing and historical institutionalism, this paper studies the sequence of events that led up to France’s withdrawal, and whether the grievances against the popular dissatisfaction with the security framework in Mali actually has explanatory power over France’s withdrawal.

Keywords: Sahel, Mali, France, Russia, Operation Barkhane, Task Force Takuba, Coup d’État, transition, jihadist, civil-military relations.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Problem.

On August 15, 2022, French Armed Forces left Mali, thus terminating ten years of military presence. France’s presence was contested by civil society movements and tensions with the military led to two military coups in 2020 and 2021 (Lorgerie, 2022). Mali also engaged in cooperation with the Russian private military company (PMC), the Wagner Group, which France and other international partners strongly objected to (Irish & Lewis, 2021). Similarly, Burkina Faso and Niger had coups in 2022 and 2023 respectively, which was shortly followed by the expulsion of the French-led Operation Barkhane from their countries and announcing Russia as a strategic ally (Berger, 2023; Reuters, 2023). Western positions have framed this trend as a resurgence of West-East rivalry and competition for influence (Amoah, 2023, p. 143).

Field opinions and analysts have questioned this strategic reorientation considering the interdependent interests of France and the Sahelien states in the operations against the jihadist groups. On the one hand, France has vested interests in regional stability and resources, which necessitates the suppression of regional jihadism fundamentally opposed to France’s presence (Baig, 2013; Peltier & Maclean; 2022; Powell, 2022). France’s presence in former colonies is also anchored to international prestige (Faye, 2023). Meanwhile, the Malian’s state interest lies in its survival. After the Malian capital Bamako was threatened by jihadist groups in 2013, which justified France’s intervention, Čábelka and Štěpánek (2021, p. 63) believes that the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) remain weak vis-à-vis the jihadists.
Furthermore, it is assessed by some that Russia will be unable to fully replace the security guarantees France provided (Abba, 2023, 32:30; Bagayoko, 2022; Doxsee et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2022; Petrini, 2022; Powell, 2022), especially considering the resources diverted to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Russian presence deems to lack the numbers and capacity (Abba, 2023, 28:15; Gräns, 2023, p. 4,7; Lindén, 2023; Serwat et al., 2023, p. 35), which is highlighted by the increase in security incidence since the redeployment of Operation Barkhane in early 2022 (ACLED, n.d.; Crisis Group, 2023; UCDP, n.d.). Wagner’s deployment spans somewhere between 1000 and 1200 troops, and Russia provides military equipment and instructors to Mali, including radars, helicopters and fighter planes (Audinet & Dreyfus, 2022, p.54; Doxsee et al., 2022; Irish & Lewis, 2021). Conversely, France had 5100 troops at its height between February 2020 and mid-2021, then downsized to ~3000 French troops and 600 troops from the European special forces coalition Task Force Takuba. Additionally, the military equipment redeployed means a loss of air support and intelligence gathering with France’s five drones, six fighter jets, eight helicopters and 295 armoured vehicles committed to Operation Barkhane (French Ministry of the Armed Forces, n.d.). The US presence in the Sahel, terminated in 2023, also focused on drone operations and reportedly provided 50% of the intelligence used by Barkhane (RFI, 2022).

The existing research discusses France’s military presence as being neocolonial, unable to address the root causes of Malian insecurity and tensing civil-military relations. Operation Barkhane is also accused of inefficiency and of adding to regional insecurity. The literature thus provides multiple motivations to expel France from Mali based on sovereignty and a battle against neocolonialism. However, these grievances do not necessarily coincide with strategic considerations of the ruling authorities. As such, the literature does not address why Barkhane was terminated if Mali was allegedly in need of continued security assistance from France. It is also bypassed why Russia is seen as an alternative security partner. This is especially interesting considering that Burkina Faso and Niger followed the same path as Mali. The grievances towards France identified by the literature might explain that France and Mali’s cooperation deteriorated, but if so, it fails to explain why France left Mali in 2022, and not sooner.
1.2 Aim and Research Question

The aim of the research paper is to explain France’s voluntary or involuntary departure from Mali in 2022. With the existing literature as a point of reference and the knowledge of the timeline of the events in Mali, the paper puts forth the hypothesis that popular dissatisfaction against the existing security framework in 2020 contributed to Operation Barkhane’s withdrawal. This is because multiple facets of the security framework are contested by various actors, including France’s role and contributions. This paper thus analyses the sequence of events leading up to the announcement of Operation Barkhane’s withdrawal and seeing if it has any anchoring to the hypothesis. Mali, as opposed to Burkina Faso and Niger, is studied because more time has elapsed since France’s departure and thus has more available material.

To explain this outcome, this paper uses historical institutionalism (HI) to make sense of institutional changes to the security framework in Mali which would disrupt the cooperation with France and align with the Wagner Group. In order to draw causal inferences with HI, process tracing is used to test the validity of events able to link the dissatisfaction with the security framework to Operation Barkhane’s redeployment. The main research question is thus, how did the popular dissatisfaction against the security framework in Mali contribute to the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane in 2022, despite interdependent French and Malian interests and a lack of confidence in Wagner’s and FAMa’s ability vis-à-vis the jihadist groups? The following sub-questions are thus answered: Why would France redeploy from Mali? Why are the Malian transitional authorities cooperating with the Wagner Group?

The findings contribute to the broader research on the wave of coups and intervening powers in the Sahel. Indeed, Charbonneau (2019a; 2019b) points out that Mali is an important case for theorising on counter-insurgency politics and international military interventions. The violence and insecurity in the region deserves attention because 38% of civil wars and 49% of interventions in civil wars were in Africa between 1960 and 2007. Furthermore, 71% of former colonial powers’ interventions have been in Africa (Matton, 2017, p. 43). The research project also matters due to current uncertainties about the future of the Wagner Group and the relations between Russia and the West.
In a first instance the literature review allows to situate this paper’s contributions to the academic debate. Thereafter, the theoretical lens of historical institutionalism is introduced, as well as the conceptual contributions of Gradual Institutional Change. Third, the methodological considerations are discussed, including the operationalisation of process tracing and historical institutionalism, and the empirics employed. Finally, the empirical analysis reviews the timeline of events until France declared the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane and the conclusion provides discussion on the findings from the analysis.
2 Literature Review

The literature review will present a discussion on the existing academic research on grievances against France and operational obstacles that could have caused France’s departure from Mali. As such, the literature consists of arguments explaining reasons for dissatisfaction with the Malian security arrangements, because peer-reviewed literature specifically addressing France’s redeployment from Mali is limited. As such, the literature review consists of (i) historical explanations for persisting instability, (ii) frictions in civil-military relations, (iii) political grievances oriented towards France’s presence, and finally, (iv) grievances against the French-led Operation Barkhane, which may generate institutional changes.

2.1 Historical Explanations for Continued Instability

Wing (2023) argues that Malians attribute more trust to its armed forces than the success of democracy, because the trust in civilian government has eroded due to the perception of corruption and impunity among its ruling elite. Both Wing (2023, p. 78-9) and Elischeri (2019, p. 14) explain the trust in the armed forces due to the 1991 military coup which restored democracy and the 2012 military coup which deposed President Touré who failed to contain the armed violence in northern Mali. Morgan (2020, p. 44), however, argues that there is distrust in democratic institutions because Mali only experienced short democratic periods, and that democratic leaders have failed to promote security and stability.

Meanwhile Emerson (2011, p. 672) and Mensah (2023, p. 534) claim that the persisting instability revolves around recurring ethnic-based wars, especially with the secessionist Tuaregs in northern Mali. The Tuareg movements critique an exploitative development policy of resource extraction in the north and marginalisation from development projects. Mensah (2023, p. 527) found that the Tuareg appeals were mostly met with violence from FAMa, which generated instability for jihadist groups to expand, while Emerson (2011, p. 679) showed that FAMa used a selective use of force to negotiate settlements to contain the conflict.
Charbonneau (2019a) argues that the war beginning in 2012 escalated to the use of brute force, which caused long term harm to the political stability of the country. As a result of the violence, Akanji (2019, p. 99) says that the jihadist groups were allowed to spread, by capitalising on poverty, an alliance with the Tuareg secessionists, and the inflow of people and weapons from the Libyan civil war of 2011. Fraioli (2023) also argues that the ensuing violence generated an increase in armed groups.

2.2 Malian Civil-Military Relations

Wing (2023, p. 93) argues that the poor democratic shape in Mali has contributed to the image that the civilian leadership is weak. As a consequence, some Malians attribute greater security to the governance of jihadist groups (Morgan, 2020, p. 44). Consequently, Schulz (2023) explains that the civilian government was vulnerable to a loss of legitimacy and influence among the population. Bøås and Cissé (2022, p. 270-1) show how Imam Mahmoud Dicko was able to utilise his social conservative authority to mobilise protests against the Western and corrupt lifestyle of Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK). Bøås and Cissé thus argue that Dicko caused the coup of August 2020 (p. 269).

Indeed, Yukawa et al. (2022, p. 841) argue that popular public display of dissatisfaction with the civilian government increases the likelihood of military coups, because it grants military leaders a justification for the international community to intervene on behalf of the population. Yukawa et al. says that this depends on a country’s civil-military relations, but Elischeri (2021, p. 424) argues that FAMa retains a dominant element within its armed forces that is favourable to interventions, as was seen in the 1991, 2012, 2020 and 2021 coups. An argument Elischeri (2019, p. 14) means is strengthened by the tendency of militaries advocating for longer transition periods. As such, Elischeri concludes that FAMa holds political influence at odds with democratic norms (2019, p. 8) and is the dominant arbitrator vis-à-vis the government (Elischeri, 2021, p. 432).
Morgan (2020) casts uncertainty about Mali’s future stability because of FAMa’s role in extra-judicial killings. Khisa and Day (2020, p. 186-7) characterises FAMa as a predatory force who coerces the civilian population and undermines centralised authority by taking civilian resources meant to promote stability. Indeed, Mensah (2023) had suggested that FAMa answered to Tuareg grievances using violence, and Elischeri (2019, p. 6-7) further suggests that FAMa uses force to quell protests, thus showing a failure to instil democratic norms on civil-military relations (p. 22).

Choulis et al. (2023) therefore argues that civilian governments should pursue ‘coup-proofing’ strategies by striking a balance between empowering the military’s demands to fight threats, but also avoiding arming a military capable of overthrowing the government. Matton (2017, p. 149) says that FAMa had been weak and fragmented against the insurgents in 2013, but Elischeri (2019, p. 19) and Gazeley (2022, p. 275,281) argue that France is responsible for empowering FAMa and restoring its a share of resources from the 1968-1991 military rule. Gazeley (2022, p. 269) means that France had misidentified Mali’s weak state as a military issue, and disregarded coup-proofing considerations and FAMa’s predatory civil-military relations, thus creating the conditions for the August 2020 coup. Čábelka and Štěpánek (2021, p. 64) even suggest that France is responsible for restoring the autonomy and credibility of FAMa. Nonetheless, Mensah (2023) argues that FAMa remains weak vis-à-vis the insurgent threat despite its increased strength, because Mali needs good governance and less militaristic counter-terrorist policies to quell the insecurity.

2.3 Issues with French Presence
Emerson (2011) found that the non-internationalisation effect of the previous secessionist conflicts had been the reason for their containment. Indeed, Baldaro (2021, p. 278) and Shah (2018, p. 82) found that France’s presence attracted more extremism, which was opposed to foreign intervention. Conversely, Amoah (2023, p. 144) and Shah (2018, 47) found that areas spared by violence and terrorism were increasingly targeted with the arrival foreign militaries.
France had anticipated that its presence would trigger accusations of neocolonialism (Matton, 2017, p. 148; Recchia, 2020, p. 530; Sandnes, 2023, p. 13), and had thus insisted on being accompanied by regional Sahelien states to legitimise the operation (Henke, 2017, p. 313; Recchia, 2020, p. 530; Sabrow, 2017, p. 178). Nonetheless, Henke (2017, p. 317) argues that, in the UN Security Council (UNSC), France displayed neocolonialism by its swiftness and eagerness to intervene. Henke (2017) and Baldaro (2021, p. 267) also argue that France competed for resources with regional actors in the Sahel. Baldaro (2020, p. 274,278) further explains that intervening powers and national elites were engaging in self-serving strategies to increase their power and authority.

Powell (2017) argues that France contributed to a harmful patronage governance through its influence to the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (APR). In an effort to promote decentralisation of power and client regimes able to advance regional security with France (Crisis Group, 2015, p. 7,13), Diallo (2017, p. 299-302,305) argues that this incentivised and awarded the creation of armed groups, which escalated the insecurity of minorities who either needed patrons or joined armed groups. Powell (2017, p. 49,54) also argues that it is the previous elites responsible for the conflict that were given back power with the APR and France’s influence.

France’s promotion of the political elite responsible for the 2012 insurgency and the enduring violence generated a dependency on more foreign (French) military presence according to Gazeley (2022, p. 272) and Powell (2017, p. 65). Gazeley (2022) argues that this pushed the Malian government to align with French interests despite popular dissatisfaction with Barkhane (p. 281), which contributed to the dissatisfaction with the government that FAMa could capitalise on to carry out the coup (p. 279-80). Ironically, Gazeley argues that France also displayed dissatisfaction with the government, which is seen in the relatively soft response to the 2020 coup (p. 282).
Čábelka and Štěpánek (2021, p. 64) found that France’s cooperation with FAMa after the 2020 coup increased tactical victories, although strategic success seemed unlikely without structural changes. Consequently, Korotayev and Khokhlova (2022, p. 206-7) found that France promoted the civilian transitional authorities at the expense of the military leaders, thus nurturing two opposing camps and causing the second coup of May 2021. Korotayev and Khokhlova explain that France’s apprehension toward the military coup leaders lies in their suspected ties to Russia, including Minister of Defence Colonel Sadio Camara and President of the National Transitional Council Colonel Malick Diaw who were trained in Russia and returned shortly before the coup (Amoah, 2023, p. 140; Gräns, 2023, p. 3).

In light of the criticism towards France’s presence and policies, Engels (2023, p. 148) sees the wave of coups and departure of France as a fight against neocolonialism. To show this, Engels refers to the demotion of French from the official language to the working language. Sandnes (2023, p. 13-4) argues that Mali aligns with Russia to correct its asymmetric relationship with France. Similarly, Fraioli (2023, p. ii) and Marten (2023, p. 52) reason that France left Mali because of a failure to live up to the promises of democratisation and due to its support for corrupt governance.

Korotayev and Khokhlova (2022, p. 209-10) liken Mali’s coup to a revolution to reclaim sovereign control. They argue this because France’s support was contained with the white-collar workers of Bamako. As such, Korotayev and Khokhlova claim that the population’s dissatisfaction with France’s presence is the reason for Barkhane’s withdrawal. Čábelka and Štěpánek (2021, p. 63), however, predicted that cooperation between Mali and France is likely to continue until FAMa can handle security threats independently.

### 2.4 Issues with Operation Barkhane

While Operation Serval (2013-2014) was able to reclaim the Malian territory, French policy was to recapture Tuareg dominated cities without FAMa, to not aggravate tensions between the armed groups (Spet, 2015, p. 71). As such, France’s operation resumed its fight against jihadist groups, considering the violence between Bamako and the MNLA an internal dispute. The Bamako elite in the Sahel protested that they were excluded from recapturing control over the north (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015, p. 820).
This grievance towards France echoes what Sandness (2023, p. 14) characterises as an asymmetric relationship between France and its Sahelian partners. Sandness (2023, p. 2) further argues that France’s claim to ownership of the operation leads to an unsustainable cooperation whereby Mali can’t shape its own security framework. Indeed, Chafer et al. (2020, p. 501) found that France’s initial emphasis on multilateralism had rather been coalition building layered on top of operational autonomy and a Françafrique mindset. Amoah (2023, p. 138) points to the frictions that arose from France’s operational autonomy, including ineffective division of labour and poor intelligence sharing, resulting in unproductive interoperability and targeting mishaps.

Bove et al. (2020) argues that frictions can be expected to grow in military cooperations with countries with great cultural and geographic distance because it is likely that institutional differences create cleavages and misunderstandings. For example, Atta (2023, p. 33,36) found that transposing a Western-centric “all-sticks” counter-terrorist approach was not suitable or cost effective for Mali. Moreover, Cumming et al. (2022, p. 626) found that Operation Barkhane emphasised an operational narrative of “patience and determination,” which did not correspond to the normative approach of regional actors. For example, Morgan (2020, p. 43-4) says that France was criticised for insisting on democratic reforms and extensive operations to kill one jihadi leader while people were focused on present security. Cumming et al. (2022, p. 626) concluded that support for France’s approach was bound to erode over time. Sabrow (2017, p. 163) also concluded that mission success and operation legitimacy reside with local operational ownership. If this is true, then France’s departure could be attributed to France’s claim to mission ownership and a lack of local legitimacy.
Bala and Tar (2021, p. 196-7) advocated the need for an African led-solution sponsored by external actors, which proved difficult with French operation autonomy. Recchia (2020, p. 530) means that France claimed mission ownership under the pretext of fighting the jihadist groups in the ‘Great War on Terror’ (GWOT). Echoing Atta’s (2023) claim that France emphasised an all-sticks approach, Charbonneau (2019a) argues that the GWOT normalised the use of force, and thus overshadowed the soft measures that needed to be taken in governance reform (Charbonneau, 2019b, p. 454). For example, regional actors have advocated negotiations with jihadist groups to promote security, (Amoah, 2023, p. 139), which France is opposed to as part of the GWOT narrative (Amoah, 2023, p. 135).

A vicious circle is thus observed in the literature, whereby overly-military centric counter-terrorist policies increase the vulnerability of minorities who are either recruited by jihadist groups or in need of security patrons, this then requires additional security measures and a more robust military. The lack of positive results from the operation and the victimisation of vulnerable populations unveil weaknesses with the counter-terrorist operations, thus fuelling resentment/radicalisation against foreign presence and the West (Atta, 2023, p. 38; Baldaro, 2020). Paradoxically, France’s tactical victories may cause further grievances against France as it continues to ignite the vicious circle of violence seen above. Although literature claims Barkhane failed due to its military-centric approach, Wing (2023, p. 77) argues that Operation Barkhane had no chance of success due to the unstable political environment and poor institutional trust.

Nonetheless, Gazeley (2022, p. 279) and Matton (2017, p. 148-9) argue that France justified staying by referring to the continued flaring up of violence, despite what Gazeley (2022, p. 281) claimed only invited further populist and nationalist resentment against France and the leadership harbouring France. Indeed, Sabrow (2017, p. 163,172,178) finds that a population will resist an operation if the intervening force fails to retain either pragmatic or ideological legitimacy. As such, it is conceivable why the population had turned against France, although the literature does not explain why France and the transitional authorities split. The literature rather points to an interdependency and an elite benefiting from France’s presence. It is therefore appropriate to consider when and why the popular dissatisfaction against France’s imprint in Mali caused Operation Barkhane’s withdrawal.
3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism (HI) emerged in the political sciences to address why institutions, that are per definition stable, change. Although its applicability to international relations was contested at first, (Solingen & Wan 2017, 2017), Zürn (2016, p. 212) explains that international institutions possess the same self-reinforcing mechanisms as domestic institutions.

According to Zürn (2016, p. 200), HI is ontologically applicable to both positivist and constructivist research traditions, while, Ma (2007, p. 63) and Mahoney and Thelen (2010, p. 4) rather argues that HI is a theory ontologically intertwined with both sociological institutionalism and rational-choice institutionalism. HI is thus able to study (i) constructed social rules and normative behaviour in informal institutions, and (ii) institutions shaped by formal mechanisms and rules aimed at maintaining a status-quo (Mahoney & Thelen 2010, p. 5-6). Epistemologically, the former is concerned with understanding the role of non-state actors in institutional change, while the latter uses formal models to assess power distribution in politics (Zürn, 2016, p. 200).

By viewing HI as a theory bridging sociological- and rational-choice institutionalism (Zürn, 2016, p. 200), HI is able to simultaneously consider the influence and interdependence of formal and informal institutions. While sociological- and rational-choice institutionalism traditionally views institutions as normative, respectively, mechanisms, reinforcing institutional uniformity, HI can explain institutional change from processes with-in and influences outside (Mahoney & Thelen 2010, p. 5).

HI also views change as a historical process, contrary to rational-choice which views change through static ‘images’ (Mahoney & Thelen 2010, p. 6). HI can thus capture gradual change and continuity by analysing a sequence of events over time (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p. 5,9,11). **Sequencing** in HI implies that the timing and order of events are crucial for causal inferences (Mahoney, 2000, p. 534; Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p. 8; Zürn, 2016, p. 221). This way, exogenous and endogenous events can be traced to institutional changes.
Besides gradual change, HI also identifies *critical junctures* as contingency events, generally exogenous, that produce a shock that reorient the *self-reinforcing* path of an institution (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 342; Solingen & Wan, 2017, p. 184; Zürn, 2016, p. 202, 213), and lift the usual constraints conserving institutions (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 352; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 7). As such, a change to the norms and rules of an institution enters a feedback loop enforcing compliance to these changes (Ma, 2007; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 10; Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p. 6-7). It thus becomes difficult and costly to reverse choices and institutional change (Ma, 2007, p. 65), making alternative or previous decisions unavailable (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p. 8).

For example, Chafer et al. (2020) saw the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda as an exogenous shock and critical juncture for French foreign policy. Indeed, the criticism France received for its inaction during the crisis forced France to change its military intervention policy to include more proactivity and multilateralism. Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, p. 368), however, caution that critical junctures are rare events, meaning that it is more likely that changes occur due to an incremental process over time (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 2-3).

### 3.2 Theory on Gradual Institutional Change

Mahoney and Thelen’s (2010) theory on Gradual Institutional Change explains self-reinforcing mechanisms through the principle of increasing returns (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 7). This means that institutions are not self-reinforced automatically, but by actors’ interests. This accredits more agency to actors, and lessens the risk of determinism. It also shows that an outcome may not correspond to the intentions of the most powerful actor (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 8).

Mahoney and Thelen (2010) also emphasises plurality in HI, meaning that change occurs in the interaction between multiple actors and institutions. Actors seeking institutional change, generally those disadvantaged under the current arrangements, can achieve change by uniting with other actors identifying as disadvantaged or by using their advantaged situation in another institution (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 9-10).
Mahoney and Thelen (2010, p. 28) conceptualised four types of institutional change, seen in table 1. Possibilities for actors of change to modify institutions will depend on the veto power of the actors in favour of the existing arrangements, and on the enforcement of the rules or on the freedom of interpretation of existing rules.

![Table 1: Contextual and Institutional Sources of Institutional Change (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, p. 19)](image)

As such, Mahoney and Thelen (2010) have theorised conditions under which institutional change occurs or fails to occur, seen in Table 1. Possibilities for actors of change to modify institutions will depend on the veto power of the actors in favour of the existing arrangements, and on the enforcement of the rules or on the freedom of interpretation of existing rules.

As such, low veto power and poor enforcement leaves greater room for actors of change to *displace* the institution, i.e. replace the rules with entirely new ones, while, actors of change may *drift* institutions with strong veto power and robust enforcement as a result of the powerful actors’ inaction to adapt to external changes. Meanwhile, *layering* new rules on top of old ones may occur when changing rules can be vetoed but following the rules can’t be enforced. Conversely, rules that are clearly interpreted, but who's change can’t be vetoed, can result in rules being *converted* into a new purpose (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 19).

Actors of change may also be both strong powers, united weaker powers, or a disadvantaged actor using the leverage from another institution. Change may not even be intended, but a consequence of power-struggles or gaps as seen in institutional drifts (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 22). Thus, this paper analyses the changes to the security framework in Mali as a result of the involved actors' interactions. Consequently, it is observed if Mali acted as an actor of change or if the outcome resulted in a power struggle.
3.2 Addressing the Critique on HI

Due to the contested ontological nature of HI (Ma, 2007, p. 63), this paper commits to the ontological assumption of the ‘Theory of Gradual Institutional Change.’ Thereby, this paper settles with an understanding of HI, one among many, as a bridging theory of sociological- and rational-choice institutionalism (Chafer et al., 2020, p. 484).

Mahoney and Thelen’s (2010, p. 6-7) theory also address the critique of HI as being deterministic by attributing actor agency as a contributor to institutional change. This conceptualisation also includes endogenous processes, whereby this paper must take notice of not falsely attributing change to exogenous shocks (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 368).

HI is otherwise critiqued for running the risk of selection bias and limited generalisability (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p. 17). This paper’s case study on Mali is from a particularly small sample pool. Its selection does not involve bias, but rather begins with the first case of three available. The intent however is not to generalise the findings to the other cases, although the findings can contribute to the explanation of the ‘wave’ of coups.

Moreover, Zürn (2016, p. 221) notes that HI can’t explain processes outside of institutions, or in very informal institutions lacking pronounced norms and rules. On that note, Chafer et al. (2020, p. 502) studied French foreign intervention policy through HI, which is composed of multiple formal institutions, including the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs among others. Similarly, this paper’s study of the security framework in Mali is composed of multiple institutional understandings, including the FAMa, the Malian state authorities, and the French Armed Forces operating within Barkhane.
4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The use of HI opens up for the utilisation of both neopositivist and constructivist research traditions (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 32). However, the causal relationship spelled out in the research question establishes a positivist research tradition. Indeed, positivism posits that knowledge is built on empirics and logic which requires that the researcher is independent from the world it studies (Jackson, 2011, p. 42,66). Conversely, interpretivism does not consider the world as an objective reality outside of the researcher, but rather seeks to understand the meaning that is given the world (Bevir & Rhodes, 2015, p. 15).

In this paper, the identified research problem is an issue of explaining the outcome of France and Mali’s security cooperation. This invites a research approach inclined towards logical inferences. This causal relationship is achieved through a qualitative in-depth case study. The case of Mali is relevant because it is the first among three Sahelian states which experienced coups and subsequently saw the withdrawal of France’s armed forces. Due to media publicity, partially with regards to the presence of MINUSMA, and to the time elapsed since France’s departure, there is also more available material on Mali.

Case studies are faced with limitations to consider. First, cases cannot be isolated from alternative explanations or cases, meaning that they are certainly entangled with other hypotheses or similar cases. Due to restrictions on time and space, only one hypothesis is explored here. With good reliability however, this paper can be complemented with other hypotheses and cases. Conversely, performing a case study offers good conditions for an in-depth analysis to attain high levels of construct validity (Bennett, 2010, p. 41-45). As such, this article can determine which variables are particularly important to explain France’s departure from Mali, which can benefit future research endeavours.
4.2 Process Tracing

This article uses process tracing to make “strong within-case causal inferences about causal mechanisms based on in-depth single-case studies” (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 2). Meaning that the paper takes a close look at the mechanisms in order to explain the historical outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 9). Furthermore, HI and process tracing both employ sequencing and linear timing of events. Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, p. 343,355,358) explicitly call for process tracing to study historical processes.

Drawing from concepts developed by Van Evera (1997, p. 31-32), and operationalized into a method by Collier (2011), Mahoney (2015), HI scholar and co-author of Gradual Institutional Change, wrote on Process Tracing and Historical Explanation[s] in order to tie HI and process tracing together without epistemological and ontological obstacles. These authors have contributed instructions on how to apply process tracing, which otherwise lacks a systematic, explicit and transparent methodology (Mahoney, 2015, p. 201).

Mahoney (2015, p. 200-1) thus offers a framework to make deductive causal inferences by verifying a hypothesis of “why X caused Y in case Z?” Process tracing measures the strength of hypotheses by testing the causal relationship between two variables. If a hypothesis involves a complex sequence with intervening mechanisms (M) to connect X and Y, then a hoop test is appropriate (p. 207). A hypothesis is strengthened if X is shown to be necessary for M, and M sufficient for Y. Failing this test, dismisses the hypothesis to a large degree. A hypothesis may also be strengthened if it involves rare or unusual variables (p. 208). M is thus essential because of its position between X and Y (p. 206).

Conversely, if the hypothesis can straightforwardly connect X and Y, then a smoking gun test is appropriate. While Mahoney (2015, p. 211) argues that decisive observations are uncommon in the social sciences, they can be built and strengthened through theoretical assumptions. Passing the smoking gun test heavily supports the hypothesis, while seriously discrediting it if the test fails.
In cases where a straightforward hypothesis can be inferred with logical reasoning, it is considered a minimalist process tracing. This is used to establish the logical relationship and order between X and Y and for counterfactuals. Verifying counterfactuals means that the orderly sequence between certain events are explained or falsified through logical reasoning and not through process tracing tests (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 2).

Process tracing thus relies on good knowledge of theories and empirical events, which the literature review and the creation of an extensive timeline of events can provide. With regards to the difficulty of attributing causal relations in social sciences, Mahoney (2015, p. 203) distinguishes between three degrees of explanatory power to a variable, so that a causal variable is either: (i) a necessary condition for the outcome, so that its removal yields another outcome Y; (ii) a factor contributing to the outcome so that its removal is not necessary for Y, but the combination of variables contribute to the likelihood of Y; (iii) a component of a combination sufficient for the outcome Y, thereby the variable is not necessary, but can be useful in different combinations to achieve Y.

4.3 Operationalisation
Operationalising entails that process tracing and HI are woven together into a systematic research approach. While HI explains how the causal variable X changed the security framework in Mali so that France redeployed in 2022, process tracing verifies the validity of the causal variable X of our hypothesis and of the intervening variables. Both process tracing and HI look at the sequence of events in Mali for this purpose.

The hypothesis seen in Table 2 shows the expected sequence of events theorised with HI. In this deductive approach, the theory of HI is ‘consumed’ to offer a framework of institutional change to the security framework in Mali. As such, disadvantaged actors in Mali are expected to act as actors of change, due to their dissatisfaction with the existing security framework (step 1). Thus, new rules are expected within the security framework which will snowball Mali’s security arrangements onto a path disagreeable to France’s continued presence (step 2), then Barkhane’s withdrawal (Y). Concerning selection bias, the empirical material is not collected to confirm the steps of the hypothesis, but rather, the hypothesis in table 2 is placed onto the timeline which is constructed by the available empirical material. As such, the analysis verifies if the hypothesis fits into the timeline of events in Mali.
Context  | Institutional changes can result in relational changes between actors
---|---
Condition (X)  | Popular dissatisfaction with the security framework in Mali
Step 1  | Disadvantaged actors will act to change the security framework to be more fitting with the interests
Step 2  | Path dependency means that earlier choices have reined in the actors on a specific path, making a reversal very difficult.
Outcome (Y)  | France announces the redeployment of Operation Barkhane from Mali on February 17, 2022.

Table 2: Hypothesis within the framework of historical institutionalism (Author’s construction)

The analysis chapter explains the sequence of empirical events taking place in Mali using Mahoney and Thelen’s four concepts characterising institutional change. The events are analysed to see if they indicate a drift, layering, conversion or displacement of the pre-existing security framework. In the conclusion, it’s discussed how identified changes created the conditions for France to withdraw from Mali in 2022 and the validity of the causal variables X and M, thus establishing if the hypothesis cleared the tests of process tracing.

The scope of the paper is limited to the available time and space allocation. Therefore, the timeline must be limited to allow for an in-depth analysis. The timeline analysed begins early 2020, because the status quo of the security framework was mostly intact until then. However, earlier events are still mentioned when they are relevant to explain events in the identified timeline. Conversely, beginning from Mali’s cooperation with Russia stretches back too long a time; starting from the cooperation with Wagner doesn’t have any value, since it fails to capture the path inviting cooperation with Wagner. Existing literature also already covers the events leading up to the Malian coup d’état of August 2020. Finally, the analysis stops with France’s withdrawal announcement on February 17, 2022, and not with its actual withdrawal on August 15, 2022. This is considered sufficient because the events in between no longer offer new clues for France’s reason to withdraw.
Finally, assigning popular dissatisfaction against the security framework in Mali as the causal variable X is because existing literature and events leading up to France’s withdrawal indicate popular grievances towards France’s and the Malian authorities’ security management, including France’s operational autonomy (Chafer et al., 2020) and Malian political elite’s alignment with France (Gazeley, 2022). Popular dissatisfaction is the ‘general population’s’ disapproval or objections, while the security framework refers to the security-related agreements and institutions, including FAMa, Operation Barkhane, the counter-terrorist arrangements listed the literature review and the 2015 Algier Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation with the northern secessionist armed groups.

4.4 Empirical Material

The empirical material corresponds to first hand or official accounts of the events making out the timeline for the study. Epistemologically, positivism generates knowledge through systematic and empirical evidence. To collect the material systematically, a timeline is created according to newspaper reporting, sorted chronologically. Events are identified in online newspapers from Jeune Afrique, Africanews, France24, aBamako and Mali Jet. Events are also identified eclectically through references in the literature or other media. The aim is to include events reported by France and Mali alike. As such, empirical material is found based on the events spelled out in news reporting.

The empirical material may be both qualitative and quantitative in positivism. Although the paper mostly looks at events through qualitative clues, quantitative evidence from the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation is used to indicate popular opinion. Qualitative evidence includes video statements and written interviews in newspapers, it also includes statements from official channels, such as the Malian state channel ORTM or the Official Journals of Mali. These actors possess different channels to share relevant clues for the timeline, including platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook. These are used as clues when shared by the verified official accounts of the Malian and French state institutions, or to demonstrate filmed events or interviews. At times, empirical evidence for certain events are ambiguous or not public. This means that certain events are referenced to non-empirical sources, including news reporting. When this is the case, wording such “reportedly” is used to reference events.
4.5 Methodological & Ethical Limitations

The research design takes on a positivist approach which leaves the study of the motivations, narrative and ambitions of the Malian and French authorities to part ways unanswered. Also, to study additional hypotheses would strengthen the paper’s findings. There is also the cognitive limit of the researcher when collecting and analysing evidence. These limitations leave room open for further research on the subject.

The primary limitation when constructing the timeline is that only material in English and French can be collected. This can mean limitations for the reporting in Mali which is sometimes only available in Bambara. This was however less of an issue for the timeline of interest, than it is today, because Mali only demoted French as the official language to the working language in June 2023. It means however that the reporting of events and corresponding empirical material is limited to what is shared by an elite, which risks marginalising populations. For example, accounts from the Fulani are mostly limited to reporting from civil society organisations. Quantitative survey results with a large and distributed population size can partially mitigate this issue.

Another limit is that not all institutions can be analysed, which may skew the results. Indeed, HI points out that institutions influence each other, and that actors leverage their positions between institutions. Studying the ‘security framework’ allows for including evidence from multiple influences, which mitigates this risk. However, covert or subtle institutional influences may have been left unnoticed.

With regards to considerations of replicability and reliability, it is not expected that the findings of this case study can be generalised to the cases of Burkina Faso and Niger. This is because they have individual historical experiences which require their own intervening mechanisms (M), although the same hypothesis may be verified in these two cases. As such, the methodology of this paper should be easily extrapolated to study these cases.
Finally, this paper touches on sensitive topics related to war and conflict. The research must thus be conducted with care to not add to the suffering to those directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. Also, certain perspectives/institutions are omitted in the analysis to limit the scope of the paper, which may unjustly attribute more value to an institution than another. The process by which certain institutions are included is the result of an attempt to be systematic, and not willful. The adoption of positivism also omits reflexivity from the methodology, however, notice must be taken to the bias and subjectivities of those involved in the conflicts and those of the researcher to be systematic and critical to the empirics. Similarly, distance from the conflict can limit cognitive abilities to assess the importance of clues and events. Further research is encouraged to correct misconceptions this paper shows.
5 Empirical Analysis

The empirical analysis lays forth the observed timeline and corresponding empirical clues leading up to France’s announcement on February 17, 2022, that Operation Barkhane will withdraw from Mali. The aim of the chapter is to verify if the sequence of events can infer a causal relationship between the popular dissatisfaction with the security framework in Mali (X) and France’s announcement to leave Mali (Y).

First, Mahoney’s (2015, p. 208) formulation of process tracing requires that the order and causal relationship between X and Y be verified before embarking on an in-depth process tracing analysis. Through a minimalist process-tracing, it can be logically inferred that dissatisfaction with the existing security framework is a condition to seek change. Indeed, this is what HI says is a driver for disadvantaged actors. Empirically, 97% of the Malian population were in favour of France’s military intervention in 2013 (FES, 2013, p. 27,34), which turned into 79% of respondents being dissatisfied with the operation by the end of 2019 (FES, 2020a, p. 15,16).

Polling showed that 57.7% of respondents reproached Barkhane of cooperating with armed groups, 53.5% thought that Barkhane failed to protect civilians from armed groups and terrorists, and 21.1% accused Barkhane of supporting a plan to partition Mali (FES, 2020a, p. 15,16). Furthermore, in November 2019, popular confidence in who can restore security in the region lies with national security actors, while Operation Barkhane gathers support from 2.8% of respondents, and Russia only receives 0.1% of support (FES, 2020a, p. 83). It is thus established that dissatisfaction with the pre-existing security framework predates France’s announcement to withdraw from Mali.

Second, the timeline below verifies whether the sequence of events leading up to France’s withdrawal announcement is related to the dissatisfaction with the security framework. Through the lens of HI, the analysis is carried through in four stages. In the first two parts, the events leading up to the coups of August 2020 and May 2021 respectively, showcases the agency of disadvantaged actors. In a third part, the agency of France is discussed, and finally the consequences of path dependency is seen in the remaining timeline.
5.1 Disadvantaged Actors and the August 2020 Coup d’État

Following the controversial outcome of the March-April 2020 Parliamentary election, the Constitutional Court overturned 30 seats in favour of the ruling party Rally for Mali (Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022, p. 203). On June 5, 2020, protests were organised by the political coalition Movement of June 5th-Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP), led by Malian opposition figures and Imam Dicko, to demand the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK). The protests, however, turned violent on July 10, with protesters storming the National Assembly and the national broadcasting channel ORTM, resulting in 14 dead and 300 wounded (Boås & Cissé, 2022, p. 271). According to Morgan (2022, p. 42), hundreds of thousands protested in Mali against the government during the summer of 2020. Boås & Cissé (2022, p. 271) argues that the shock from the violence allowed a segment of FAMa to detain IBK in the presidential palace unchallenged.

By August 18, five Malian colonels introducing themselves as the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) announced the resignation of IBK. The CNSP effectively displaced the existing institutional framework of Mali by claiming all executive and legislative power and declaring the “Transitional Founding Principles” on August 24 (CNSP, 2020, 24 Aug; ORTM, 2020, 19 Aug). The overturning of democratic institutions marks a juncture with state authority in the hands of the military.

Besides the distress and mobilisation from the 2020 summer’s protests, the coup’s success is also shown to be attributed to the popular support for FAMa (FES, 2020a, p. 16). On top of the popular distrust against IBK, distrust with the civilian political elite, including the political opposition, was high (FES, 2020a, p. 12-3). Indeed, the popular opinion was mostly positive about the transition, with 52.9% saying that IBK couldn’t stay in power and 53.4% in favour of a military heading the transition (FES, 2020b, p. 5). Finally, the protests and dissatisfaction with IBK coincided with disapproval of France’s presence and anti-French elements in the summer protests (FES, 2020a, p. 15-6).
Faced with sanctions from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (ECOWAS, 2020, 15 Sep), the CNSP announced their continued commitment to the existing national and international agreements as well as their commitment to pave the way for credible democratic elections (ORTM, 2020, 19 Aug). The transitional charter, created in September, also expressed continued commitment to republican values, democracy and international cooperation (Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 1 Oct, p, 2). By December 3, the CNSP had appointed a civilian prime-minister, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Moctar Ouane, and appointed the retired military officer Bah N’Daw, former Minister of Defence, as president (CNSP, 2020, 27 Sep; Koulouba, n.d.), inaugurated the transitional legislative body, the National Transitional Council (NTC) (Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 11 Dec, p, 1299), and committed to an 18-month transition period, acting according to the demands of ECOWAS to have the sanctions removed (ECOWAS, 2020, 5 Oct). Thus not threatening to overturn the existing security framework.

The M5-RFP expressed the need to be included in the transitional process after having been excluded from the initial negotiations with the ECOWAS (Dagnoko, 2020, 26 Aug). After being included to draft the transitional charter, the M5-RFP argued that the final document did not correspond to the deliberations, including the appointment of Colonel Assimi Goïta as Vice-President, responsible for all security and defence matters (Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 1 Oct, p, 3; Maïga, 2020, 13 Sep). The M5-RFP also disapproved of their omission from the government cabinet (Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 19 Oct, p, 2), of the NTC seat distribution giving only eight seats to the M5-RFP but 22 to military and security forces (Mali-Online, 2020, 13 Nov; Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 10 Nov, p. 1092), and of the appointment of three out of five CNSP members to ministerial roles in the transitional government (Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 19 Oct, p, 2). The final CNSP member Colonel Malick Diaw was also elected president of the NTC (CTN, 2020, 5 Oct).
Finally, the CNSP appointed governors, announced on December 2, including ten militaries and seven civilians reportedly close to the CNSP (Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 4 Dec, p. 1276; Koné, 2020, 26 Nov; Sangaré, 2020, 2 Dec), including Brigade General Keba Sangaré, appointed Governor of the Bougouni region, who was discharged from commander of operations in the central region follow accusations of impeding the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation (APR), and contributing to the massacre in Ogossogou village on February 14, 2020 (United Nations, 2020, 13 Aug, p. 1,8). The M5-RFP therefore critiqued the CNSP’s hogging of power at the expense of the political opposition. Although the existing security framework remains intact, a conversion towards a militarisation of state institutions is observed, and shows an oversight in the measures to quell grievances against centralised power and minorities.

5.2 Disadvantaged Actors and the May 2021 Coup d’État

Not surprisingly, with the appointment of Bah N’Daw, who had signed the military cooperation agreement between Mali and France as Minister of Defence in 2014 (aBamako, 2014, 17 Jul), the authorities continued their commitment to the pre-existing security framework, making continued international cooperation possible. On February 16, Chad announced an additional 1200 troops to the tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger as part of the G5-Sahel cooperation (Élysée, 2021, 16 Feb). Finally, on April 21, the EU announced an increase in financial aid for structural reform and strengthening of the training provided by the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) (Laplace, 2021, 3 May). However, the transitional authorities wanted to layer negotiations with the Al Qaeda affiliated Support Group for Islam and Muslims (JNIM, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin) on top of the pre-existing operational arrangements, which France rejected. This came about as a result of the inclusive national dialogue of December 2019 (France24, 2020, 26 October, 00:28; Keita & Perelman, 2020, 10 Feb).

Despite some disagreements with French policy, the transitional government made progress on good governance. According to the demands of ECOWAS, the CNSP was dissolved by presidential decree on January 18, 2021 (ECOWAS, 2020, 5 Oct; Malick, 2021, 18 Jan), and the government announced its action plan to draft of a new constitution, which has been postponed thrice since 2011 (Mali-Online TV, 2021, 23 Feb).
Nonetheless, drifts away from republican and democratic values continued. Media warned about the encroachment on freedoms with the new state emergency measures taken in response to Covid-19, which allowed state authorities to close public spaces and forbid public gatherings, but also to control media (Secretariat General du Government, 2020, 18 Dec; Mali-Online, 2020, 20 Dec; Sawlani, 2020, 20 Dec). Furthermore, six people had been detained for conspiracy against the government, including former Prime Minister Boubou Cissé’s brother Aguibou Tall and the journalist Ras Bath. Cissé had also been accused but not located. Albeit a lengthy detention due to a reshuffle of judges during the prosecution, they were eventually released due to a lack of evidence (Human Rights Watch, 2021, 14 Mar).

With only some of the M5-RFP integrated into government, internal divisions sparked in the opposition. Issa Kaou N'Djim, fourth vice-president of the CTN and speaker of Imam Dicko’s Coordination of Movements, Associations and Sympathisers (CMAS), says that the CNSP “died a beautiful death” with the downfall of IBK, and now urged CMAS to pave its own path during the transition (N'Djim, 2020, 10 Sep). Other factions of the M5-RFP continued to criticise, including against the transitional authorities' unilateral decision to dissolve the Ceni (the Independent National Electoral Commission), and issued statements calling for protests, a national dialogue and the dissolution of the CTN (Maïga, 2021, 22 Feb). In a meeting with President N’Daw on May 6, 2021 (Koulouba, 2021, 6 May), the president of the strategic committee of the M5-RFP, Choguel Maïga, demanded the dissolution of the government, changes to the Transitional Charter and to replace the CTN with a more legitimate body (Mali Jet, 2021, 6 May).

Under pressure from the M5-RFP protestests (Maïga, 2021, 11 Feb), and strikes by the syndicate National Union of Workers of Mali (Katilé, 2020, 15 Dec; Mali-Online 2021, 23 May), transitional prime minister Ouane resigned on May 14, he was later reinstated by President N’Daw to form a new inclusive government (Koulouba, 2021, 14 May). The new government presented on May 24, replaced the two former CNSP members Koné and Camara with two generals. Five M5-RFP members were also given ministerial roles (ORTM, 2021, 24 May). Due to the transitional charter attributing Vice-President Colonel Goïta with power over defence and security issues, Goïta justified a coup the same day, relieving N’Daw and Ouane, as an act to defend the order of the transitional charter. Goïta claims that N’Daw and Ouane had failed to consult him on these changes beforehand (ORTM, 2021, 25 May).
Goïta had successfully converted the transitional authority in favour of the CNSP. Indeed, Goïta did not displace any institutions or its rules, but used his authority to use the rules to correspond to the will of the CNSP members to remain in authoritative positions. Goïta was officially recognised by the Constitutional Court as the President of the transition and Head of State on May 28 and inaugurated on June 7 (Koulouba, 2021, 7 Jun; Secretariat General du Government, 2021, 28 May, p. 3). The M5-RFP were invited to suggest a prime-minister candidate, and thus Choguel Maïga was appointed on June 7 (Primature, 2021, 7 Jun). The new ministerial cabinet included three M5-RFP members and replaced Colonel Koné with another military as Minister of Security and Civil Protection (Secretariat General du Government, 2021, 11 Jun, p. 681-2).

The M5-RFP, who successfully contributed to the downfall of two state authorities, are thus identified as actors of change because of their disadvantaged position being excluded from the transitional authorities. Meanwhile, the agency and power of the ex-CNSP marks them as the dominant national actor, able to convert national institutions.

5.3 France’s Reaction to Changes to the Security Framework
The security arrangements between Mali and France became increasingly fragile following the 2021 coup. France had suspended its military cooperation with Mali between June 3rd and July 3rd, because it strongly questioned its legitimacy with a military officer as President (Macron, 2021, 10 Jun; Ministère des Armées, 2021, 8 Jul). ECOWAS suspended Mali’s membership and laid forth demands for civilian rule, and on June 17 welcomed the progress made with the establishment of Choguel Maïga’s cabinet (ECOWAS, 2021, 19 Jun, p. 4). France disagreed with ECOWAS, which set a bad jurisprudence for other states (Macron, 2021, 10 Jun, 02:10).

Furthermore, France displaced the existing security arrangements in Mali on June 10, 2021, by announcing the restructuring of Operation Barkhane (Macron, 2021, 10 Jun, 02:38), following up on an announcement from January 2021 that it was looking to “adjust” its efforts in reaction to protests against Barkhane’s presence (Africanews, 2021, 26 Jun; Vie Publique, 2021, 19 Jan). Also, France had expressed already in December 2019 that it was reluctant to send additional troops with regards to the growing movements against its presence (Macron & Issoufou, 2019, 22 Dec, 16:40).
On July 9, 2021, France announced that the restructuring would entail a decrease in troop commitment, withdrawal from the northern bases Timbuktu, Tessalit and Kidal and an emphasis on supporting regional actors with specialised forces, and to rely more on international partners (Vie Publique, 2021, 9 Jul). The reorientation towards central Mali also reflects France’s new priority targeting against the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) which stands for an increasingly larger share of security incidents (Elysée, 2020, 13 Jan; UCDP, n.d.).

The restructuring of Barkhane was ill received by the Malian authorities. It was seen as France leaving the combat against JNIM in the north to FAMa (Maïga & Foka, 2022, 22 Feb, 6:25), despite JNIM still representing the majority of the security related incidents in Mali (UCDP, n.d.). By withdrawing from the northern bases, France was also considered to leave a vacuum without anchoring government control first. PM Maïga thus accused France of betrayal for creating an extremist enclave in northern Mali (Mali+ Media, 2021, 10 Oct, 00:44; Maïga & Foka, 2022, 22 Feb, 1:30,3:40), and of abandonment by taking the decision unilaterally (Africanews, 2021, 27 Sep, 00:18).

On September 13, Reuters’ sources reported that Mali and the Wagner Group had engaged in negotiations which would involve the deployment of a thousand Wagner soldiers to Mali for a sum of $10.8 million a month (Irish & Lewis, 2021, 13 Sep). Following these accusations, PM Maïga asserted Mali’s need to fill the vacuum left by France, and its sovereign right to do so with any partner (UNGA, 2021, 26 Sep, 13:00; Ministère des Affaires étrangères du Mali, 2021, 19 Sep). French Minister of Foreign Affairs LeDrian said the plans were incompatible with Operation Barkhane (Assemblée Nationale, 2021, 15 Sep, 1:56:30), the French Minister of Defence said that Wagner could not coexist with Barkhane (Mackinnon, 2021, 24 Sep), and Niger warned that Wagner would endanger the G5-Sahel coalition (Boisbouvier, 2021, 17 Sep).

By the end of December 2021, Wagner is thought to have deployed to Mali (Audinet & Dreyfus, 2022, p. 29; Thompson et al., 2022, 2 Feb), which France, Canada and the EU denounced in a joint statement (France Diplomacy, 2021, 23 Dec). Meanwhile, Malian authorities continuously deny Wagner’s presence, and only claim to work with the Russian state (Diop, 2021, 24 Dec).
It is unknown when the negotiations began, but the Malian Minister of Defence Colonel Camara and Minister of Foreign Affairs Diop are seen in multiple trips to Russia during 2021 (MoD of the Russian Federation, 2021, 28 Jul; MoD of the Russian Federation, 2021, 24 Aug) and PM Maïga announced in September that Mali is looking for a plan B because the current security situation is unsatisfactory (Maïga, 2021, 18 Sep). Also, Mali acquired four Mi-171 helicopters along with weapons and ammunition from Russia under the transitional rule (FAMa, 2021, Oct 1). Also, cooperation with the Russian state is not new to Malian authorities who had extensive military cooperation with the Soviet Union (Audinet & Dreyfus, 2022, p.54), and signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia in 2019 (MoD of the Russian Federation, 2019, 25 Jun). While it is unlikely that Wagner was relevant under IBK, it is possible that the CNSP’s relationships to Russia influenced cooperation with Wagner. Indeed, the ex-CNSP members Colonel Camara and Colonel Diaw reportedly returned from their officer training in Russia just before the coup in 2020 (aBamako, 2020, 23 Aug; Gräns, 2023, p. 3; Mali Jet, 2020, 18 Aug; Ogun Update, 2020, 19 Aug). Besides this, the only evidence to claim that the CNSP in itself triggered cooperation with Wagner, is that Colonel Camara is sanctioned by the USA for being a ‘facilitator’ for Wagner in Mali (U.S. Embassy in Mali, 2023, 24 Jun).

Converging with the deployment of Wagner, the transitional authorities suggested a transition period of up to five years. In response, ECOWAS sanctioned Mali with the most severe measures yet, including the closing of air and land borders and recalling ambassadors in Mali (ECOWAS, 2022, 9 Jan), which Mali reciprocated and accused the ECOWAS of being instrumentalized by other powers (ORTM, 2022a, 10 Jan, 01:35). Nonetheless, France breached Malian airspace, and dismissed the transitional government’s critique (Gouvernement du Mali, 2022, 12 Jan). Mali thus denounced the unbalanced cooperation with France, and pointed to Russia as a favourable partner (ORTM, 2022, 15 Jan, 4:20). The events mobilised significant protests against France and the ECOWAS sanctions, backed by the moral authority Imam Dicko, and reaching 60000 participants on January 14, 2022. Criticism against France included its insistence on compliance with international law, while being responsible for a pattern of high-casualty breaches itself (Human Rights Watch, 2021, 21 Jan; MINUSMA, 2021).
The same day, Sweden announced the withdrawal of its 150 troops contingent from Task Force Takuba, citing the Wagner Groups as the reason (Swedish Armed Forces, 2022, 17 Feb; Sveriges Radio, 2022, 14 Jan). Later the same month, Mali rejected a deployment of a Danish contingent to Task Force Takuba, because it lacked formal approval (MATD, 2022, 26 Jan). Malian authorities also claimed that Norway, Hungary and Portugal lacked formal approval at that time (ORTM, 2022, 26 Jan, 10:00). This can be connected to PM Maïga’s accusation a month later of France stationing boots on the ground in Mali in 2013 without formal permission (Maïga & Foka, 2022, 22 Feb, 03:15). Mali therefore wanted to display control bilateral of security cooperations rather than being dictated by France’s Barkhane (Africanews with AFP, 2022a, 28 Jan).

In response to the Danish redeployment, French officials warned against cooperation with Wagner and accused the Malian authorities of being provocative (Perelman & Alexandre, 2021, 6 Dec, 8:20), by which PM Maïga asked French Minister LeParly to “shut up” (Maïga, 2022, 26 Jan). In response to LeDrian’s claim that the ‘junta’ is using Wagner to secure its power and its authority illegitimate (Clemenceau, 2022, 19 Jan), Mali kicked out the French ambassador on February 2, 2022 (ORTM, 2022, 31 Jan). Despite Parly claiming that France would need to find a solution to continue its fight against terrorism (Parly, 2022, 20 Jan), they conceded that France couldn’t stay in Mali at any price (Delvaux & Parly, 2022, 29 Jan, 12:40).

On February 17, 2022, France announced its withdrawal from Mali due to inadequate “political, operational and legal conditions” (Elysée, 2022, 15 Aug; Vie Publique, 2022, 17 Feb). The hostilities between France and Mali had escalated to a point where returning to pre-existing arrangements was difficult.
5.4 Path Dependency

The second transitional government, instated after the May 24, 2021, coup, initiated its “term” by announcing a mostly civilian leadership and continued commitment to the electoral calendar, with presidential elections February 2022. In December 2021, Mali emphasised that it bilaterally agreed to be the recipient of an additional thousand MINUSMA troops from Chad (Info Wakat, 2021, 19 Dec; Mali Info, 2021, 17 Dec). This showed the continued commitment to international cooperation, despite a popular sentiment rejecting both Barkhane and MINUSMA, with 73% and 58% dissatisfied respectively. This sentiment is however stronger in the north and south of Mali, but weaker in central Mali by the tri-border region, which is prioritised in Barkhane’s restructuring (FES, 2022, p. 4).

Nonetheless, on November 7, 2021, Malian authorities announced the postponement of elections, for which ECOWAS sanctioned Mali by freezing assets and issuing travel bans to the Malian government and CTN members (ECOWAS, 2021, 7 Nov, p. 5) as previously mentioned in 5.3. Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs Diop says that the security situation was not opportune to hold legitimate elections (Diop, 2021, 11 Nov, 05:04), and that the transitional authorities expected a better security context when settling for the electoral calendar and that France’s withdrawal from three of its five bases did not contribute positively to the security situation (Diallo & Diop, 2021, 8 Dec).

Moreover, political opposition parties boycotted the National Conference held in December 2021, to deliberate the societal cleavages and the transitional period (Primature, 2021, 31 Jul), because it was considered as a ploy to postpone elections (Ag Acharatoumane, 2021, 10 Dec; UDD, 2021, 14 Sep). The outcome of the conference was a suggestion of a transitional period between 6 months and 5 years in order to restructure institutions and prepare credible elections (ANR, 2021, p. 4). Due to Mali’s bid for a five year transition, ECOWAS members withdrew their ambassadors from Mali, closed their land and air borders to Mali, froze Malian assets and suspended financial assistance, except for medical products, food supplies and energy sources (ECOWAS, 2022, 9 Jan, p. 4). Mali rebuttals by retrieving its ambassadors in ECOWAS countries and closing its land and air borders (ORTM, 2022a, 10 Jan, 01:35). The M5-RFP reportedly also submitted a letter critiquing the progress of Choguel Maïga’s government (Kanta, 2022, 20 Jan).
Mali began regional and international isolation in 2022. For one, as covered in 5.3, France breached Mali’s airspace, Sweden withdrew its contingent, both the Danish contingent and the French ambassador were kicked out. The relationship with Niger had also deteriorated (Ministère des Affaires étrangères du Mali, 2021, 19 Dec). Moreover, the EU established targeted sanctions against NTC President Colonel Diaw, Minister for Reconciliation Colonel Wagué, Prime Minister Choguel Maïga, Minister of Refoundation Ikassa Maïga, and NTC member and Yerewolo - Debouts sur les remparts (“Yerewolo - Standing on the fences”) leader Ben Diarra (EU, 2022, 4 Feb). Due to its frozen assets, Mali also missed a series of payments of $93 million and saw its cotton industry, which accounted for four million workers, crippled. (Africanews with AFP, 2022b, 28 Jan; Lorgerie & Diallo, 2022, 21 Feb). In a joint statement, the CSP, RPM, Adema-PASJ, Asma-CFP and more, reportedly threatened to withdraw their recognition of the transitional authorities and the CTN unless a more inclusive government was formed (Bendhaou, 2022, 10 Feb). Nonetheless, on February 21, the CTN revised the Transitional Charter in accordance with the national conference held in December (Secretariat General du Government, 2022, 26 Feb). An attempt to pressure the authorities similar to the events leading up to the second coup of May 2021 thus failed.

The transitional authorities weren’t entirely isolated however. Protests were organised by Yerewolo against France and ECOWAS’ sanctions in support of the transitional authorities (Lingerie, 2022, 5 Feb; RFI, 2022, 14 Jan). Russia and China also opposed the UN Security Council’s otherwise unanimous support for the ECOWAS sanctions (UNSC, 2022, 11 Jan, p. 9,18). Furthermore, Algeria also provided 108 tons of essential food supplies and 400 thousand Covid-19 vaccines to Mali amidst the sanctions (Algerian MoD, 2022, 25 Jan). Finally, Guinea announced that its borders remained open for Mali (ORTM, 2022b, 10 Jan).
6 Conclusion

6.1 Findings

The investigation has sought to bring up the relevant evidence to explain why France would leave Mali although both countries shared interests in combating the insecurity. Using the existing scholarly literature, this paper verified if the popular dissatisfaction with the Malian security framework can explain France's announcement to redeploy from Mali on February 17, 2022. Historical institutionalism is used to explain changes to the security framework in the form of disruptions or opportunities to explain deviations for the pre-existing security arrangements. The sequence of events in Mali from 2020 forward is thus explored through process tracing to infer causal relationships between events to determine why France left Mali, voluntarily or involuntarily, and why it did so when it did.

Looking at the sequence of events, summarised in figure 1, clues connect dissatisfaction with the security framework in Mali (X) with Operation Barkhane’s withdrawal (Y) through a series of necessary intervening variables (M). Process tracing shows that no single event analysed here is attributed lone explanatory power, rather it is the combination and sequence of multiple events. The smoking gun test is thus ruled out, but to pass the hoop-test, X must be necessary for the intervening mechanisms, who must be sufficient for Y.
As such, X was a necessary condition for the mechanisms for the military coups of August 2020 and May 2021 (M₁), as well as Barkhane’s restructuring (M₂). First, although the motivation for the coups are also related to corruption, the profile of the coup leaders is dependent on Mali’s insecurity and dissatisfaction with the security framework. Indeed, FAMa’s popularity over political actors, the popular preference for military rule and the dissatisfaction with IBK’s relationship to the security framework are clues showing that the coups needed elements of dissatisfaction with the pre-existing security framework. Furthermore, the CNSP’s militarisation of state authority, monopolisation over security and defence matters, and emphasis on security centric approaches shows that the CNSP’s concern is the security framework.

Second, the popular dissatisfaction with the security framework in Mali was a necessary condition for Barkhane’s restructuring, which is seen in the repeated statements issued by the French authorities that a partial withdrawal or restructuring is to be expected as a result of the opposition shown to Barkhane. Barkhane’s strategic reorientation to the tri-border region of central Mali also reflects a restructuring to a geographic area more favourable to Barkhane.

Although France is not considered a disadvantaged actor vis-à-vis the Malian security framework, the CNSP is argued to be one. Indeed, the CNSP were subjected to civilian political authorities and the French led-operation, and displayed other preferences once in power. The CNSP had thus used their advantaged power within FAMa and the national Malian civil-military relations to leverage a change in the Malian security framework. Even the transitional authorities, similarly to IBK’s government, is considered a disadvantaged actor in the Malian security framework due to their asymmetric relationship to France, seen in the attempt to launch negotiations with JNIM. As such, the CNSP and transitional governments were actors of change vis-à-vis the Malian security framework.
As a result of the actors of change within the Malian political landscape and Barkhane’s restructuring, their respective decisions entered a positive feedback loop contributing to the withdrawal of France. For one, France's announcement to restructure Barkhane is a difficult decision to reverse. It also generated criticism from the transitional authorities and triggered arguments for an intensified cooperation with Russia, and the reported deployment of Wagner by December 2021. Second, the transitional authorities’ initiatives to change the security framework, the consolidation of power by dividing the M5-RFP, and the popular movement against France’s presence, triggered diplomatic hostilities with France, and with Russia even overtly confronting France’s position in Mali. These patterns reinforced Mali’s alignment with institutional challengers, and thus an intensified cooperation with Russia, and increased the difficulty of reversing the path.

As such, the difficult relations between Mali and France, as well as Wagner’s deployment counted heavily towards France’s withdrawal, making them more than sufficient contributing factors for outcome Y. Wagner’s deployment eroded France’s chances of counting on international support with Sweden’s withdrawal and Denmark’s expulsion. It also made operational synergies with Mali more difficult, with the latter continuing to deny the presence of Wagner. The hostile relations between France and Mali also showed an escalatory trend with a back and forth of verbal insults and diplomatic attacks, including France’s delegitimization of the transitional authorities and the expulsion of the French ambassador. The transitional authorities also meant that France was dealing with an authority able and willing to displace and convert existing arrangements, which could pressure French operational autonomy. As such, the path dependency is seen in the irreversibility of the new normative positions of France and Mali which continues to spiral until the stress on the cooperation reaches its peak when France announces its withdrawal on February 17, 2022.
According to the conditions of the hoop test, the hypothesis is thus strengthened, but not confirmed. Finally, to answer the research question, evidence shows that France did not withdraw earlier because a change in state authority was needed to ignite the frictions with France. While IBK’s governance was considered dependent on France, the CNSP is considered an actor of change. Coupled with the exogenous shock of Barkhane’s restructuring, the interdependent relationship between Mali and France eroded. So while the popular dissatisfaction with the security framework contributed to France's withdrawal, it was dependent on intervening mechanisms, which explains why France didn’t withdraw earlier despite significant dissatisfaction. As such, the short timeline and the outcome dated February 17, 2021, is due to fast institutional changes as a result of two significant institutional displacements.

6.2 Contributions to War Studies
This paper's contributions to war studies are the gaps the paper can fill in the existing literature. The literature review revealed multiple arguments that dissatisfaction with Barkhane and the Malian authorities’ backing France’s presence was the instigator for the coups (Elischeri, 2021; Gazeley, 2022; Yukawa et al., 2022), and even Barkhane’s withdrawal (Čábelka & Štěpánek, 2021; Cumming et al., 2022). This paper thus shows that these arguments are strengthened, although other explanatory paths are also at play.

More specifically, institutional differences between France and Mali, such as French operational autonomy (Chafer et al., 2020), operational frictions (Amoah, 2023) and an asymmetric relationship (Sandness, 2023), pressured their military cooperation (Atta, 2023; Bove et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2022; Morgan, 2020), eventually led to France’s withdrawal. Indeed this paper finds that the degradation in French-Malian relationships and incompatible operational choices led their relationship to erode. As such, it is Operation Barkhane’s emphasis on human rights and operational autonomy, but not its security-centrality or client regimes, that were the reasons for Barkhane’s redeployment.
Indeed, minority concerns or Mali’s “predatory” civil-military relations were not relevant in the timeline. However, the loss of trust in democracy (Elischeri, 2019; Morgan, 2020; Wing, 2023), is seen with a replaced trust in religious authority and the ideological legitimacy of FAMa (Boås & Cissé, 2022; Sabrow, 2017). The CNSP’s bid to reclaim sovereignty is thus appreciated (Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022; Sandnes, 2023, while there is dissatisfaction with France’s relationship with Malian elites and hypocrisy shown to the respect of democratic norms (Fraioli, 2023, p. II; Marten, 2023, p. 52).

Finally, this paper found that the initial intent with the cooperation with Wagner was pragmatic to fill a vacuum, thus reiterating the understanding that FAMa remains unable to independently handle the jihadist groups (Čábelka and Štěpánek, 2021; Elischeri, 2019; Mensah, 2023). The intensified alliance with Russia was also made sense of as an alignment among institutional challengers, which echoes the perspective of seeing the coups as a revolutionary process (Engels, 2023; Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022), or to find alternative security solutions (Fraioli, 2023; Marten, 2023; Sandnes, 2023). Regardless, findings show that the ex-CNSP is an element in favour of political interventions, seen in the inclination to advocate for longer transition periods (Elischeri, 2019).

6.3 Further Research

This paper captures multiple contributing explanations in the timeline captured. It is therefore ideal to explore other hypotheses to explain the outcome. Indeed, the dissatisfaction with the security framework is only a partial explanation for the outcome. This paper is also only able to capture verifiable actions and announcements, meaning that narratives or non-expressed intents are not identified. For example, influence campaigns are not easily captured in a timeline. This paper thus failed to capture the intensified cooperation with Russia and the Wagner Group. Alternatively, a narrative analysis could be beneficial to understand the motivations for the actors involved. Russia’s presence as symbolic resistance to French Africa policy is already researched (Engels, 2023, p. 148), however there is a lack of knowledge on when and why this symbol grew considering that trust in Russia to restore security in Mali was insignificant in 2019 (FES, 2020a, p. 83), but grew over the time of the observed timeline (FES, 2022, p. 5).
The paper is limited in its scope, and with additional time and space, additional events and actors may impact the validity of the hypothesis and generate additional hypotheses. Process tracing also requires good theoretical knowledge to formulate hypotheses or inductively generate generalisable findings. Considering the similar outcomes in Burkina Faso and Niger it would be fruitful to study the timeline in these countries and eventually compare the explanatory variables in the context of the coups and withdrawal of Barkhane as wave. With the withdrawal of France, further research on the military capacity and success of the armed forces in the Sahel and with cooperation between Wagner and FAMa is to be expected. The creation of the Alliance of the Sahelian States between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger also invites another path to study these military forces’ battlefield success.
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Introduction


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**Theoretical Framework**


Methodology


Empirical Analysis


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