



**Dimensions**  
for Strategic Studies

Analytical Report

# International polarization in the Sahel And the expected Mauritanian roles

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## **Dimensions** for Strategic Studies

Dimensions Centre for Strategic Studies (DCSS) is think tank, dedicated to the study of the Middle East and North Africa affairs, provides the Arab readers with a substantive insight on the region's political, economic and social issues and dynamics.

The DCSS was founded in the United Kingdom on January 2020 ,1, and is headquartered in London.

Dimensions Center for Strategic Studies is interested in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) affairs in particular, addressing influences the region has and the effects of this region's interactions with the rest of the world.

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We are keen to provide topics in an intensive manner that goes in line with the challenges of modern times and in brief way which can meet the needs of researchers and readers as well.



## Preamble

The geographical location of Mauritania necessitates interaction with the events of the Sahel region and West Africa in general.

The centrality of this interaction is enhanced if we invoke other dimensions, including cultural, historical, security and economic dimensions.

Since the international interest in the security of the Sahel region began more than a decade ago, Mauritania has remained at the center of the attention of international forces that look at the region from a security perspective.

The volume of Western investment in the Mauritanian army has increased and the aspects of cooperation between the two sides have diversified, while the main forces in the Western powers have waged (France and the United States of America), which have a traditional interest in the region, have over Mauritania in the fight against terrorism.

Recently, however, the situation in the region has witnessed a radical change in the nature of major players, as the Western powers (France, the United States and their European allies) have no longer the monopoly on drawing the maps of the region and the tools of influence; especially, with Russia's growing presence in the region's security and military files, and its military entry into the crisis in Mali, forcing France, the traditional colonizer of this West African country to withdraw its military forces involved in the war on terrorism in protest of the latter's alliance with Russia.



## Axes under formation

With the entry of Russian mercenaries months ago into Mali, at the request of its transitional authorities to assist in the war on terrorism, and France's announcement of a military withdrawal from it; the region began to live under the impact of an accelerating international movement to define and direct the features, nature and tools of the new intervention.

The activity of the diplomatic movement in the region and the size of the international gatherings that were hosted and organized outside it, and in which high-ranking officials (from that region) participated, all contributed to the formation of a preliminary picture of the direction of the alliances coming to the region with its regional and international tributaries.

During its management of the African Sahel file, France was content with the group of five countries known as the "G5", which consists of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, as a regional system for the war on terrorism in the Sahel, and for the realization of development projects that seek to develop the region.

Mauritania was the country that hosted the founding summit in 2014, and remained the most prominent actor in the group, and the country incubating its most important institutions (the permanent secretariat and the military college), but the French withdrawal from Mali and the escalation of the Russian military presence in the region opened the door to a new movement that makes Mauritania a demand for good choice and accurate calculations in alignment choices and dependency paths.

It is clear that Russia today is seeking to expand and penetrate the African continent, at the expense of the French retreat in Central Africa and the Sahel countries.

Moscow is betting on Algeria as an effective and influential traditional ally in the region.



The Russian diplomatic movement shows this trend, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Algeria in May 2022, in light of the escalation of the situation with Morocco, and in light of Rabat's preparation for the summit of the international coalition to fight ISIS, which was established in 2014 with the aim of besieging the international extension of the terrorist organization. It is considered the first meeting of the alliance to be held in Africa, specifically in Morocco.

A few days after the visit of the top official of the Russian diplomacy to Algeria, the Chairman of the Defense and Security Committee of the Russian Federal Council, Viktor Bondarev, arrived there, in the context of strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries.

The security issue emerged remarkably on the Russian official's agenda, as he discussed with the Algerian side the development of military cooperation between the two countries and joint military exercises.

There is a certain thing that appears through the Russian focus on Algeria, which is that Moscow wants to strengthen its historical and traditional ties to this country on the one hand, and on the other hand, it seeks to thwart the rapprochement efforts made by NATO with it.

The Russian movement in the region is matched by the unmistakable interest of "NATO" in the Sahel region, which appears to be a new strategy for the Western powers to prevent Russian expansion in the region.

The new strategic concept of the "NATO" defined North Africa in the area of the strategic interests of the Alliance.

Thus, the new political-military map of the organization showed, for the first time, the shift of the front line south towards the black continent, despite the fact that the data, documents and plans of the "NATO" that give priority to the eastern flank of Europe, where Russia is conducting its military operation in Ukraine.

North Africa has become part of the areas that constitute an arena of confrontation between Russia and "NATO", according to what appears from the diplomatic movement of the two parties in the region in the recent period, and based on the results of the vote that took place by African countries against Russia regarding the Ukrainian issue.



Algeria, which is close to Russia, abstained from the vote, while Mauritania condemned the Russian actions, while the representative of Morocco was not even present at the United Nations session.

This indicates the level of actual entry of the region into the accounts of international parties.

In addition to feeding the greed of the military-industrial complex, the intervention of "NATO" in the region in general and the Sahel region in particular, could be considered the latest shift in the international conflict in the region, pushed by France, in the face of the rise of China and Russia there.

There is a real emphasis on the approach of NATO's entry into the Sahel region, which was expressed by Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albarez on the sidelines of the NATO summit, which was held in Madrid last June, when he said in press statements: "We cannot rule it out.

This issue was not brought up during the debates in Madrid; because the summit is dedicated to defining the NATO framework.

If necessary, and if there is a threat to our security, we will certainly do so.



## Mauritania and “NATO”... An alliance fraught with challenges

In light of the new geopolitical situation in the region, Mauritania finds itself in a complex geopolitical reality.

NATO is betting on Nouakchott as an important strategic ally in the region, knowing that Mauritania attended the last NATO summit in Madrid.

Mauritania has been part of the Alliance's Mediterranean Dialogue Partnership Framework since 1995.

In recent years, NATO has helped Mauritania build safe ammunition depots, destroy obsolete ammunition, and train military personnel.

Mauritania's participation in the Madrid summit reflects the growing Western interest in strategic and vital interests in the African Sahel region and the growing regional and international polarisation in the region.

It may be understood from this participation that Mauritania falls within the framework of the alliance's calculations within the "southern wing", according to the new strategic concept of "NATO".

Mauritanian Foreign Minister Ahmed Salem Ould Marzouk held several meetings on the sidelines of the Madrid summit with Western officials, including US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

Mauritania's rapprochement with NATO is no longer a secret, and one of its goals may be to provide Nouakchott protection for itself, in light of the weakness of France, which is the country's traditional military and intelligence ally, due to the failure of its military and security policy in the region.

In addition, the French enthusiasm for the adoption of the Group of Five (G5), which was established at the initiative of Mauritania and with the blessing of France, has declined.

The weakness of the enthusiasm of Paris is explained by the fact that it reached a conviction of the ineffectiveness of this group in its military approach in the region.



A number of French positions in the recent period have embodied Paris' lack of betting on that force, including the unilateral decision to withdraw military from Mali, which was taken without extensive coordination and consultation with the group's leaders.

And even if the political situation of the member states, three of which are living under the impact of military coups, pushes France to renounce this framework, Paris - moreover - dealt negatively with the group at a sensitive stage, as it did not coordinate with it the arrangements for its exit from Mal., It did not put in place joint mechanisms for working with it in the post-withdrawal phase.

It became clear that Mauritania's leading role in the Sahel region began to decline significantly. Nouakchott did not sponsor initiatives in the recent crises in the region, nor did it issue clear positions regarding the military coups that occurred in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Based on the aforementioned, Mauritania has become aware that it has to go beyond the traditional ally, i.e., France, in the security card, and coordinate directly with "NATO", in light of the latter's policies of openness and expansion in Africa.

The intention was to preserve the strategic importance that Nouakchott has recently gained in Western eyes, in the areas of security and the fight against immigration, and the strengthening of a strong ally in light of the Russian military presence in the region, which Mauritania adopts positions that reject it.

So far, the bill of Mauritania's rapprochement with the "NATO" has carried security advantages and economic gains, but it is not without many risks and inconveniences, due to security and regional considerations that can be summarized as follows:

**Wagner on the Border:** Mauritania faces a complex security challenge, represented in the spread of Russian Wagner mercenaries in Mali, and the stationing of some of their units in the border areas.

Mauritanian citizens have been subjected to brutal killings by the Malian army in operations supported by "Wagner" forces in the border area between the two countries in recent months.





Therefore, any strong rapprochement of Nouakchott with "NATO" and identification with its regional agendas will inevitably make Mauritania at the forefront of Mali's neighboring countries, both affected and benefiting from the presence of Wagner.

**Obsessions of estrangement with Algeria:** If Nouakchott is strongly involved in the "Atlantic" military and security agenda in the Sahel region, and aligns itself with the French axis in the region, it is not excluded that this matter will anger Algeria, which is keen to attract Mauritania within its competition with Morocco in the framework of the regional conflict between the two countries.

If Mauritania loses Algeria, this may affect its national security due to the latter's importance in the region's security files and intelligence coordination.

If this rapprochement occurred, it would undermine Algeria's efforts to supply Mauritania with energy, as the two countries agreed some time ago on a preliminary study for a project to construct a pipeline to transport Algerian gas to Mauritania, in order to provide the Mauritanian market with fuels, oil materials and household gas, in light of the growing fears the authorities have about their inability to provide energy due to the current global energy crisis.

**The possibility of losing the security coordination paper and military cooperation with Mali:** The statements of the Spanish Foreign Minister, in which he did not rule out the "NATO" intervention in Mali, sparked a diplomatic crisis between Bamako and Madrid, as the Malian government summoned the Spanish ambassador accredited to it to deliver a letter of protest against the statements he made.

Head of Spanish diplomacy.

Mali considered that the intervention of the "Atlantic" means the destruction of the country, noting that its intervention in Libya was the cause of its destruction.

The financial position of NATO shows the extent of Bamako's involvement with the Russian axis, after Bamako and Nouakchott were part of the French axis in the region before the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's regime.

Although Nouakchott is trying hard to maintain friendly relations with Bamako, any strong positions from it that support "NATO" policies in the Sahel in the future may lose its relations with Mali, which is in the orbit of Russia.



This will inevitably reflect on the military and security cooperation paper between two neighbors whose common border exceeds 2,000 km, and armed violence and cross-border crime groups are active on such a border.

# Conclusion

It has become clear that there is an atmosphere of international competition in the regions of North Africa and the Sahel between the "NATO" axis on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other.

This international polarization will have negative economic and security effects on the countries of the region, with Mauritania being in the heart of all that , if the ambitions of influence and penetration by the great powers are not accompanied by local political wills in the countries of the region that pursue policies characterized by flexibility and away from absolute subordination to this or that axis.


It is true that it is difficult for a country like Mauritania to disengage from the traditional link with powerful Western powers such as France and the United States of America.

They possess powerful security influence tools that enable them to destabilize security and stability, as well as large energy resources that the countries of the region need in light of a reality that is witnessing challenges related to energy of all kinds.



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