



Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation

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What's new? Since the coup in May 2021, Mali's authorities have developed closer relations with Russia, now their preferred military partner. In parallel, they have distanced themselves from several Western and regional partners, notably France.

Why is it important? The Malian authorities' shift in strategy jeopardises the regional stabilisation architecture developed since 2013. The break with France, along with the worsening relations with other Western and regional partners, threatens to isolate Bamako.

What should be done? Bamako should find ways to rebalance relations with its different partners, rather than paint itself into a corner by again relying primarily on military solutions, this time with its Russian ally. Mali's partners should not let geopolitical conflict bleed into the Sahel.

I. Overview

After the coup in May 2021, the Malian authorities chose Russia as their main military partner, turning their backs on France. Mali's leaders hope this new strategy will boost their approval ratings and offer the country brighter prospects after ten years of spiralling insecurity. They argue that partnership with Moscow gives them readier access to the military hardware they need to take back areas that jihadists have overrun. The true nature of Mali-Russia relations and the outcome of their deepening ties remain a matter of debate, as do the risks, particularly in economic terms, of severing ties with the West. The Malian authorities should explore rebalanced, less contentious diplomatic relations. They should also revamp their response to insurgent groups by giving higher priority to local initiatives, particularly renewed dialogue. Meanwhile, Mali's partners should avoid letting international tensions affect diplomacy in the Sahel.

Bamako's relations with neighbours and Western partners remain troubled, even conflictual, though in July 2022 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) eased the sanctions it had imposed on Mali that January. While delays in the electoral calendar and the return to constitutional order have raised tensions, the strain stems mainly from Bamako's decision to break with France and choose Russia as its preferred military partner, including through the Kremlin-linked private security company Wagner.

This choice, while partly an assertion of sovereignty, originates to some extent in the failure of previous military efforts to curb the jihadist threat. These interventions have not delivered greater security; to the contrary, the situation has worsened over the past ten years. Malian authorities see Russia as a reliable, pragmatic partner that is better suited than the West to help them fight jihadist groups, in particular by providing rapid access to military equipment and combat forces on the ground. Yet it is far from clear that Russian backing will turn the tide. The Malian army's efforts in recent months – it has mounted large-scale operations, especially in the centre of the country – have enjoyed only marginal success. The defence and security forces have demonstrated their ability to organise complex operations without French support, but the persistence of jihadist attacks in central and north-eastern Mali and the serious incidents affecting the civilian population show that the security situation remains fragile, despite the authorities' triumphalist rhetoric.

Another reason why Mali's leaders moved toward Russia and away from France is that they were keen to garner stronger popular support, having seized power by force rather than through elections. Wearing by years of insecurity, large swathes of the population have applauded the country's shift in alliances. Fuelling this popular support is strong criticism of previous foreign interventions. The critique owes partly to a Russian-led disinformation campaign, but there is also genuine anger that years of military operations have not checked spreading insecurity. Above all, this popular backing creates the substantial political base the transitional authorities need to govern.

By making Moscow its new strategic partner against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Mali risks isolating itself internationally. Bamako could find itself embroiled in major power rivalry it cannot control. It would gain no lasting benefits from such a scenario. Russia, with its focus on military solutions, will be no more capable than France of fixing Mali's security problems, which go far beyond the jihadist threat. The authorities' rhetoric emphasising Mali's sovereignty, though popular, also has limitations: it has already deprived the country of important support, notably financial backing, and risks being counterproductive over time. The strong financial pressure means that, absent significant security improvements, the authorities' political support base could swiftly crumble, especially in urban centres.

Although they are unlikely to reject Russian support, the Malian authorities should avoid falling into isolation and take a more balanced approach to foreign relations. They should not underestimate the fallout from an abrupt severance of ties with old allies, mainly in the West. Such a break could have harmful consequences for the country, notably in its access to international aid and help with stabilisation.

To prevent such a scenario, Mali's leaders should abandon confrontational diplomacy and instead work toward settling their differences with neighbouring countries and rekindling relations with those Western partners most amenable to compromise. They should avoid overblown rhetoric and impulsive decisions that damage the country's good relations with its regional partners and those further afield. Mali is entitled to reassert its sovereignty and its partners should respect that right. Yet protecting its sovereignty should not counteract efforts to maintain or reestablish partnerships with those Western and regional allies that remain committed to helping the country on its path to stability. In particular, Bamako should lift its highly obstructive restrictions on the UN's stabilisation mission in Mali. The authorities

could also send stronger signals they will respect the electoral calendar agreed upon with ECOWAS in July 2022.

Mali's Western partners, meanwhile, should be pragmatic and flexible in their cooperation, not allowing tensions to boil over and keeping the country out of their confrontation with Russia. They should encourage Malians to debate their future choices for the transition, particularly in regard to political and institutional reforms. The Malian authorities' inability to tackle insecurity, even with the support of their new Russian partner, suggests that the solution lies not in a new alliance, but in locally developed political strategies that respond to people's expectations.

To emerge from a particularly difficult situation, Mali will need both military and financial support from its partners. The country should also adopt a strategy that focuses on strengthening governance and explores the possibility of dialogue with jihadist groups. Several partners, including France, had long been opposed to the latter, giving de facto precedence to counter-terrorism tactics. Despite switching partners, Mali has persisted in an essentially military response, which continues to take a heavy toll on civilians. Bamako should rather make use of the space left by France's departure to devise an approach that strikes a better balance between political and military solutions.

II. Falling Out with Western and Regional Partners

In 2021, Mali started reassessing its relationships with its main partners, particularly France. When a coup ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020, the group of Malian officers that led it released statements reassuring the country's traditional allies of their commitment to military partnerships.¹ Yet in May 2021, when these same officers mounted a second coup, their tone and position changed. Within a few months, the Malian authorities made Russia the country's privileged military partner. In parallel, relations with France – Mali's main military ally since the outbreak of the 2012 crisis – soured to the point that Paris withdrew all the troops who were part of Barkhane, its main Sahelian operation, from Mali in August 2022.² Beyond this rift with France, relations between the transitional authorities and many other allies, Western partners and West African neighbours alike, are also worsening, raising fears that the country is headed toward unprecedented isolation.

There are several reasons for Mali's rapprochement with Moscow. First of all, the condemnation of the second coup by Mali's partners, particularly France, generated tensions that hastened Bamako's distancing.³ Secondly, the Malian authorities highlight what they perceive as Operation Barkhane and other international and regional

¹ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°304, *Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition*, 21 September 2021.

² Operation Barkhane replaced Operation Serval in August 2014. A total of 4,500 French soldiers were deployed to Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad between 2014 and 2022.

³ Unlike the first coup, in August 2020, after which international partners quickly acknowledged the new authorities, the second coup drew great disapproval, including from France. Paris notably suspended joint operations with the Malian armed forces and threatened to withdraw Operation Barkhane. This period also marked the beginning of a series of heated exchanges in press releases and declarations.

military interventions' failure to curb the advance of jihadist groups to date.⁴ The authorities consider that France – which had been their leading partner in these interventions – does not have the solution to instability in the Sahel. Some even think that Paris is playing a double game by supporting armed groups hostile to the Malian state.⁵ This feeling is also fuelled by Mali's colonial history, with France regularly accused of paternalism.⁶

The break between Bamako and Paris became concrete within months.⁷ When the second coup took place on 24 May 2021, the French government strongly condemned it and ten days later suspended its joint military operations with Malian armed forces.⁸ French President Emmanuel Macron also formalised and sped up Operation Barkhane's disengagement from Mali, which had been under way since the preceding February.⁹ In September 2021, reports by the Reuters news agency that the Malian government and Wagner had signed an agreement further aggravated relations between Bamako and Paris.¹⁰ Then, in January 2022, Bamako expelled the French ambassador in response to statements by French authorities that questioned the Malian authorities' legitimacy.¹¹

In April 2022, after the discovery of a mass grave near the Gossi camp, which Barkhane troops had handed back to the Malian armed forces, Paris accused Wagner of trying to place the blame on French forces for the atrocities. France denied committing any such crime, claiming that Wagner had staged the event as part of a smear campaign, charges it backed up with aerial images relayed in international media. The transitional authorities, however, stated the footage was "fake" and a proof of French "espionage" and "subversion".¹² Signalling an unprecedented deterioration in relations between the two countries, Mali lodged a complaint before the UN Security

⁴ In addition to Operation Barkhane, they cite the UN's stabilisation mission, MINUSMA, the Takuba Task Force, which involved special forces from nearly a dozen European countries, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Takuba was launched in March 2020 to support Barkhane and dissolved in July 2022. On the G5 Sahel Joint Force, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, 12 December 2017.

⁵ "Le Mali saisit l'ONU et accuse la France d'armer les djihadistes", *Le Point Afrique*, 17 August 2022. What was perceived as Paris' accommodating stance toward rebel groups in 2012 fuelled various stories about France's alleged support not only of the armed groups that signed the 2015 inter-Malian peace agreement, but also of jihadist movements. French authorities, for their part, denounced these accusations as "groundless", "preposterous" and "implausible". See also "Le Mali dénonce des 'actes d'agression' français et interpelle l'ONU, l'Elysée dément", TF1, 18 August 2022.

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior Malian military and civilian officials, Bamako, June 2022.

⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition*, op. cit.

⁸ At that time, the coup's leaders had not revealed their intentions, but rumours of a rapprochement with Russia were already circulating. Paris was concerned about the return of Defence Minister Sadio Camara, reputed to be close to Moscow, whose ouster from the government had led to the second coup. Crisis Group Report, *Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition*, op. cit.

⁹ "G5 Sahel : l'avenir de l'opération 'Barkhane' au menu du sommet de N'Djamena", *Le Monde Afrique*, 15 February 2021.

¹⁰ "Deal allowing Russian mercenaries into Mali is close – sources", Reuters, 13 September 2021.

¹¹ Macron called the transitional government "the child of two coups", while French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said the Malian authorities were "illegitimate". "Mali: Macron qualifie de 'honte' les propos du Premier ministre sur un 'abandon' par Paris", RFI, 30 September 2021.

¹² "Communiqué N° 28 du Gouvernement de la Transition", 26 April 2022.

Council in August 2022, accusing France of “gathering intelligence for the benefit of terrorist groups operating in the Sahel and dropping them arms and ammunition”.¹³

Though Malians had greeted their arrival in 2013 with considerable enthusiasm, French troops departed on 15 August 2022 against a backdrop of public rejection, especially in the capital.¹⁴ The repercussions of the rift between France and Mali go beyond the security realm. In November 2022, France announced it was suspending its official development aid while maintaining humanitarian aid.¹⁵ In response, the Malian government banned the activities of NGOs operating with French funding or support, including in the humanitarian field.¹⁶

The arrival of Russian elements in Mali compromised relations with other Western partners involved in regional stabilisation. As rumours spread of a contract between Bamako and Wagner, the authorities denied them, speaking instead of the presence of Russian “instructors” on Malian soil.¹⁷ But Mali’s partners, including Western allies, raised concerns about the arrival of “mercenaries” in the country. In December 2021, fifteen European countries and Canada declared that their troops’ presence was incompatible with that of “mercenaries” linked to Wagner, whose abuses are documented.¹⁸ In January 2022, Bamako turned away the Danish contingent of the Takuba Task Force – a European initiative intended to supplement Barkhane – for lacking the necessary authorisations to deploy. A few months later, in July 2022, France announced the end of Takuba, which had been launched in 2020 and mandated principally to act in Mali but had struggled to materialise.

European countries’ reluctance to pursue military action in Mali is also linked to the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. The conflict, which erupted a few months after the Malian authorities’ shift toward Moscow, pits Russia against Ukraine, which is supported militarily by the West. This Russian-Western standoff has added to the tensions in Mali, bringing rivalries to the fore and complicating Bamako’s efforts to maintain a balance among its various partners.¹⁹ In the first months of 2022, officials from several European countries that had contributed troops to either the European Union Training Mission for Mali (EUTM) or the UN’s stabilisation force, MINUSMA, revealed to Crisis Group that they were considering withdrawing their

¹³ “Lettre circulaire N° 000031/MAECI/SG-CT-MT”, 16 August 2022. See also “Le Mali saisit l’ONU et accuse la France d’armer les jihadistes”, *Le Point Afrique*, 17 August 2022.

¹⁴ “Les derniers soldats français quittent le Mali après plus de neuf ans d’intervention militaire”, *TV5 Monde*, 15 August 2022.

¹⁵ “Mali – Suspension de l’aide publique au développement”, French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 16 November 2022.

¹⁶ “Communiqué N° 042 du Gouvernement de la transition”, 21 November 2022.

¹⁷ “Le Mali dément tout déploiement des mercenaires russes du Groupe Wagner”, *Le Monde*, 25 December 2021.

¹⁸ “Communiqué conjoint sur le déploiement du groupe Wagner au Mali”, 23 December 2021. See also “Guerre en Syrie : trois ONG portent plainte contre des mercenaires russes”, *France 24*, 15 March 2021.

¹⁹ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°96, *Answering Four Hard Questions about Russia’s War in Ukraine*, 8 December 2022; Crisis Group Commentary, “Walking a Fine Line in Ukraine”, 10 October 2022.

contingents. Their view was that the Malian authorities had to choose sides.²⁰ Gradually, Mali thus became embroiled in a rivalry between Russia and the West.

Meanwhile, relations between MINUSMA and the transitional authorities have oscillated. The government has for some months denied the UN team investigating claims of serious crimes against civilians access to sites in the centre of the country.²¹ MINUSMA, for its part, identified numerous human rights violations in a quarterly note published on 30 May, highlighting summary executions of hundreds of civilians in the city of Moura.²² Moreover, the transitional authorities' opposition to maintaining the mission's "support and reassurance mechanism" – notably, specific rights to fly over territory that Barkhane had guaranteed MINUSMA, the expulsion of the mission's spokesman and new procedures hindering ground force responsiveness – have all cast deep doubt on its future.²³ Nevertheless, several UN interlocutors choose to see Bamako's stance as a sign of renewed interest in the UN force.²⁴

Mali's relations with some of its neighbours and with ECOWAS have also deteriorated. Shortly after the second coup, ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) suspended Mali from membership but did not impose economic sanctions, which they had done in August 2020. In October 2021, the Malian government expelled the ECOWAS representative in Bamako, accusing him of carrying out "activities hostile to the transition".²⁵ In December 2021, on the eve of an ECOWAS summit devoted in part to the situation in Mali, Bamako proposed a five-year extension of the transition. The regional organisation, seeing the proposal as a provocation, decided in January 2022 to adopt a series of diplomatic, economic and trade sanctions against Mali.

After several months of tensions and negotiations, the Malian authorities made some concessions to their regional partners. In June 2022, they decided to extend the transition by 24 months instead of the five years proposed in December 2021.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Brussels and Bamako, June-September 2022. See also "L'Allemagne met le Mali en garde contre la coopération militaire avec la Russie", Mikado FM, 15 September 2021.

²¹ "Note trimestrielle sur les tendances des violations et atteintes aux droits de l'homme au Mali 1^{er} janvier – 31 mars 2022", UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 30 May 2022; "Mali : Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers", Human Rights Watch, 5 April 2022.

²² Ibid. Mali did not authorise the UN fact-finding mission to travel to Moura. In response to accusations against the Malian armed forces and their Russian allies, however, on 6 April, the Mopti military court prosecutor announced that the national gendarmerie would investigate.

²³ When MINUSMA's mandate was renewed in June 2022, the Malian government refused to grant Operation Barkhane specific rights to fly over its territory. Once Barkhane left in August 2022, MINUSMA could no longer rely on the French mission's flights, a mechanism through which Barkhane supported MINUSMA with surveillance and reconnaissance capacity as well as reinforcement of its camps and patrols. The interruption spurred some of the European contributing countries to consider withdrawing from the mission. Crisis Group interviews, European officials from countries contributing to MINUSMA, 2022. See also Crisis Group Commentary, "MINUSMA at a Crossroads", 1 December 2022; "Internal review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali – Report of the Secretary-General", UNSC/2023/36, 16 January 2023.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Bamako and New York, 2022. See also "La Minusma évoque des restrictions de mouvement par l'armée malienne", *Africanews*, 20 May 2022; and UN Security Council Resolution 2640 renewing MINUSMA's mandate, S/RES/2640 (2022), 29 June 2022.

²⁵ The authorities accused the ECOWAS ambassador of working with Malian political actors to destabilise the transition. See "Le gouvernement malien justifie l'expulsion du représentant de la Cedeao", RFI, 26 October 2021.

They also adopted a new electoral law, published a timetable and set up a team of experts to prepare a draft constitution. In an effort to normalise relations with Bamako, ECOWAS partially lifted its sanctions on 3 July 2022.²⁶

Mali's relations with the regional organisation nevertheless remain difficult, more so since tensions arose with Côte d'Ivoire, an important neighbour and an influential member of ECOWAS. In July 2022, Malian authorities arrested 49 Ivorian soldiers at Bamako airport on charges of "breaching state security".²⁷ They detained most of the soldiers in the capital until December 2022.²⁸ Negotiations for their release were complicated by a series of incidents pre-dating the arrests.²⁹ The Ivorian president is frequently criticised in Bamako, where he is suspected of playing a major role in the ECOWAS decision to sanction Mali and of working behind the scenes against the transitional authorities.³⁰ Bamako is also irritated by the presence in Abidjan of former senior officials with ties to the late President Keïta, whom it accuses of working to destabilise Mali.³¹

On 23 December 2022, with Togolese mediation, the Ivorian and Malian authorities signed a memorandum to diplomatically settle the case of the 49 soldiers. A week later, after a particularly fast procedure, the Malian courts sentenced the male Ivorian soldiers still detained in Bamako to twenty years' imprisonment, and the three female soldiers, who were tried in absentia, to the death penalty. All were pardoned on 6 January 2023 by the Malian president, thus ending a difficult phase in the already strained relations between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.³² The episode may nevertheless leave its mark on ties between the two countries.³³

²⁶ ECOWAS lifted economic and financial sanctions but maintained political (ie, individual) and diplomatic sanctions (ie, suspension from regional institutions). "Mali: la levée des sanctions économiques de la CEDEAO saluée", AA, 5 July 2022.

²⁷ "Mali : l'inculpation des 49 militaires ivoiriens confirmée par la justice malienne", TV5 Monde, 15 August 2022. Bamako claimed the accused were "mercenaries" seeking to destabilise the transition. Abidjan asserted they were soldiers acting within the framework of a UN procedure called National Support Elements, national soldiers deployed by troop-contributing countries in support of their contingents. The practice is common in peacekeeping missions.

²⁸ In September 2022, the Malian authorities released the Ivorian contingent's three female soldiers "for humanitarian reasons" as part of Togolese mediation that spared no effort to resolve the diplomatic crisis. "Communiqué de la médiation relatif à la libération des trois des quarante-neuf soldats ivoiriens interpellés à Bamako le 10 juillet 2022", Togolese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and Togolese Abroad, 3 September 2022.

²⁹ In February 2022, for example, an alleged conversation between Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara and former Malian Prime Minister Boubou Cissé reignited tensions between Abidjan and Bamako. In the audio recording, whose authenticity remains to be confirmed, the two men discuss the sanctions that ECOWAS imposed on Malian authorities a month earlier. "Mali : ce que l'on sait de l'audio attribué à Alassane Ouattara et Boubou Cissé", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 February 2022.

³⁰ "Entre Abidjan et Bamako, les secrets d'une guerre de la paranoïa autour d'un deal à un milliard de dollars", *Africa Intelligence*, 21 November 2022.

³¹ During negotiations to free the Ivorian soldiers, Malian authorities attempted to exchange them for these officials, some of whom now reside in Abidjan. See "D'anciennes personnalités en exil dans le collimateur de la junte malienne", VOA, 14 September 2022.

³² "Communiqué N°043 du gouvernement de la transition", Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, 6 January 2023.

³³ In November 2022, Abidjan announced it would withdraw its troops from MINUSMA. See Crisis Group Commentary, "MINUSMA at a Crossroads", op. cit.

Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga's appointment as interim prime minister initially nourished hopes of easier relations between Mali and its Western and regional partners, but these were soon dashed.³⁴ His background as a former AU, UN and ECOWAS official suggested he might adopt a more diplomatic tone with Western and regional partners. When addressing the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2022, however, Colonel Maïga made virulent remarks about France, including calling its leaders "a junta in the service of obscurantism". Even more unexpectedly, he lashed out at the UN secretary-general and the heads of state of Guinea-Bissau (currently heading ECOWAS), Côte d'Ivoire and Niger.³⁵ According to the Malian authorities, this speech was simply a response to aggressive attitudes or remarks made by the presidents that Maïga criticised. But it should be understood in light of national priorities and the authorities' desire to garner popular support by asserting their sovereignty.

Not all signs point to a breakdown in Western support for Mali. The United States, for instance, which suspended its military aid following the second coup in May 2021, committed in October 2022 to provide an additional \$148.5 million (101 billion CFA francs) in humanitarian aid to the country.³⁶ This move reflected Washington's concern about Russia's growing influence in the Sahel and its intention to counter it by keeping a U.S. presence in the region.³⁷ Some European nations also advocate for maintaining or even increasing development efforts in Mali to avoid a vacuum that Russia could take advantage of. An example is Germany, which intends to continue providing development aid and humanitarian assistance to Mali, despite ending its military involvement in MINUSMA in 2024.³⁸

III. The Russian Wager

Mali and Russia developed stronger relations from the second half of 2021, as reflected in increased military support. The first signs of this security rapprochement appeared in September 2021 with Moscow's delivery of military hardware to Bamako, notably helicopters, weapons and ammunition.³⁹ At the same time, rumours circulated that Mali had signed a contract with Wagner, which is headquartered in

³⁴ These hopes were somewhat misplaced, however, given Abdoulaye Maïga's previous strong rebukes of the French authorities in his role as government spokesperson. He became interim prime minister following Choguel Maïga's prolonged absence.

³⁵ For example, he called the French authorities "a nostalgic junta acting in a neocolonial, condescending, paternalistic and revengeful manner". He then criticised the Nigerien president, accusing him of being "a foreigner claiming to be from Niger". "Discours du Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga, Premier ministre p. i, Chef du Gouvernement du Mali, à l'occasion du Débat général de la 77ème Session ordinaire de l'Assemblée générale des Nations Unies", 24 September 2022.

³⁶ "Signature d'un accord de financement de 148,5 millions de dollars entre les Etats-Unis et le Mali", press release, U.S. Agency for International Development, 4 October 2022. The U.S. had also suspended military aid after the August 2020 coup, but restored it once the transitional authorities were established.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Bamako, 2022. See also "US AFRICOM commander says Russian mercenaries in Mali", VOA, 20 January 2022.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Bamako, 2022. See also "Berlin veut rester impliqué dans le développement du Mali", Deutsche Welle, 25 November 2022.

³⁹ Eric Topona, "Des équipements militaires russes au Mali", Deutsche Welle, 1 October 2021.

Saint Petersburg, Russia. Though the Malian authorities still officially deny it, the presence of mercenaries linked to a Russian company, very probably Wagner, is no longer in any doubt.⁴⁰ Many sources, including Western intelligence services, estimate that Wagner has deployed over 1,000 personnel to Mali.⁴¹ The Russian foreign minister's recent visit to Bamako, the first in the history of ties between the two countries, added a diplomatic component to the partnership.⁴²

Malian organisations opposed to Paris and claiming close ties to Moscow actively worked to facilitate Bamako's "shift" toward Russia. The Group of Patriots of Mali, for instance, launched a petition asking for Russian military intervention in 2017. Two years later, in 2019, this group claimed it had collected over eight million signatures in support of Moscow's military engagement in the country. Yewolo-Standing on the Ramparts, a movement created in 2017 that also supports a rapprochement with Russia, spearheads opposition to the French military presence in Mali. In recent years, protests of French policy and, to some extent, Western intervention, have multiplied in the Sahel. While these groups' ties to and coordination with Moscow are uncertain, Western countries view their activism as a disinformation campaign orchestrated by Russia with help from Wagner's founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin.⁴³

Bamako's relations with Russia go well beyond its recent contract with Wagner, however. The two countries have strong historical ties dating back to Mali's independence in 1960. Until the end of the 1980s, many Malian officers were trained in the former Soviet Union and much of the country's military equipment was acquired from Moscow.⁴⁴ Mali also maintained security ties with Russia under President Keïta, and in 2019 the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement paving the way for closer collaboration.⁴⁵ Today, Malian officials in the inner circles of power consider Moscow to be Mali's "natural" ally – and the only one that offers a credible alternative to what is seen as France's unproductive hold upon military operations. Many of the Malian officials interviewed by Crisis Group had long since stopped expecting anything from the stabilisation architecture in place since 2013.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Sources attesting to Wagner's presence are many and varied, ranging from journalistic investigations, such as those published by *Jeune Afrique*, to testimonies from residents of Mopti, Gao and Timbuktu regions whom Crisis Group spoke to.

⁴¹ "Wagner au Mali: enquête exclusive sur les mercenaires de Poutine", *Jeune Afrique*, 22 February 2022.

⁴² "Potential Deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali", press release, U.S. Department of State, 15 December 2021.

⁴³ "La campagne de désinformation d'Evguéni Prigojine dans toute l'Afrique", U.S. Department of State, 4 November 2022.

⁴⁴ From the 1970s, and especially the 1980s, cooperation between Bamako and Moscow declined. The two countries nonetheless maintained links, in part through a Russian-speaking Malian elite that was awarded scholarships in countries formerly part of the Soviet Union. This elite included senior civil servants, several senior officers and the current prime minister, Choguel Maïga.

⁴⁵ "Le Mali et la Russie signent un accord de coopération militaire", *Jeune Afrique*, 3 July 2019.

⁴⁶ This briefing uses the term stabilisation architecture to refer to the range of initiatives launched by the G5 Sahel countries and their international partners to curb insecurity and stabilise the region – for instance, Operation Barkhane, MINUSMA, the Takuba Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. France was both leader of this system and the most influential military actor therein. Crisis Group interviews, senior Malian military and civilian officials, Bamako, September 2022.

The transitional authorities consider Russia to be a reliable and pragmatic partner, offering assistance more in line with Mali's needs.⁴⁷ For current leaders, Russian support brings many concrete benefits. It offers them ready access to military hardware, especially aerial equipment.⁴⁸ It also provides direct support to Malian troops during ground combat. Western countries, on the other hand, are considered too slow or reluctant to provide military equipment.⁴⁹ In addition, some Malian soldiers interviewed by Crisis Group regard the European missions (the EUTM and European Union Capacity-Building Mission in Mali) as too traditional and devoid of real added value in fighting terrorism.⁵⁰ The EU is aware of these criticisms, which are not specific to the Sahel. In 2021, it introduced a new financing tool, the European Peace Facility, allowing it to provide lethal military equipment to the armies of countries it assists.⁵¹

Although Malian forces and their Western partners did carry out joint operations, notably through Barkhane and Takuba, these were limited and never managed to turn the tide on the ground. Moreover, Malian officials point out that Malian military camps regularly suffered large-scale attacks that Barkhane was unable to counter. According to them, these attacks have become rarer since the Russians' arrival, and Malian forces have even, in some cases, displayed greater capacity to respond to assaults.⁵²

Convinced that its alliance with Moscow has strengthened its capabilities, the Malian army has for several months now been engaged in a series of large-scale operations, particularly in the centre of the country.⁵³ Malian officials Crisis Group interviewed in Bamako believe that this new military engagement is the result of a more aggressive posture on the ground. They credit this impetus to the acquisition of new equipment and a shift in mindset within the armed forces, which are reinvigorated by the arrival of a partner more involved in combat support.⁵⁴

For the time being, and despite the Malian authorities' triumphalist rhetoric, these initiatives have failed to show convincing results – jihadists have continued to advance and violence against civilians has increased sharply.⁵⁵ The country's armed forces have demonstrated their ability to organise complex operations in the central region without French aid. But persistent jihadist attacks in the centre and north east are reminders that the country's security situation remains dire. In an unprece-

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Malian officials, Bamako, July-August 2022.

⁴⁸ "Le Mali reçoit de nouveaux équipements militaires de Russie", *Le Monde Afrique*, 10 August 2022.

⁴⁹ "Mali: Bamako demande aux USA de débloquer l'exportation d'un avion militaire", *Africanews*, 23 August 2021.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior Malian military and civilian officials, Bamako, August 2022. Before 2021, however, Brussels did not have the necessary instruments to finance the provision of lethal military equipment to African armies. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°297, *How to Spend It: New EU Funding for African Peace and Security*, 14 January 2021.

⁵¹ For more information on this funding tool, see the European Peace Facility's official website.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, military officials, Bamako, 2022.

⁵³ The army has carried out operations against jihadist groups, notably in the centre of the country, occasionally managing to inflict losses and putting the groups under pressure. It has failed to permanently challenge jihadists' control of rural areas, however. "L'armée malienne annonce des succès contre les groupes armés", *Deutsche Welle*, 21 January 2022.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Malian military officials, Bamako, August 2022.

⁵⁵ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) records 2,146 civilians killed in Mali between January and December 2022, an increase from 459 during the same period in 2021.

dented move, on 22 July 2022, the Katiba Macina, the dominant jihadist movement in central Mali, attacked the garrison town of Kati, which is 15km from Bamako and home to the transitional president. In recent months, several security posts near the capital have come under attack.⁵⁶ One year after their shift in alliances, the Malian state and its new Russian partner have not managed to drive jihadists out of the centre – their operations’ area of focus. Moreover, their actions seem very limited in the face of the Islamic State Sahel Province’s latest north-eastern expansion.

Several Western partners have told Crisis Group that Russia is unable to provide effective military support to Mali. They cite the Central African Republic and Mozambique as examples of the limits of Russian aid, in particular the risks of human rights violations and predation that Wagner’s presence brings about.⁵⁷ After ten years of unsuccessful Western interventions to counter jihadist expansion, however, invoking the ineffectiveness of Russian rings hollow to both the authorities and large swathes of the population.⁵⁸ The issue of crimes against civilians is of greater concern to groups most at risk of violence, particularly after the Moura episode. Although the risk is increasing, however, it is hardly new in a country that has already experienced episodes of serious crimes involving security and paramilitary forces.⁵⁹ Finally, Russia’s difficulty in Ukraine has not undermined the confidence of Moscow’s supporters. Many in Bamako even see it as proof of Russian resistance to the West.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the Malian authorities believe that the rapprochement with Russia can help improve the country’s economy. In late October 2022, a Malian delegation led by the economy and finance minister travelled to the Russian capital to obtain fertiliser and hydrocarbons, which the national market badly needs and inflation has made particularly precious. A shipment of \$100 million’s worth of these commodities should transit through the port of Conakry, a sign of the good relations between Mali and Guinea. In the eyes of the political leaders interviewed by Crisis Group, Russia not only plays a security role, but can also partially cushion any economic shocks caused by reductions in Western aid.⁶¹ This wager is uncertain, to say the least, in a

⁵⁶ “Au Mali, les attaques jihadistes se rapprochent de Bamako”, *Jeune Afrique*, 4 January 2023. It should be noted, however, that attacks in the south began well before Operation Barkhane’s departure and the alliance with Russia. Bamako, for instance, suffered a series of attacks between 2015 and 2017.

⁵⁷ Pauline Bax, “Russia’s Influence in the Central African Republic”, Crisis Group Commentary, 3 December 2021; and Enrica Picco, “Fixing the Army is Key for CAR’s Stability”, Crisis Group Commentary, 11 May 2022.

⁵⁸ Some Malians, including at the highest echelons of power, have been convinced for years that Western powers are secretly plundering Malian resources or are pre-positioning themselves for a vast global struggle to get at them. Crisis Group interviews, senior Malian civilian officials, Bamako, September 2022. These beliefs stem in part from the asymmetry between the volume of aid provided to Mali and the limited results achieved on the ground. Some countries, including France, highlight the financial and human cost of their interventions, but their arguments have failed to convince Malians, for whom Western aid – in particular French support – has been discredited.

⁵⁹ Non-state armed groups remain the main perpetrators of violence in the country. Nevertheless, according to ACLED, “between 2017 and 2020, 535 civilians were reportedly killed in Mali by security forces”. Morgane Le Cam, “Certains ont été exécutés à bout portant: au Mali, l’armée de nouveau accusée d’exactions”, *Le Monde Afrique*, 22 April 2021.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, political and civic leaders, Bamako, August 2022.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, Malian officials, Bamako, October 2022.

context where Russia is devoting a large part of its resources to the war in Ukraine and will find it difficult to boost Mali's finances and economy.

The main benefit Bamako derives from its break with France and move closer to Russia is actually the major impact of these developments on domestic policies. Disheartened by enduring instability, which the thousands of French soldiers and UN peacekeepers in the country since 2013 have failed to ease, most of the population responded positively to the shift in alliances. The authorities in Bamako have alienated international partners by challenging the stabilisation architecture, but they have garnered widespread national support, especially in towns and cities.⁶² The shift has rekindled hope among Malians who had lost faith in the state and ruling elites. As such, beyond the security realm, the partnership with Russia has also become a powerful tool for the transitional authorities to mobilise popular support. The effectiveness of this strategy, however, remains to be seen if the security situation does not significantly improve and public services remain limited.

IV. The Repositioning's Risks and Consequences

Despite broad popular support, the pivot to Russia also raises concerns about restrictions on civil liberties. Attacks on politicians, intellectuals and journalists' freedom of expression have multiplied.⁶³ Arrests and legal actions initiated by the authorities have stoked fear and sometimes led to self-censorship in Bamako.⁶⁴ Many political and civic actors are wary of the new partnership amid the renewed geopolitical rivalries, but they prefer to express their opinions privately. They doubt that the alliance will have positive repercussions, especially in the case of an abrupt break with the West. They are also concerned about rising tensions between Mali and certain partners, such as Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, which have common interests and face similar challenges.⁶⁵ In northern Mali, some officials are beginning to grow impatient with what they view as an opaque and self-serving approach to local issues.⁶⁶

The strategic repositioning has also sparked concerns among movements that signed the 2015 Peace Agreement. In a 16 September 2021 statement, the Coordination of

⁶² An opinion poll conducted in April 2022 by the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung indicated that nine of ten respondents were satisfied with the transition's management. See "Mali-mètre, Enquête d'opinion : que pensent les Malien(ne)s?", FES, May 2022.

⁶³ The case of Issa Kaou Djim is a good illustration. The former right-hand man of Mahmoud Dicko, an imam prominent in the opposition to President Keïta, he was prosecuted for a "flagrant offence" after media appearances where he criticised Prime Minister Choguel Maïga's handling of the situation, among other things. See "Mali : pourquoi Issa Kaou Djim, fervent défenseur de Goïta, a-t-il été arrêté?", *Jeune Afrique*, 27 October 2021. Apprehension has swept over social networks, with people increasingly refraining from commenting for fear of eliciting hostile or aggressive reactions.

⁶⁴ "Au Mali, les atteintes à la liberté de la presse se multiplient", *Le Monde*, 5 November 2022. In 2022, Mali fell from 99th to 111th in Reporters Without Borders' freedom of the press rankings, which cover 180 countries.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Malian political and civic actors, Bamako, 2022.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, politicians and civil society actors, residents of Gao and Ménaka, July-November 2022. An oft-cited example is the Malian government's decision to ban the use of French funding for NGOs, including in the humanitarian field, following Paris's announcement that it was suspending official development aid.

Azawad Movements (CMA), the main coalition of former rebel groups, strongly criticised the state's reliance on a private security company.⁶⁷ The decision, they say, jeopardises implementation of the 2015 agreement, particularly its security component. Many fear that the officers leading the Malian state, some of whom experienced defeat at the rebels' hands, will attempt to retake Kidal by force, with Russian support, which could reignite the conflict.⁶⁸ On 22 December 2022, the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development (CSP-PSD), a coalition of armed groups that signed the peace agreement, announced their withdrawal from all mechanisms tied to the agreement and its monitoring.⁶⁹

Furthermore, political and economic actors have started expressing concern at Malian diplomacy's aggressive tone, which increases risks of a rift with the country's Western and regional partners. In a column published shortly after the acting prime minister's speech in New York, former Prime Minister Moussa Mara expressed his regret at "the belligerent tone used with certain partners, particularly those from [the sub-region]". He notably called on the transitional authorities to prioritise dialogue and to "mend the broken ties that link us to our neighbours in particular and our partners more broadly".⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Mamadou Sinsy Coulibaly, former president of Mali's National Employers' Council, has expressed his concerns about the authorities' strategy, fearing the devastating impact an economic collapse would have on an already struggling population.⁷¹

The rift with European countries does indeed have direct economic repercussions for Mali. The suspension of European Union budgetary support in January 2022 and paused payments from institutions such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank have forced the Malian state to drastically cut its operating expenses, though they have not yet led to bankruptcy.⁷² This stoppage exacerbates the challenges facing the Malian economy, which the effects of COVID-19 and six months of financial sanctions from ECOWAS in early 2022 have already left reeling.⁷³ Several private-sector actors who spoke with Crisis Group expressed their worries about the fallout of a prolonged interruption of Western financial support.

The deteriorating economy could be a destabilising factor. Some officials do not see diminishing aid as a concern, arguing that foreign support encourage dependence on Western partners and corruption among political elites.⁷⁴ They believe that Mali should strive for greater financial autonomy. The country is unlikely to achieve that status at present, however, as a sudden cut in Western aid could have severe consequences for already vulnerable populations. Moreover, Mali is borrowing at

⁶⁷ "Mali : la CMA, vent debout contre les mercenaires russes", *Jeune Afrique*, 28 September 2021.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, political actors and armed group leaders, 2022.

⁶⁹ Statement by the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development, 22 December 2022. The signatory armed movements have set a meeting with international mediation in "neutral territory" as a condition for returning to the deal. The Malian government has yet to respond to this request.

⁷⁰ Moussa Mara Yelema, "Statement", Quotidien du Mali Facebook page, 26 September 2022.

⁷¹ "Mamadou Sinsy Coulibaly : Au Mali, l'Etat est faible, absent et brutal", *Jeune Afrique*, 10 November 2022.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Malian economists, Bamako, 2022.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Malian economic actors, Bamako, September 2022.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Malian officials, Bamako, 2022.

higher rates on regional markets and its domestic debt may soon surpass its external debt.⁷⁵ These resources are mainly used to cover rising public expenditure, rather than investing in social sectors like health care and education.⁷⁶ These trends, which are partly related to Mali's internal political situation, could aggravate the country's economic difficulties and undermine its stabilisation efforts if they persist.

In an effort to counteract its challenging circumstances and avoid isolation, Bamako has sought to expand its regional partnerships. The inflationary trend in the region, while it has not generated significant social protest movements, has left Mali in a more precarious financial position than that of its neighbours.⁷⁷ ECOWAS sanctions have increased the landlocked country's dependence on its coastal neighbours. To weather the sanctions' effects, the authorities have strengthened ties with Mauritania and Guinea and travelled to secure financial and diplomatic support.⁷⁸ The coup in Guinea at the end of 2021 provided an unforeseen opportunity to strengthen political ties between Bamako and Conakry.⁷⁹ It is nevertheless unlikely that Conakry can replace Abidjan or Dakar as a supply port.⁸⁰ Although the Malian government has chosen to rely on Nouakchott's port to export cotton, of which Mali is the leading producer in Africa, its relations with Mauritania are still strained.⁸¹

Mali's departure from the G5 Sahel has revealed the country's central role in the region's security challenges and the need for new forms of collaboration. Mali has historically been a key player in regional stabilisation efforts, and its exit from the G5 in May 2022, following disagreements with other members and issues with Niger, risks jeopardising the framework developed since 2013. Nonetheless, given the transnational nature of insecurity and its actors in the Sahel, it will be difficult for Mali to restore peace on its territory without cooperating with neighbours who face similar threats, starting with Burkina Faso and Niger – and, to a lesser extent, Côte d'Ivoire. While Bamako's relations with Ouagadougou emerged stronger after the September 2022 coup in Burkina Faso, those with Abidjan and Niamey remain complicated.⁸²

Finally, the change in alliances marked by the rapprochement with Russia obscures what is actually a deep continuity in responses to the crisis. Thus far, the transitional

⁷⁵ "Mali Economic Outlook", African Development Bank, 2022.

⁷⁶ "Mali: Systematic Country Diagnostic Update", World Bank, 2022.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, experts in macro-economics, Bamako, November 2022. See also "Loi de finances rectificative 2022 : Le CNT valide", abamako.com, 9 November 2022 ; "Projet de loi de finances rectificative 2022", Malian Ministry of the Economy and Finance, 29 August 2022.

⁷⁸ "Après la Guinée, une importante délégation ministérielle malienne en Mauritanie", RFI, 18 January 2022.

⁷⁹ Relations between the two countries have grown stronger in recent months – a sustained diplomatic back-and-forth has resulted in the signing of a dozen agreements.

⁸⁰ These agreements cover many areas, including trade, security, mutual legal assistance, civil protection, health and mining.

⁸¹ "Coton: le Bénin a détrôné le Burkina Faso et le Mali en devenant le premier producteur africain", Financial Afrik, 11 August 2022. Relations between the two countries notably deteriorated in March 2022, after the killing of several Mauritians in Mali's Nara region. See "Mali – Mauritanie : comment la crise diplomatique a été évitée", *Jeune Afrique*, 17 March 2022.

⁸² Burkina Faso's new transitional president, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, chose Mali for his first official visit, where he met for a few hours with the transitional president, Colonel Assimi Goïta. "Mali – Burkina Faso : Assimi Goïta et Ibrahim Traoré affichent leur partenariat à Bamako", TV5 Monde, 5 November 2022.

authorities have not managed to capitalise on the space created by France's departure to devise a new strategy in which locally generated political initiatives play a greater role. In 2020, Mali was the first country in the G5 Sahel to express willingness to engage in dialogue with jihadist groups, which was met with disapproval from the French authorities. This approach is no longer being considered, however. Illustrating their lack of interest in political solutions, the authorities have made almost no reference of late to the work of the Permanent Secretariat of the Political Framework to Manage the Crisis in Central Mali, a tool created in June 2019 to provide a multidimensional response to insecurity in the centre of the country.⁸³ The alliance with Russia has strengthened the Malian army's capacities, but it has also further restricted the country's stabilisation process to largely security-based approaches.

V. Rebalancing While It Remains Possible

Mali finds itself in the centre of international tensions, caught in a vice between major powers. This position is not unprecedented. In the early 1960s, during the Cold War, Mali's first president, Modibo Keita, made a bold decision to align the country with the Eastern Bloc. Despite rancour born of a difficult decolonisation, however, Keita's government maintained a dialogue with France and always sought a balance between its Eastern allies and Western partners. The present authorities would do well to follow in Keita's footsteps. For now, though, they have made little effort to do so, instead taking a hostile stance toward Western and regional partners. Despite Malian authorities' view that they were responding to provocations, they should now start to de-escalate tensions with some of their Western and regional partners.

The transitional authorities chose to shift their strategic alliances despite uncertain consequences. First, the shift risks durably depriving them of much their Western partners' and regional allies' support. Their popularity has soared among Malians, especially in cities, but this backing could disappear if the new partnership with Russia fails to substantially alter the country's security situation. Secondly, Mali could become a pawn in a big power rivalry it cannot navigate, which would not benefit the country in the long run. Russia alone will not be able to solve its security problems, and Western countries could permanently reduce their levels of assistance and cooperation. The political support base that the transitional authorities have built through their strategic repositioning is also likely to erode over time.

Bamako could seek to keep, or even repair, badly damaged ties with some of its neighbours, and avoid losing Western support altogether, without having to renounce its partnership with Moscow. While the Malian authorities have reasons to preserve a partnership in which they have invested heavily, and which does not call into question their rise to power, they also have an interest in meeting regional and Western partners halfway. Few voices at the heart of Mali's administration openly criticise the security alliance with Moscow, but some would like to see this choice pragmatically balanced with continued Western support, particularly in the economic and humani-

⁸³ In contrast, during the first phase of the transition, the authorities seemed in favour of a dialogue with jihadists and showed particular interest in the Political Framework to Manage the Crisis in Central Mali.

tarian sectors.⁸⁴ With their popular base broader than it was in 2020, the transitional authorities have the opportunity to make this pivot without losing local support.

The rift is deep when it comes to France, the former colonial power, but other Western partners must not be neglected. Bamako's privileged partnership with Paris seems to be a thing of the past; it will take patience to rebuild that trust. It is still possible, however, to nurture relations with other Western actors such as the European Union, Germany, the Benelux countries and Switzerland, all of which still wish to be actively involved in Mali, provided that Bamako urgently takes steps toward reconciliation.⁸⁵ The window of opportunity for such a repositioning is shrinking, in part because of Mali's failure to distinguish between its break with France and its strained relationships with other Western nations. The Malian authorities must understand that not all Western countries endorse the approach that has dominated the past decade. Many even acknowledge its limitations, including their own involvement in it. Western countries are, however, united in their mistrust of Russia and its growing influence in West Africa.

Bamako should therefore find ways to rebalance relations with its external partners. Malian authorities would be wise to avoid aggressive rhetoric, which may have allowed them to accumulate domestic political capital but has also seriously damaged their relations with Western partners and African neighbours. Another strong gesture toward Western partners would be to ensure greater transparency when confronted with regarding allegations of massacres committed by the armed forces and their Russian allies, and to allow the UN mission to carry out investigations in the field, in support of national investigations. Such a move is unlikely, however. In its stead, Bamako could proceed to lift other restrictions it has imposed on MINUSMA, which severely limit the mission's actions. Unfortunately, the Malian government's recent decision to expel the head of MINUSMA's Human Rights Division does not bode well in this regard.⁸⁶

For their part, Mali's partners must avoid exacerbating tensions in the Sahel or transposing onto the region geopolitical challenges that do not concern it. Western partners should not distil the growing opposition to their policies in Mali down to a Russian-led disinformation campaign. Admittedly, new groups of more or less coordinated actors have emerged and are attempting to promote the alliance with Russia, including through disinformation campaigns.⁸⁷ But the distrust of Western initiatives also stems from Malians' dashed hopes after a decade of relentless violence.

Under the current circumstances, trying to force the authorities to end their partnership with Russia may not be as productive as seeking compromises with Bamako to maintain a degree of collaboration and influence there. While Wagner's presence limits options in terms of security, there is still scope for action in other areas, nota-

⁸⁴ Certain members of the Malian administration are in favour of this rebalancing, but they do not publicly state their position. Crisis Group interviews, senior officials, diplomats and political actors, Bamako, 2022.

⁸⁵ "Benelux" refers to Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

⁸⁶ "Communiqué N°045 du Gouvernement de la Transition", Bamako, 5 February 2023. This decision followed a human rights activist's testimony before the UN Security Council during the presentation of MINUSMA's quarterly report on Mali.

⁸⁷ Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, "La Russie au Mali : une présence bicéphale", Institut de recherche stratégique de l'école militaire, September 2022.

bly economic development and governance reforms.⁸⁸ Partners should lead open discussions with the transitional authorities on the concrete terms under which they are ready to continue assisting in these areas, without indirectly financing the Russian military effort or increasing the risk of collusion on the ground.

At the same time, Western partners should continue to support the national debate the Malian society needs to make the transition meaningful. To this end, they should avoid public altercations with Malian authorities that overshadow more important domestic issues. They should also work more closely with ECOWAS and the AU to support their efforts in restoring constitutional order in Mali. The 2020 military coup would likely not have had the same popular support had it not been for Malians' exasperation with the country's poor governance and growing criticism of ineffective outside intervention.

If it wants to curb insecurity, Mali should also seek to mend relations with ECOWAS and some of its neighbours. To this end, the transitional authorities should pursue constructive dialogue with the Local Transition Monitoring Committee and, as a sign of good-will, swiftly set up the Independent Election Management Authority. This move would send a strong positive message. ECOWAS, in turn, could consider lifting individual sanctions against members of the government and the National Transitional Council to regain the Malian authorities' trust, which was severely damaged by six months of tough sanctions.

Finally, the transitional authorities, like all their allies, should understand that the solution to the Malian crisis will come less from a change in partners and more from a profound shift in governance and cooperation practices. As previously recommended by Crisis Group, they will need to take a renewed approach to security issues, which does not imply abandoning the multidimensional strategy in place, but rather reordering its priorities. This new approach would start by prioritising political dialogue, including with the jihadists, so that the state can be deployed in rural areas, before preparing a broader governance reform.⁸⁹

VI. Conclusion

The Malian authorities' shift in strategy was an attempt to gain political support and bring new hope to a country that has been grappling with a decade-long security crisis with no end in sight. The partnership with Moscow has allowed Mali to acquire military equipment and carry out operations, but results have been slow in coming. Russia will likely fare no better than France in the face of a crisis whose resolution requires more than a military response. Moreover, the increase in deadly attacks on civilians is a major concern, which could also fuel resentment and lead to new jihadist recruits. Even with a new preferred military ally, Mali has not deviated from its course and remains focused on predominantly military responses. The transitional authorities have yet to use the space created by the departure of France to devise a strategy with a greater role for locally generated political initiatives.

Bamako/Dakar/Brussels, 9 February 2023

⁸⁸ For details, see Crisis Group Report, *Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition*, op. cit.

⁸⁹ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°299, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, 1 February 2021.

Appendix A: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2020

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