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A NEW SCRAMBLE? GEOPOLITICAL ECONOMY OF MULTI-POLARITY IN THE SAHEL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA'S ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY

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Introduction

Africa is at a critical juncture in its political history. The political destinies of most of its states are currently being negotiated and threatened by forces internal or external to its existence. Internally, there has been spiralling waves of terrorism and allied violent extremisms in many African countries (Gaye, 2018; Okoli, 2023). There has also been a resurgence of military coups in parts of the continent (Omotola, 2023). Externally, Africa has been the new site for multipolar geopolitics, essentialized by opportunistic statecraft and geostrategic disputes involving the global superpowers.

The Sahel (re)presents the microcosm of Africa's current political travails. According to the 2023 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel has become the global epicentre of violent extremism (IEP, 2023). The region has also become the world's hotbed of violent and unconstitutional regime changes, commonly evidenced in the occurrence of military coups. No fewer than ten (10) military coups have occurred in the region since 2020 (Omotola, 2023). At present, six (6) of the countries of the region are under effective military rule, namely: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, Guinea, and Sudan. The resurgence of military coups in the region has earned it the appellation of 'the coup arc' of Africa (Omotola, 2023).

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Apart from the incidences of terrorism and violent regime changes, the Sahel has equally been a continental hub of organized crime and illicit transnational dealings (Gaye, 2018). There has been a high incidence and prevalence of armed trafficking, drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal extractivism, smuggling, banditry, and other forms of transnational organized crime in the region (Gaye, 2018; Okoli, 2024). These criminal patterns have not only prevailed; they have also, over time, coalesced and converged into a nebulous mix and nexus. This is evidenced in the flourishing dynamics of crime-terror opportunism in many parts of the region (Okoli & Nwangwu, 2023; Okoli, 2023).

More recently, the Sahel has further become a theatre of volatile multi-polar geopolitics (Pollichieni, 2024). Following the emergence of new geopolitical actors, interests and stakes, there have been shifts and counter-shifts in diplomatic and geo-strategic alignments in the region. The shifting alliances and relations have been associated with some critical outcomes such as the rising anti-French / Western populism and resentment, increasing pro-Russo-China diplomatic alignment, and fracturing of the regional bodies (Okoli, 2024).

The new military boards in the region have deployed populist de-colonial rhetoric to gather legitimacy amid the endeavours of the Western powers to discredit them. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have withdrawn membership from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following the latter's bid to sanction them over breach of the Protocol on Democracy and Governance (ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Governance, Article 45, 2001). These countries have also launched out of the G5 Sahel, and have since formed for themselves the Alliance of Sahel States (AES/ASS).

The geopolitical developments in the Sahel and their concomitant local dynamics hold fundamental political and economic implications for the member states as well as the (sub)regional authorities in the region. While a number of studies have been undertaken on the political dimensions of the problem (Degterev, 2024; Okoli, 2024), the economic implications have scarcely been explored. More importantly, the dynamic interplay of political, economic and geo-strategic imperatives that undergird the situation, and how they bear on the sovereign virtues of African states have been hardly investigated. It is in the light of this fact that this paper proffers a political economy of multi-polar geopolitics in the Sahel, positing that such holds both positive and negative implications for Africa's economic sovereignty.

Conceptual Briefing: Geopolitics, geopolitical economy,

multipolarity, economic sovereignty

Colin (2022) defines geopolitics as the struggle for the control of geopolitical entities within international and/or global space and the use of such entities for political advantage. In other words:

> Geopolitics looks at the means and use of power within globally competitive spheres, with reference to how states and non-state actors compete to control and exploit such spheres for the advancement of their competitive strategic interests (Okoli, 2024, p.121).

Geopolitics, therefore, explains the actions and inactions of states, but also other formal and non-formal actors, in relation to geostrategic competition, contestations, and control (Okoli, 2024). To say the least, geopolitics seeks to understand how the aforementioned actors pursue their competitive and contestable interests in global geopolitical terrains.

The notion of geopolitical economy, simply, refers to the political economy of capitalism in the era of multipolarity (Desai, 2015). Yet, there are much nuanced conceptions, such as that of the World Association of Political Economy (WAPE):

> Rooted in the classical Marxist tradition, critical of many of its current avatars, putting the understanding of capitalism and its contradictions and of imperialism and anti-imperialism at its core, giving states their rightful due, alongside classes, as key actors shaping the modern capitalist world, drawing on classical political economy and other traditions critical of neoclassical economics, geopolitical economy aims to investigate the international relations of the capitalist world in a historical materialist manner (WAPE, 2024, p.1).

Polarity derives from the notion of 'pole of power'. This "refers to a state or an alliance of states that wields an enormous power to influence the behaviour of other states in the context of international politics'' (Okoli, 2024, p.119). Ashford and Cooper (2023) see polarity as the distribution of power in the international system and how that changes in the course of time. The present world system is multipolar because there is an appreciable diffusion of hegemonic influence in a set of big, middle, and rising global powers. None of these powers wields a predominating economic, military, and political leverage to assert itself as an ultimate global hegemon.

Economic sovereignty encompasses the right to continue and preserve economic activities closely linked to the existence of the state. It is principally determined by a number of factors, including: 1) the interference with a pre-existing fundamental state policy; 2) the relationship between the party to the dispute and the state policy; and 3) the presence or threat of injury to the state itself" (Walker & Simon 1985, 8). Put differently, economic sovereignty implies the "ability of a state to impose the rules of appropriation, exchange and use of resource" (Savanovic 2014, cited in Okoli & Atelhe, 2021, p.233) within its area of jurisdiction without external constraints.

Theoretical Premise: The Political Economy of Geopolitics and the 'New Scramble'

Political economy is primarily concerned with understanding the intricate relationships between politics and the economy (Ake, 1981, Okoli, 2001; Okoli, 2014; Okoli, 2017). Its subject matter revolves around "the systematic inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations" (McLean & McMillan 2003, p. 415). Essentially, Political Economy probes the economic determinants and implications of power relations in the contexts of domestic and international affairs.

The conception of Political Economy in the context of the present paper is, by and large, consistent with its international application. In that regard, Political Economy offers a framework for the understanding of the gamut of nexuses that underpin state-economy relations in the international system. It embodies all facets of the politics of international economy, and conversely, economics of international politics (Oatley 2019). More fundamentally, encompasses the multidimensional nexuses that define the politico-economic dialectics of contemporary international relations.

In this paper, a political economy of geopolitics is espoused. It focuses on how power, influence, stakes, and resources are competed for in a geo-strategic space. It also highlights how the interactions among various geopolitical actors within a geo-strategic space compete, cooperate, or contend in pursuit of their strategic interests. This covers aspects of politics of international economics relations, economics of foreign policy and diplomacy, and other dimensions of production-and-market relations that shape the wealth of nations. Simply put, the political economy of geopolitics enables us to come to terms with the complex intersection of forces of geography, politics and economics, and how that determines global power dynamics, resource sharing and international economic relations.

The political economy of geopolitics in the Sahel explains the realpolitik of the 'new scramble' in the region. The meaning of the new scramble relates to the increased involvement and competition of global and regional actors in the region. The scramble is characterized by geopolitical plus geostrategic competition and contestations, reminiscent of the 19th Century 'scramble for Africa by the imperial powers' (Ake, 1981). The new scramble is driven by a number of imperatives, as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors in the New Scramble in the Sahel

Factor	Commentary
Economic interests	Competition over access to strategic natural resources: oil and gas, solid minerals, agro-forestial resources, maritime resources, etc.
Geostrategic interests	Location and protection of military bases, security and counter-terrorism concerns, protective military presence, etc.
Geopolitical interests	Maintenance of competitive influence and stakes
Commerce and development	Involvement in trade and investment as well as infrastructural development.

Source: Author's original compilation (2024).

The new scramble involves conflicts and collusions of geostrategic interests among the various foreign and regional actors in the region. The actors include the hitherto dominant players and the emerging ones whose interests straddle variously the spheres of security, trade, investment, infrastructure, and military strategy. Table 2 is instructive in this respect.

Table 2: Key Actors in the Sahel's New Scramble

Actor	Commentary
France	Maintaining its historical geopolitical dominance amid rising anti-French populism
China	Seeking expansion in economic and infrastructural investments
USA	Pursuing security and counter-terrorism concerns
EU	Supporting governance in the areas of development, security, migration, and humanitarian concerns
ECOWAS	Seeking regional integration and stabilization
Turkey	Expanding economic and political influence through strategic partnerships in defence and economic diplomacy
Russia	Seeking greater economic and military presence and influence through military basing and undercover interventions
African Regional Powers (Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa)	Seeking to assert their stakes and influence through multilateral platforms such as the AU and ECOWAS.
Saudi Arabia	Increasing its influence through soft-power diplomacy

Source: Authors' original compilation (2024).

Perspectives on the Multipolar Geopolitical Economy of the Sahel

Multipolar geopolitical economy in the Sahel refers to the nexus of foreign interests and local dynamics in the context of the multipolarizing geopolitical order in the region, and how such forces affect the workings of the state and the economy in member countries (Okoli, 2024). It consists in complex and multifaceted interactions between global powers, regional actors, and local interests (Abdulle, 2024). More importantly, it highlights how local, regional, and global forces interplay to bring about dynamics that affect, and are affected by, the stakes and interests of both state and non-state actors.

The multipolar geopolitical economy in the Sahel manifests in a number of dimensions. Firstly, there is an increasing multipolar competition and contestations. As global powers, such as the United States, France, China, and Russia, engage in competitive struggle for strategic influence, stakes, interests and resources, the region experiences tense geopolitical ambience that reflects the exigencies of realpolitik (Abudulle, 2024). A dangerous trend in this development is the use of proxies, mercenaries, and clandestine agents to advance geo-strategic pursuits (cf. Table 3). A case in point is the disruptive undercover role of the Russia-aligned Wagner Group in parts of the region (Matusevich, 2019; Gruzd & Ramani, 2022).

Secondly, regional bodies, such as ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel are seeking to play important roles in shaping the region's geopolitical destiny amid challenges arising from the prevailing multipolar political dynamics. ECOWAS has been fractured following the exit of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from its fold. This was in a bid to protest ECOWAS' sanction against them for unconstitutional change of regime in violation of the organization's Protocol on Democracy and Governance (ECOWAS, 2021). This group of countries has not only withdrawn from ECOWAS; they have also withdrawn from the sub-regional collective security regimen known as the G5 Sahel. Today, the three countries have constituted themselves into a rival sub-regional body called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES / ASS).

Thirdly, there is a growing quest among the Sahelian states to assert their agency and decolonize from the West (Degterev, 2024). This is evidenced in the waves of anti-French/ West resentments and populism across the region. The military boards in the region have capitalized upon the narrative arising from this development to galvanize popular legitimacy amid the endeavours of continental and extra-continental powers to pressure them back to the path of constitutional order. The de-coloniality rhetoric appears to have gained both currency and traction following the gamut of sponsored disinformation and propaganda by both Russia and China, which seeks to discredit electoral politics and democratic processes in the region (Elbassoussy, 2023).

Fourthly, there has been a resurgence of military rule in the Sahel. Six countries of the region — namely Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, and Sudan — are currently under effective military regimes (Omotola, 2023). There have been instances of aborted coups in the region, such as the 2022 Gambian example. Some of these coups have been allegedly instigated by the global powers, which are engaged in opportunistic statecraft, tailored towards their vested interests (Duursma & Masuhr, 2022).

Fifthly, the Sahel has been the global epicentre of terrorism and allied violent extremism (IEP, 2023). Numerous indigenous and internationally-affiliated terrorist groups operate in the region, including Boko Haram and its splinter groups, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, the Islamic State, et cetera (Okoli, 2023). There is also a rising incidence of terrorism financing and franchising, which has sometimes implicated state and non-state actors alike in the region (Okoli, 2023). The involvement of foreign actors or interests in the Sahel's terror conundrum is a critical dimension to its current geopolitical volatile dynamics.

Beyond terrorism, there are high incidences of organized crime and armed violence in the Sahel (Gaye, 2018; Okoli & Nwangwu, 2023). The activities of drugs and arms traffickers, bandits, pirates, smugglers, and other anti-state elements in the region have impacted rather adversely on its stability and development. Besides, they have created conditions that undermine the functionality of the state and the economy, in addition to bringing about conditions that reinforce and reproduce state fragility syndrome (Okoli & Nwangwu, 2023).

Sixthly, the prevailing geopolitical dispensation in the Sahel has been characterized by a shift in the pattern of external alignments among member states. The traditional pro-Western posture of foreign policy in many of the states is being altered and substituted by a pragmatic orientation that tilts toward the erstwhile eastern bloc of allies - notably China and Russia (Okoli, 2024). The military regimes in the region have been more manifestly inclined to foster diplomatic relations with these countries, apparently in a bid to spite the West for its antagonism.

Lastly, the Sahel's geopolitical economy presents a context where disparate actors deploy desperate strategies to pursue desperate ends. Among these actors are foreign entities, which are not only after their own interests, but are also interested in gaining zero-sum strategic advantage over others. Coupled with the activities of various armed criminal and violent groups, what plays out in the region is a morass of geopolitical opportunism in which sovereign interests of the member countries are, more or less, jeopardized.

Table 3: Mixed Actors in the Sahel's Current Geopolitics

Category of Actor	Examples
State actors	• National government and militaries • Political regimes • Multilateral and minilateral bodies • Foreign diplomatic and military missions
Clandestine actors	• Terrorists • Insurgents • Terror franchises • Transnational organized crime syndicates
Businesses	• Industries/ firms • Investments
Foreign agents	• Proxies • Spies • Mercenaries
Civil society actors	• Charities • Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) • Humanitarian workers

Source: Okoli (2024, p.121).

Sahel's Economic Sovereignty amid the Multipolar Geopolitical Dynamics: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger

The current wave of multipolar influence in the geopolitics of Sahel region has far-reaching economic implications on the economic dynamics of the region – especially in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The scramble to gain influence and control of the resources and polity of these countries by internal (Nigeria, South Africa, ECOWAS) and external (France, The United States, China, Russia, and the European Union) forces has unprecedented implications for the economy of the countries and for Africa in general (Góes & Bekkers, 2023). The dynamics affect economic indexes of the Sahel region.

In a multipolar geopolitical context, Burkina Faso's economic sovereignty is influenced by various global and regional powers. The global powers wield control on critical sectors of the economy and polity of the Sahel region. France maintains significant economic, military, and cultural influence due to historical and colonial ties, while China commands an increasing investment in infrastructure, mining, and agriculture, to challenge French dominance. Moreover, the US has a heavy military presence which focuses on counter-terrorism efforts, with some economic interests in the region. In the same vein, the European Union engages in numerous trade agreements with countries of the Sahel and provides development aid to them for the purpose of promoting economic integration, which will enable Europe unfettered access to the resources and political manipulations of the countries.

Furthermore, the Regional Powers in Africa equally take part in the geopolitics of the Sahel. Nigeria is a regional hegemon with significant economic influence, particularly in West Africa while South Africa is the economic powerhouse with interests in mining and infrastructure sectors of the Sahel countries, especially Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Morocco is another regional player with economic and security interests, particularly in the Sahel region. Ghana and Algeria are regional neighbors, and regional trade partners of the Sahel countries with economic ties and cooperation in areas like agriculture and energy respectively. This explains the complex multipolar geopolitics in the Sahel region.

The multipolar geopolitics is associated with incessant political instability, civil unrest, military conflict, tensions, terrorist threat in the Sahel region emanating from different world powers which contest for control and influence on the region (Caldara & Iacoviello, 2022; Góes & Bekkers, 2023). This has an unprecedented effect on the economies of the affected countries, especially Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The influence is exerted through the channels of financial institutions and markets, trade relations and global commodity price. The financial market influence is wielded through direct and indirect capital controls and financial sanctions which increase uncertainty, high risk premia and generate asset price surge and fluctuations (Gurvich & Prilepskiy, 2015).

Equally, the trade flows of the countries of the Sahel region are usually altered because of increased trade restrictions associated with the tension emanating from the disruption of peace and democracy often exacerbated by the dynamics of the multipolar geopolitics. Also, multipolar geopolitics disrupts supply chains in the region. Trade restrictions create supply shortages and obstruct the flow of critical resources such as oil and gas and mineral resources, which are the mainstay of the economies of the countries of the Sahel region. For instance, Burkina Faso and Mali are gold-dependent economies while Niger's economy is heavily reliant on uranium exports, making the countries vulnerable to global commodity price fluctuations. This is inimical to industrial production and economic sovereignty of the countries. However, the multipolar geopolitics provides ample economic opportunities for economic diversification, new diplomatic relationships, economic integration and wide market for the Sahel countries.

The expository analysis in this paper provides insights on the nexus between the geopolitics and the economic sovereignty and sustainable progress of the selected Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger). The dynamics of the nexus between geopolitical risks and economic sovereignty are examined using pair-wise correlation analysis. The correlation coefficients are presented in table 4. The results show that global geopolitical risks and the US-China tensions, as well as the unilateral (country-specific) geopolitical tensions, threats, and uncertainties emanating from France, China, Russia, the US are negatively related with economic growth and positively associated with unemployment, inflation and state fragility (failure) of the Sahel countries especially Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. This implies that increase in multipolar geopolitics results in decline economic growth, and rise in unemployment, inflation of the Sahel countries, and expose their economies of the countries to shocks and global economic and political uncertainties, thereby reducing their economic sovereignty. The influence of the multiple world powers on the Sahel countries reinforces each other mutually and harm the economies of the countries by generating uncertainties that result in higher inflation, unemployment and lower economic growth (Góes & Bekkers, 2023; Catalán, & Tsuruga, 2023).

On the other hand, regional geopolitics (represented by South Africa's geopolitical risk index) is positively associated with economic growth and inversely related to unemployment, inflation and state economic fragility. This suggests that the influence of regional powers will improve the economic sovereignty of the Sahel region.

Comparing the geopolitical and economic sovereignty indices of the unipolar (2007) and multipolar (2023) eras, it is revealed that the geopolitical threats and opportunities of the current multipolar geopolitics are greater than that of the unipolar era. This is presented in Table 5. While the geopolitical threats are manifest in poor economic performance and foreign dominance, the opportunities of economic diversification, infrastructural development, stronger and new diplomatic relationships, and wider economic integration are also available for the Sahel region (Flint, 2021). For instance, due to the multipolar geopolitics, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger experienced increase in economic and trade diversification and, the countries' extensive margins of exports – number of products in export list have increased over the years (Table 5 and Figure 1-4). This presents an opportunity for the countries to expand their trade and promote sustainable economic growth and development.

Table 4: Relationship between Geopolitical and economic sovereignty indices – Pairwise correlations coefficients

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
(1) Economic growth	1.000													
(2) Unemployment	-0.054	1.000												
(3) Inflation	-0.109	0.077	1.000											
(4) Economic freedom index	-0.203	0.558	-0.036	1.000										
(5) US-China tensions	-0.110	0.140	0.028	0.445	1.000									
(6) Geopolitical risk	-0.143	0.118	0.121	0.283	0.535	1.000								
(7) Geopolitical risk from China	-0.185	0.168	0.002	0.351	0.877	0.544	1.000							
(8) Geopolitical risk from France	-0.090	0.060	0.018	0.156	0.197	0.747	0.185	1.000						
(9) Geopolitical risk from Russia	-0.034	0.157	0.302	0.303	0.649	0.676	0.547	0.362	1.000					
(10) Geopolitical risk from the US	-0.163	0.152	0.131	0.317	0.679	0.923	0.741	0.489	0.708	1.000				
(11) Geopolitical risk from South Africa	0.188	-0.033	-0.136	-0.112	-0.348	-0.127	-0.231	0.055	-0.111	-0.164	1.000			
(12) Fragile state index	0.084	0.083	0.032	0.132	0.330	0.226	0.168	0.234	0.292	0.181	-0.086	1.000		
(13) Fragile economy index	0.159	-0.218	0.002	-0.498	-0.753	-0.414	-0.621	-0.255	-0.599	-0.490	0.154	-0.041	1.000	
(14) Fragile economic inequality index	0.228	0.285	-0.091	0.236	-0.009	0.048	-0.107	0.090	0.034	-0.021	-0.010	0.403	-0.185	1.000

Source: Authors' computation. Note: Data on economic growth, unemployment and inflation are sourced from World Bank, World development Indicators, economic freedom index is obtained from Fraser institute database, geopolitical risks indices are obtained from Federal Reserve Board database while Fragile state indices are obtained from The Fund For Peace dataset.

Table 5: Geopolitical and economic sovereignty indices of unipolar (France era) and multipolar era in Sahel region

Geopolitical and economic sovereignty indices	Burkina Faso	Burkina Faso	Mali	Mali	Niger	Niger
	2007 (Unipolar -France era)	2023 (Multipolar era)	2007 (Multipolar era)	2023 (Unipolar -France era)	2007 (Unipolar - France era)	2023 (Multipolar era)
Economic growth	4.11	2.96	3.49	5.24	3.14	2.50
Unemployment (as % of labour force)	3.30	5.29	1.37	3.01	2.03	0.55
Inflation rate	-0.23	0.74	1.41	2.06	0.05	3.70
Economic freedom index	5.88	6.14	5.99	5.80	5.39	5.80
US-China tensions	77.61	147.42	77.61	147.42	77.61	147.42
Global Geopolitical risk	97.92	104.27	97.92	104.27	97.92	104.27
Geopolitical risk from France	0.27	0.56	0.27	0.56	0.27	0.56
Geopolitical risk from Russia	0.33	1.97	0.33	1.97	0.33	1.97
Geopolitical risk from the USA	2.37	2.41	2.37	2.41	2.37	2.41
Geopolitical risk from China	0.40	0.55	0.40	0.55	0.40	0.55
Fragile state index	89.70	94.00	91.20	93.40	75.50	99.50
Fragile economy index	8.20	7.00	9.20	6.60	8.70	7.70
Fragile economic inequality index	8.90	8.30	7.20	7.80	6.60	7.20
External intervention index	7.00	8.70	8.00	7.40	6.90	9.50
Trade diversification index	0.76	0.88	0.84	0.90	0.79	0.84
Number of products in export list	97.00	117.00	136.00	173.00	104.00	97.00

Source: Authors' computation. Note: Data on economic growth, unemployment and inflation are sourced from World Bank, World development Indicators, economic freedom index is obtained from Fraser institute database, geopolitical risks indices are obtained from Federal Reserve Board database while Fragile state indices are obtained from The Fund For Peace dataset.

Figure 1: Geopolitical risk indices

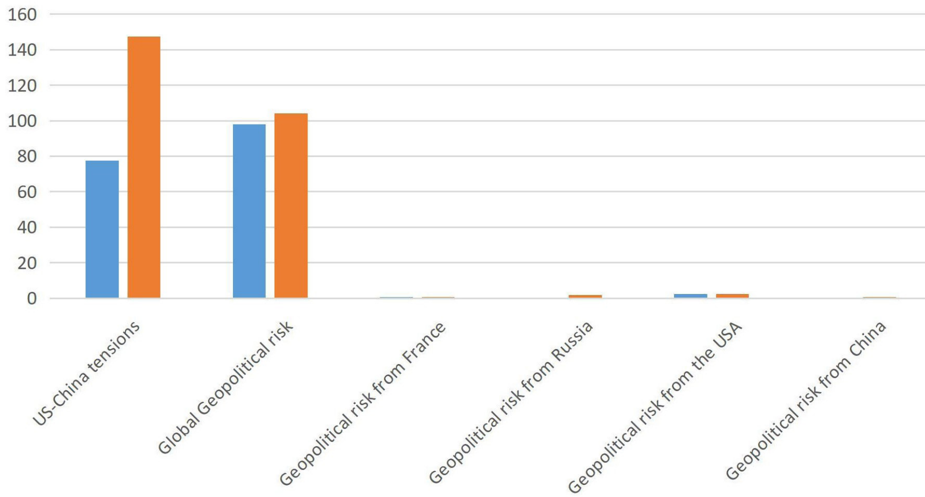


Figure 2: Burkina Faso - Economic sovereignty indices

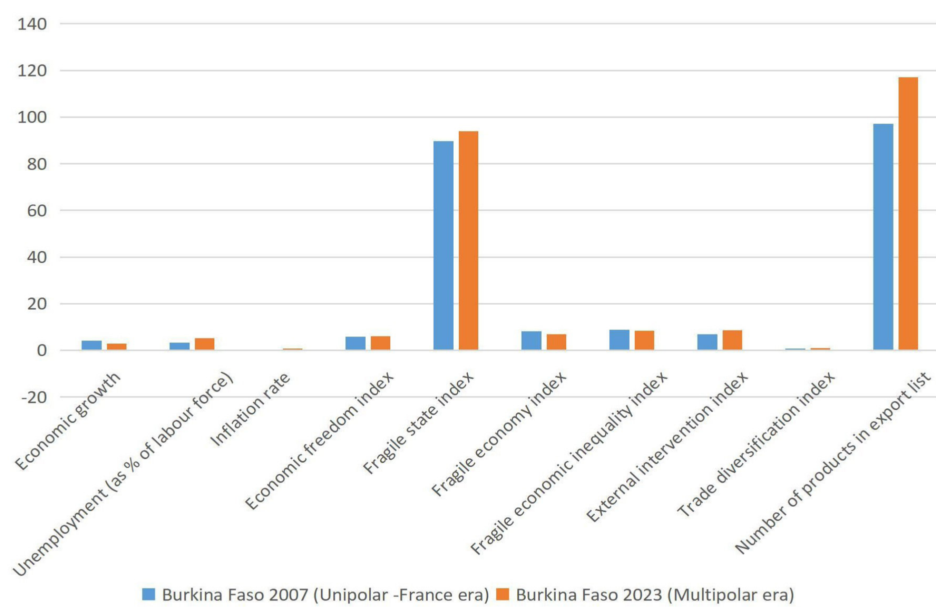


Figure 3: Mali - Economic sovereignty indices

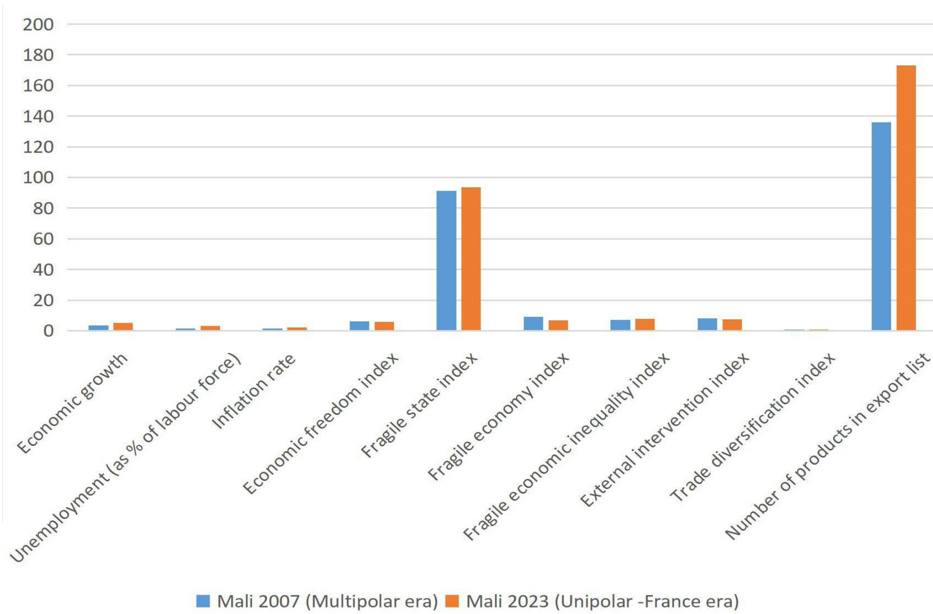
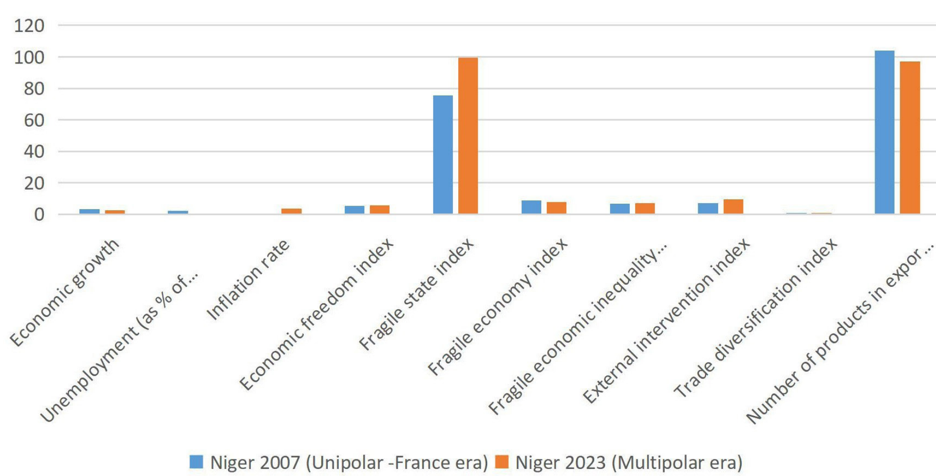


Figure 4: Niger - Economic sovereignty indices



Conclusion: Implications for Africa's Economic Sovereignty

The new multipolar geopolitics in Africa offers the continent the prospects of a geopolitical economy of fair competition and diversification. Depending on how the continent plays within the context of the evolving dynamics, it stands to gain or lose. For the Sahel, the emergence of new big global powers, particularly Russia and China, presents the member states with new opportunities for more favourable geostrategic bargains. Put differently, it comes with the prospects of more competitive geopolitical space in which the interests of African states may be more favourably negotiated and advanced. How does this apply to the Sahelian states?

First, by offering the Sahelian states the opportunities for diversified and more competitive strategic partnerships, it empowers them to engage with multiple global powers on new terms. Thereby reducing the over-dependency on individual countries or a bloc of countries as the case was hitherto. The traditional politico-economic alignment of the Sahel's state to the French and its western allies is being radically altered by the current state of geopolitics in the region.

Secondly, the geopolitical changes in the region are increasing the bargaining power of member states in negotiating a better, fairer, and more strategically advantageous deal with the global powers. The competition between the United States and its Eastern counterparts (Russia and China) presents opportunities that states in the region could exploit to maximize their strategic advantage. Sahelian states should leverage on such opportunities to bolster their wins in terms of economic diplomacy.

Thirdly, the multipolar order in the region is opening up new markets and trade opportunities for the Sahelian states. This is exemplified in the burgeoning trade and investment stakes of China and Russia in that context (Hassen, 2023). Apart from reducing the historical reliance of the Sahelian states on the West, this development also offers the states an ample opportunity to negotiate viable trade and investment deals.

In spite of the aforementioned possibilities, the multipolar geopolitics in the Sahel is equally associated with some negative outcomes. It is stoking waves of great power rivalry, thereby making the region a battleground for geopolitical contests. The use of proxies, strategic disinformation and other opportunistic tactics by the contending global powers to advance their competitive strategic interest has been a veritable driver of the prevailing instability in the region.

There is also the danger of another pattern of post-colonial exploitation by the new geopolitical powers in the Sahel. China's exploitative tendencies as evidenced in its policy of extractivism is a relevant concern in this regard (Okoli, 2024). In addition, there is the concern of multi-source debt and aid dependency. With the new entrants in the region's geopolitical space, the likelihood of multiple indebtedness by member states is high. As a consequence, these states may be pressured to compromise their policy space, priority, and agency in keeping with the exigencies of their debt burden.

To navigate the challenges imposed on Africa by the multi-polar geopolitical dispensation and ensure the protection of its economic sovereignty, the Sahelian states need to take a number of actions:

i. Develop a stronger and more unified sub-regional economic agenda to promote their collective economic aspirations

ii. Diversify global partnerships by engaging with more global players and blocs

iii. Negotiate fair deals and protect their sovereign economic virtues from all ramifications of neo-colonial exfoliation and control

iv. Bolster their agency and sovereignty through economic diplomacy and nationalist statecraft

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the Sahel has emerged as a contested space for influence, competitive stakes, resources, and markets. The paper posits that the Sahel's geopolitical economy is characterized by a new scramble – a multi-polar struggle by the global and regional powers – for dominance and strategic advantage, with far-reaching implications for the sovereignty of the member states as well as regional stability and development. The paper underscores the nuanced issues that underpin the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Sahel and what they hold African agency and sovereign virtues, especially in the realms of economy and geo-strategy.

KEYWORDS

Geopolitics, Global Powers, Multi-polarity, Political Economy, Sovereignty, the Scramble

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