## Role of Nigeria in the Malian Protracted Political Conflict

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**Abstract**

The paper explores the intricate role of Nigeria in the Malian protracted political conflict towards situating Nigeria's underlying motivations and its multiplier effect. Characterized by weak governance, a coup d'état in 2012, economic challenges, ethnic tensions, and extremist insurgencies amongst others, the protracted political crisis in Mali is not an isolated event. It is embedded in a complex realm of international relations. Nigeria, seen as a regional powerhouse, had reasons to intervene in the protracted crisis and this is rooted in its strategic interests encompassing political, security, and economic considerations. The paper adopted a qualitative research method based on content analysis of relevant secondary data and used theories of neorealism and constructivism as frameworks to illustrate the role of Nigeria in the Malian protracted political conflict. In all, the paper found that Nigeria's engagement in the Malian protracted political conflict was not out of generosity though seen as a 'big brother' but predicated on the pursuit of national interest, regional hegemony, and influence in West Africa and beyond. The paper therefore recommended amongst others that in view of the growing anti-France sentiments in Francophone West African countries, Nigeria should be cautious in its foreign engagement and should adopt a non-align regional policy.

*Keywords:* Mali, Nigeria, Conflict, Strategic Interests, West Africa, Armed Conflict

**Introduction**

Since March 2012 when President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted by a military coup led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, the Republic of Mali, a landlocked country, in West Africa has been facing a myriad of political conflicts and it has attracted attention from both within and outside the region, with each interventionist seeking to influence the trajectory of the political instability and perhaps, to resolve it. According to Bate Felix (2023), the West African region has experienced enormous volatility because of two principal challenges - military coups and terrorism. In recent years, West and Central Africa have experienced a series of successful coups that have challenged efforts to move away from the region's reputation as a 'coup belt'. Armed conflict in the continent has been a cyclical realism in the explanation of postcolonial Africa. The continent has been exceedingly vulnerable to various forms of conflict and war. (Uwa & Iloh, 2022) Instructively, various extremist groups that hitherto operated within the Malian borders such as the Tuareg rebel factions and jihadist organizations lashed onto the power vacuum and political instability occasioned by the coup to further their interests. This underscores the capture of large territories by rebel and extremist forces as well as the consequent declaration of the independent state of Azawad in northern Mali.

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The political upheaval and security situation was so bad that France, its erstwhile colonialist, had to intervene to stem the tide of the extremist forces by initiating a military action code-named 'Operation Serval' in January 2013 and later 'Operation Barkhane'.Despite the success of the French-led intervention, Mali continued to grapple with a host of economic, political, and security challenges as the persistence of rebel and extremist elements in the north, ethnic and regional tensions, and the fragility of political transitions. The Malian political crisis is further compounded by allegations of fraudulent and inclusive elections. Obviously, the political instability has a high propensity to spill over into neighboring countries and worsen the already precarious security situation in the Sahel region of Africa.

This was buttressed by former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo in an address to the Third Tena High-Level Forum on 26th April in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia that politically, Africa's ability to establish secure, democratic, and economically prosperous states is being hampered. State institutions and infrastructures are eroded, thereby undermining the integrity of the state. Formal economies have collapsed, giving room for the rise of shadow states where warlordism, impunity, and criminality thrive. (Obasanjo, 2014)It is therefore not surprising that the Malian crisis has been characterized by political instability, weak government, ethnic and regional tensions, the presence of extremist groups, and economic hardships. Expectedly, this poses a formidable challenge to regional stability and security in the Sahel.

Instructively, many regional and international actors, including Nigeria had been involved in addressing the conflict but the continuing conflict raised questions about the effectiveness of the interventions and the primary motivations for the interventions. Therefore, the main thrust of this paper is to examine the role of Nigeria in the protracted political conflict in Mali. Specifically, the paper aims to uncover the underlying motivations that have shaped Nigeria's intervention(s); and to examine any spill-over effects and regional dynamics influenced by Nigeria's actions. To achieve these, the following questions are germane; What are Nigeria's primary motivations and strategic interests underlying its involvement in the Malian political conflict? To what extent has Nigeria's engagement in Mali impacted regional stability in West Africa and beyond? The paper argues that the intervention of Nigeria in the Malian political conflict is primarily driven by its pursuit of regional hegemony and influence in West Africa, and it has had both positive and negative spill-over effects on regional stability, impacting neighboring countries in West Africa. Nonetheless, this paper is meant as a contribution towards conflict resolution in Africa, particularly the ongoing search for lasting peace in West African countries.

## Conceptual Framework

Politics is a reality of life and interest matters in politics leaving in its path a conflict of interest. Thus, political conflict is a situation where the divergent interests of parties do not align. It can take any form- economic, religious, family, social, and even psychological. This conception of political conflict is buttressed by Iroye (2023) when he opined that "conflict is bound to occur and reoccur as a result of differences arising from human interactions in our daily economic, social, and political activities." Agreeably, political conflicts arise because individuals and organizations have different goals and interests which leads to political misunderstanding, conflicts within the society intend to arise between the elite and the governed if, to some extent and degree, the policies passed on by the elites do not suffice the desires of the people (Cashman, 2014) in Bwanga (2019) Conflict is evidently a product of irreconcilable differences, which can escalate or tow a progressive path of destructive

circumstance if drastic measures are not taken to avert it. (Adams & Iwu, 2015) It is apt to also add that the cause of conflict is context-specific, multi-causal, and multi-dimensional and can result from a combination of the following factors:

a. Political and institutional factors: weak state institutions, elite power struggles and political exclusion, breakdown in social contract and corruption, identity politics
b. Socioeconomic factors: inequality, exclusion and marginalization, absence or weakening of social cohesion, poverty.
c. Resource and environmental factors: greed, scarcity of national resources often due to population growth leading to environmental insecurity, unjust resource exploitation. (Adinoyi & Muliru, 2015)

It is therefore not uncommon to find the prevalence of military takeovers, armed rebel groups, extremists, or insurgencies in political conflict zones. They challenge the authority of the government and seek to control territory or achieve political change. This has been the fate of Mali since the January 2021 military coup as "rival communities, with the perception of threat to their survival (real or imagined) see the control of the state and its resources as the only means of survival." (Agara and Basil, 2022)

**Theoretical Frameworks**
The paper adopted a two-sided theoretical approach - realism and constructivism theories.
Realism (Structural Realism): Structural Realism or Neorealism, as proposed by Kenneth Waltz, posits that states' behaviors are primarily influenced by the international system's structure, emphasizing power, security, and self-interest (Waltz, 1979). The international system is structured on the basis of states' interaction with each other. While stronger states seek to consolidate global power, weaker states seek political alignment to protect their national interest. France, for example, exerts enormous economic and political influence over Mali its former colonial territory as well as many other countries in the Sahel region of Africa. Impliedly, the West (Europe) and America in championing their liberalist cause (capitalism, democracy, human rights, etc.) seek to safeguard their influence on countries like Mali in the Sahel region. They however find competitors in other powerful international state actors like Russia and China who are aggressively making inroads in Africa with respect to countries in the Sahel region to advance their economic and political interests. As rightly put by Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson in their book, *Causes of War* (2010), anarchy in conjunction with uncertainty about the intentions of other states, has enormous consequences that induce insecurity and continuous competition for power, which makes the international insecurity and international conflict. (Adinoyi & Muliru, 2015)

As a leading state in the West African region, Nigeria seeks to maximize its security and influence, aligning its actions with the relative gains perspective (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).In this context, Nigeria's role in the Malian protracted political conflict can viewed through neorealism's lens as a rational response to the anarchic international system. With the political situation in Mali, it would not be unnecessary for Nigeria to deploy military power through the mechanism of ECOWAS or the African Union (AU) to consolidate its position as a regional power and address events leading to the political instability and its resultant problems on Mali and beyond.

**Constructivism**:

Closely related to neorealism as adopted in this paper is constructivism which holds that the interaction between states is based on their normative perception and interpretations of the international system. Constructivism, as advocated by Alexander Wendt, emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behavior. (Wendt, 1992) The culture, traditions normative values shape the perception of states and their actions and relations with each other within the context of the international system. This has been the case since the Cold War era. What started with the US and the then Soviet Union has snowballed into an anarchist international system of alignment and realignment of states and it somewhat underlines the political instability in Mali. For example, Nigeria "being a liberal democracy today encourages an intolerance of authoritarian regimes and a preference for free-market capitalism. (Burchill et al, 2005) These are liberalist policies championed by the US and the West. Neorealist logic dictates that other states will balance against the United States because offsetting US power is a means of generating one's security, such balancing will lead to the emergence of new great powers in a multipolar system. (Jackson and Sorenson 2007).

Similarly, constructivism holds that institutionalized norms, culture, and ideas underline the identity and actions of states in the international system. Nigeria's identity as a regional power and its commitment to pan-Africanism can influence its engagement in Mali, reflecting constructivist factors (Wendt, 1992). Nigeria's diplomatic efforts within the framework of regional norms and shared values among African states can be explored, highlighting the role of normative factors (Checkel, 1999).

## Methodology

This paper employed a qualitative method using document/library sources on Mali's political situation before and after the 2012 Coup d'état and on Nigeria in the context of being a regional leader in West Africa. Document sources such as journal articles, books, and newspapers among others, were contextually analyzed to illustrate the role of Nigeria in the Malian protracted political conflict. The researcher employed this approach to view the previous study's strengths and weaknesses to develop new insights into the subject matter.

## Literature Review
### The Protracted Political Conflict in Mali

In the 1990s, Mali was portrayed as the beacon of neoliberal democratization in West Africa. However, behind what was presented as a showcase of democracy, good governance, and peace and reconciliation there was institutional weakness, mismanagement, and collusion involving regional and national elite interests that paid scant heed to human security and development. (Ba & Bøås, 2017) No doubt, Mali has been engulfed by political unrest for more than a decade, arising mainly from the power vacuum and political instability created by the military coup of March 2012 which ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré. This exposed the longstanding ethnic and regional tensions in the country, particularly between the predominantly Tuareg north and the south. Tuareg groups in the north, along with jihadist elements capitalized on the coup to rebel and declared the independent state of Azawad. This led to a military intervention by French and African forces. The government of Mali is doing the bare minimum, demonstrating little willingness to invest in the violence-wracked north and central regions of the country—both in terms of counterinsurgency operations and community programming. In addition, many Malians are disillusioned with their government and no longer view a security response as part of the "preserve of their [national] leaders," (Devermont, 2019)In all, Mali struggled with weak governance and corruption coupled with

sporadic attacks from insurgency groups thus complicating the political crisis. In a report commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was noted that the crisis of 2012 is not yet solved, but continues in similar and different forms, making 2012 the 'long' year in Mali's history…In policy circles, the connections between smuggling and Jihadist rebels are often framed as 'narco-terrorism', thus suggesting that the Malian crisis is primarily driven and constituted by a profit-motivated illegally organized criminal economy. (Ba & Bøås, 2017)

Similarly, Mali's political and business classes may have an incentive to prolong the conflict because they benefit from international financial flows into the country. (Devermont, 2019)By implication, both the elites and rebel groups up north in Mali are fueling the political conflict economy while the masses continue to show resentment towards the already weak government. This may explain why Russian forces' foray into Mali was even more significant as it came after months of insistent warnings by France and other European governments that they would withdraw their military support if Mali engaged Russian mercenaries. Partly because the junta ignored these warnings, French forces have since begun withdrawing from Mali.(Lacher & Africa, 2022) The anti-French resentment in May and shift towards Russia in terms of military support amongst others seem to have gained traction in the region as some other Francophone West African states like Niger, Guinea, Burkina-Faso, and Guinea have in the same period experienced military take-overs and they appear to lean majorly towards Russia rather than France and others within the West bloc for military and economic support. Obviously, regional instability is at the peak in West Africa.

## Nigeria's Role in the Malian-Protracted Political Conflict

The 2012 Tuareg insurrection in Mali, which has already led to a military coup against the elected Government of President Ali Toure, and the carving out of Mali, the so-called Azawad Republic by pro-AQIM Tuareg Islamists have further complicated the security situation in the Sahel, creating still more complicated security problems for ECOWAS and putting Nigeria under a new kind of pressure. (Alli, 2012)Assuredly, insecurity negatively affects international cum regional trade, and Nigeria being a major oil and gas exporter in the region works directly or directly with other states and non-state actors to promote its strategic interests in Africa and West Africa on the basis of its Afrocentrism policy of placing Africa at the center-stage of its interactions with other states. This aptly underlines why Nigeria, through ECOWAS, has condemned the unconstitutional seizures of power and took actions to reinstate democratic order and regional stability. ECOWAS imposed sanctions on Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, and suspended their memberships in an effort to pressure a return to constitutional rule. (Felix, 2023) Also, Nigeria provided an avenue for major consultations on how to restore democracy and stability in Mali. Abuja, the Nigerian seat of power, played host to delegates from the sub-region in trying to find appropriate ways to resolve the Malian impasse (Premium Times, August 15, 2013).

Primarily, Nigeria is driven by its pursuit of regional hegemony and influence in West Africa. Nigeria, as espoused by W.O. Alli (2012) is playing its leadership role in ECOWAS security affairs in a subtle way, i.e. mainly through providing resources in men and material and diplomatic muscle through peacekeeping, mediation, and training of military personnel. It is also strengthening the collective efforts against transnational organized crime, terrorism, and other security threats. Finally, Nigeria is employing democratic consolidation programs,

including electoral assistance and support for constitutional rule and continuing efforts to achieve economic integration as a pathway to economic development. (Alli, 2012)

Boko Haram has links with international jihad networks, especially al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), one of the leading elements in Mali's Islamic insurgency. Mali has used that claim as a basis for requests for outside help. If such links do exist on meaningful terms, it would seem likely that Boko Haram will escalate its attacks in northern Nigeria in solidarity with its Islamic brothers. If that happens, there will be yet more pressure on the already overstretched Nigerian forces. John Campbel (2013) Francis, as cited by (Idagu et al., 2020), noted that Nigeria's leadership of ECOWAS to deploy AFISMA forces in Mali is therefore a preemptive intervention to crush Islamist extremists in Mali, and to deny them access to and prevent them from providing support to Boko Haram in Nigeria.

In a nutshell, Nigeria approaches any conflict in the Sub-region region based on its motivation, foreign policy, and diplomatic relations with states within and outside the region. In this light, Nigeria's intervention in Mali was not out of generosity but predicated on the pursuit of national interest as well as regional hegemony and influence in West Africa.

## Criticisms of Nigeria's Role in the Malian Protracted Political Conflict
The role of Nigeria in the Malian protracted reveals some shortcoming that needs to be addressed to achieve a lasting resolution while safeguarding its own national interest:
(i)     Political and Ethnic Dynamics: Obviously, Mali has a complex political terrain characterized by ethnic tensions and power struggles. Being an external state actor in the internal political conflict of Mali, Nigeria has to carefully navigate the complex political terrain in Mali which is characterized by ethnic tensions and power struggles, to avoid exacerbating the conflicts.
(ii)    Security Risks: Nigerian military personnel deployed during regional and international armed interventions in Mali face attacks by extremist groups thus raising concerns about the potential for attacks on Nigerian soil by affiliated extremist organizations in Mali.
(iii)   Resource Constraints: Nigeria faces its own domestic issues in terms of its economic and security, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast thus providing financial and military resources to address the Malian crisis strains Nigeria's resources and capabilities.
(iv)    Coordination: In view of the various external actors (coupled with their interests) intervening in the internal political conflict of Mali, Nigeria must be tactful in its cooperation with them to safeguard its interests.
(v)     Limited Impact: Despite Nigeria's intervention in Mali, through ECOWAS immediately after the military coup in 2012, the political instability and extremist violence persist thus underscoring the limitations of external interventions in local conflicts.

## Impact of Nigeria's Role in the Malian Protracted Political Conflict on Regional Stability
Despite criticisms, Nigeria's role in the protracted political conflict in Mali has implications for regional stability in West Africa and the Sahel thus:

(i)     <u>Diplomatic Strain</u>: Criticisms and disagreements among regional actors and international partners in terms of interest and approach in Mali can strain diplomatic relations, hindering collaborative efforts to resolve the crisis in Mali.

(ii)    <u>Continued Instability</u>: The persistence of challenges in Mali, coupled with criticisms of international efforts, has contributed to continued instability in the region as it has spilled over into neighboring countries such as Guinea, Niger, Chad, and even Nigeria.

(iii)   <u>Impact on ECOWAS</u>: Regional blocs such as ECOWAS play vital roles in addressing regional conflicts and promoting stability thus the challenges faced by Nigeria in Mali have implications for ECOWAS, as Nigeria is a key member and leader within the organization.

(iv)    <u>Resource Diversion</u>: The resource constraints and security risks associated with Nigeria's involvement in Mali divert resources and attention away from addressing its own security challenges, such as the Boko Haram insurgency.

## Conclusion

Coup d'état and political conflict have been a recurring theme in Mali and some other West African countries in the last decade. Nigeria's involvement in the Malian protracted political crisis underscores the complexity of regional conflicts which often involve a multitude of actors, including rebel groups, extremist organizations, and ethnic factions, making resolution challenging. The conflict itself is characterized by political instability, ethnic tensions, extremist insurgency, and economic challenges. As such, the situation in Mali, as well as Nigeria's foreign policy, is dynamic and subject to change. Nonetheless, Nigeria remains a leading force in countering the spate of military coups in Mali and other West African states, advocating for peace and democratic norms. This aptly explains why the West collaborates with Nigeria directly or indirectly, through the regional body, ECOWAS, intervening in the Malian political conflict.

No doubt, Nigeria's role in Mali was aimed at addressing the complex interplay of political, ethnic, and security crisis conflict that has engulfed the country. It adopted a multilateral approach to the Malian conflict by working within the framework of organizations like ECOWAS and the African Union and other international partners like the European Union and France. In sum, Nigeria's involvement in the Malian political crisis has not been without challenges and criticisms in terms of its effects on both regional stability and Nigeria's own security. Addressing these challenges and adapting strategies to overcome criticisms is essential for achieving lasting peace and stability in Mali and the broader Sahel region.

## Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing, it is recommended that:

(i)     Nigeria should provide support for security sector reforms in Mali, including training and capacity building for local security forces to help Mali develop the capabilities needed to maintain security and stability independently.

(ii)    Nigeria should continue to strengthen cooperation with other West African countries in terms of intelligence-sharing, joint military exercises, and border security initiatives to address shared security challenges collectively.

(iii)   Nigeria should continue to engage diplomatically with regional and international partners to:

(a) facilitate peace negotiations, dialogue, and reconciliation in Mali.

(b) to address the root causes of the protracted political conflicts (i.e. governance issues and ethnic tensions) in Mali.

(iv)    In view of the anti-France sentiments in Mali and other Francophone West African countries, Nigeria should be cautious in its foreign engagement and possibly adopt a non-align regional policy.

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