

# The Security-Development Nexus in Mali: China's Evolving Role Amidst Geopolitical Shifts

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper analyzes the security-development nexus in Mali, exploring the primary research question: How does China's "development-first" approach influence Mali's security landscape? The study aims to demonstrate that a collaborative, development-oriented model offers a viable pathway to sustainable stability, moving beyond traditional, militarized security-centric approaches.

**Methods:** The study first establishes a theoretical framework for the security-development nexus, drawing from both traditional and critical perspectives. It then applies this framework to a case study of Mali, using socioeconomic and political indicators such as GDP, FDI, access to electricity, literacy rates, and political stability to highlight the intertwined nature of the country's security and developmental deficits since the 1990s. Finally, the research assesses the characteristics and outcomes of China's cooperation with Mali.

**Results:** The findings show that Mali has made progress in certain developmental areas, such as GDP and electricity access, but continues to face significant challenges, including a sharp decline in political stability. The analysis of China's engagement reveals a "development-first" approach centered on mutual benefit and local agency, which offers a valuable alternative to conventional interventions. This collaborative model, focusing on infrastructure and economic projects, can contribute to more durable security outcomes by addressing underlying developmental deficits.

**Conclusion:** The paper concludes that collaborative, development-oriented engagement can offer a viable pathway to sustainable security by recognizing Mali as an active partner in its own future. The study's focus on developmental aspects and local agency contributes to the literature by providing a nuanced and timely analysis of international engagement in fragile states.

**Keywords:** Security-Development Nexus, Mali, China, Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, African Security

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## I. Introduction

This paper explores the dynamic relationship between security and development, specifically examining Mali's complex trajectory since the 1960s and China's evolving role within this context. Located in West Africa with a population of approximately 23 million, Mali has experienced economic growth and rising living standards over the past three decades. However, the country continues to face significant challenges, including widespread poverty, critical infrastructure gaps, low literacy rates, and severe political instability. These domestic conditions are set against a backdrop of shifting geopolitical landscapes, where traditional actors are being joined by emerging partners. This research is rooted in the long-standing scholarly debate surrounding the security-development nexus, which explores whether security is a prerequisite for development or if the two are mutually reinforcing. By situating Mali's experience within this theoretical framework, this paper provides a robust foundation for understanding the country's unique challenges and the contributions of its international partners.

The central problem addressed by this research is the disconnect between traditional, often militarized, approaches to security and the long-term, sustainable development goals of nations like Mali. While Mali has made progress in areas like economic size and infrastructure access, it continues to face significant and often intertwined security and developmental deficits, as seen in its persistently low political stability and literacy rates.

The paper posits that solely focusing on security without addressing the underlying developmental issues is an insufficient strategy for achieving lasting stability. This study highlights the need to understand how development-focused cooperation can contribute to more durable security outcomes. China's engagement in Mali serves as a crucial case study for exploring this problem, particularly its emphasis on what scholars refer to as a "no-model model" of engagement (Tang, 2020).

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze how China's engagement in Mali, particularly its focus on development, contributes to the country's security and stability. The study aims to demonstrate that a development-first approach, centered on cooperation and mutual benefit, can offer a viable alternative to more traditional, security-centric interventions. To achieve this, the paper will first establish a theoretical framework for the security-development nexus, drawing from both traditional and critical perspectives. It will then apply this framework to Mali, examining the country's development and security indicators over time. Finally, the research will analyze the characteristics of China's cooperation with Mali and assess how these efforts are reshaping the security landscape.

In order to address these objectives, the following research questions are explored: (1) what theoretical frameworks best explain the relationship between security and development in the Malian context? (2) How have Mali's key development and security indicators evolved over time? (3) In what ways does China's approach to cooperation in Mali, as it relates to development, influence the country's security landscape? (4) How do Mali's agency and its role as a partner shape this evolving relationship? By answering these questions, the paper will shed light on a nuanced and often misunderstood aspect of international relations.

This research offers significant novelty by moving beyond conventional analyses of great power competition to focus on the collaborative and developmental aspects of engagement in Africa. While much scholarship has viewed China's role through a geopolitical or opportunistic lens, this paper contributes to the literature by emphasizing China's approach of "development is the key to achieving sustainable security" (He, 2018). The study's focus on Mali's agency also represents a departure from state-centric analyses, recognizing that local actors should not be viewed as passive recipients but active participants in shaping their own future. By providing a detailed examination of this cooperative model, this paper is structured to offer a timely and relevant contribution to the fields of development studies, security studies, and international relations.

To guide the analysis, the remaining content of paper is organized as follow. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework of the security-development nexus, clarifying the concepts and debates that underpin the study. This is followed by the research methodology. In Chapter 4 we present Mali's development and security indicators, which provide the empirical foundation for assessing the need for and merit of external partnerships. The next chapters examine in detail the engagement of China, complemented by Russia, and France, each highlighting their respective strategies, areas of cooperation, and evolving roles in Mali. A comparative analysis then draws out the similarities and differences across these partners, emphasizing the implications for Mali's development and security agenda. The discussion subsequently turns to a critical assessment of opportunities and challenges, situating these within Mali's own agency and strategic choices. Building on this, a proposed blueprint for cooperative engagement is outlined, before the study concludes with key findings and policy recommendations.

## **II. Conceptualizing the Development-Security Nexus: Theoretical Underpinnings and Critical Perspectives**

This chapter examines the debate on the security-development nexus, contrasting proponents who view security as a prerequisite for development with critics arguing they are mutually reinforcing or else. Drawing on real-world examples for each perspective, it establishes the conceptual framework necessary for analyzing China's evolving role in Mali.

### **2.1. Security as a Prerequisite for Development: A Realist Perspective on State Stability and Geopolitical Priorities**

The belief that security is the bedrock of development is a central theme in realist and neorealist political thought. These theories, as articulated by key thinkers, consistently emphasize the state's primary role in ensuring its own survival and maintaining order. The arguments of these theorists, while developed in different contexts, converge on the idea that stability is not an outcome of development but a necessary condition for it.

Huntington (1968) argued that political order is the most pressing issue in developing countries, even more so than economic growth. He contended that rapid modernization without strong political institutions to manage the resulting social and political upheaval leads to instability and "political decay." This perspective highlights the need for a strong, capable state to maintain order, without which development is impossible. For Huntington, a state's ability to maintain a monopoly on the use of force and enforce its authority is the essential first step toward progress. When a state cannot provide basic security, it cannot effectively govern, collect taxes, or implement development projects. The chaos that ensues erodes public trust and makes any long-term planning or investment unfeasible. Similarly, the founders of classical realism, such as Carr (1939) and Morgenthau (1948), laid the groundwork for this understanding. Carr critiqued the "utopian" belief in international cooperation and law, arguing that state behavior is fundamentally driven by a struggle for power and national interest. This struggle is centered on a state's primary goal: its own survival and security. Morgenthau formalized this view by asserting that states are rational actors driven by a "will to power," and their pursuit of power and security in an anarchic international system is their most important concern. From this perspective, development is a secondary goal that can only be pursued after a state's fundamental security needs have been met.

Neorealist thinkers, most notably Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001), reinforced this view by shifting the focus from human nature to the structure of the international system. Waltz posited that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to prioritize security through "self-help." Mearsheimer, a proponent of offensive realism, argued that states are inherently aggressive and constantly seek to maximize their relative power to achieve regional hegemony. His core belief is that security is a state's ultimate goal, and this pursuit is a relentless, competitive process driven by the uncertain intentions of other states.

Other scholars in the field of international security further solidified this theoretical foundation. Walt (1987) demonstrated how states form alliances not just against powerful states, but against perceived threats. Similarly, Jervis (1976) highlighted how a state's quest for self-preservation can unintentionally decrease the security of other states, leading to conflict. This cyclical process shows that security concerns are a constant and often destabilizing force, making it difficult for states to focus on long-term development. Furthermore, scholars focusing on state strength and sovereignty have echoed these sentiments. Krasner (1999) argued that a state's ability to provide security for its citizens is paramount. The absence of a strong, secure state—a "failed state"—makes any form of development impossible. Even scholars who introduced more complex concepts, such as Nye and Keohane (1977), acknowledged that military security remains a significant feature of international relations, particularly in high-stakes situations.

The theoretical arguments presented above are not merely academic concepts; they are confirmed by real-world examples where security has been a prerequisite for successful development. Following Huntington's argument on the necessity of political order, the post-World War II Marshall Plan for Europe and the subsequent reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina post-1995 Dayton Accords demonstrate this principle in action. The Marshall Plan was deeply intertwined with security concerns, as political leaders recognized that economic recovery was impossible without a stable security environment. Similarly, the deployment of a NATO-led military force to Bosnia and Herzegovina was the crucial first step in enabling post-war reconstruction. The theories of Morgenthau and Waltz are reflected in the experiences of Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste. The post-civil war interventions in both countries were driven by the need to restore state authority and provide basic security. The international security presence allowed for critical disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs to be implemented, enabling the re-establishment of government authority. Furthermore, the case of Colombia and Plan Colombia provides a tangible example that resonates with the arguments of Walt and Mearsheimer. Plan Colombia, through extensive U.S. military and law enforcement assistance, was designed to counter the perceived threat posed by drug cartels and rebel groups. The primary goal was to enhance the security of the Colombian state, which in turn allowed for economic growth and foreign investment. Finally, the examples collectively demonstrate the core insight of Krasner's work on "failed states." In all these cases—Bosnia, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste—the central issue was the fragility or absence of a functioning state capable of providing security. The international community stepped in to help restore the state's capacity to govern, confirming that without security, development efforts are impossible.

## **2.2. A Critical Perspective: The Mutually Reinforcing Nature of Security and Development**

The traditional "security as a prerequisite for development" model is fundamentally flawed because it creates a false dichotomy between two processes that are, in reality, deeply intertwined. This model, which often prioritizes state-centric, militarized solutions, has been challenged by a wide array of scholars who argue that security and development must be pursued simultaneously. As Buzan (1991) and Wæver (1998) contend,

security is not just about military threats; it also encompasses political, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions. This expanded understanding reveals that threats to development, such as poverty, disease, and environmental degradation, are in fact core security concerns, as argued by Ullman (1983) and Matthews (1989). A state that fails to address these developmental issues cannot achieve genuine, long-term security.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the research topic on Mali and China's role. Mali faces a complex web of challenges, including armed conflict, political instability, and socioeconomic hardships, which demonstrate the inseparable link between security and development. China's engagement in Mali, as it evolves, must be understood through this critical lens. A successful approach will not merely be about military aid or state-to-state agreements, but also about addressing the root causes of instability through sustainable development initiatives.

The assertion that security must come before development often leads to a myopic, militaristic approach that fails to address the underlying causes of instability. Critics of this model, such as Thomas (1987) and Ayoob (1995), argue that for many post-colonial states, the greatest threats are not external invasions but rather internal fragilities stemming from weak institutions, poor governance, and a lack of political legitimacy. A strategy that focuses solely on military solutions can exacerbate these internal tensions by diverting resources away from essential services like education and healthcare, thereby fueling popular discontent and creating fertile ground for insurgency.

Furthermore, the "securitization" of issues, as described by Wæver (1998), can be counterproductive. When developmental problems are framed as existential military threats, it can justify extraordinary and often violent state responses while stifling political dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution. For instance, framing the presence of armed groups in Mali as a purely military problem might lead to security operations that alienate local populations and create more grievances, ultimately undermining, rather than enhancing, long-term security.

The human security approach, championed by scholars like Kaldor (1999) and Hampson (2018), provides a powerful alternative. This framework shifts the focus from the state to the individual, arguing that true security is found when people are protected from threats like poverty, disease, and violence. As Booth (2007) and Leaning (2004) articulate, genuine security is synonymous with emancipation and empowerment—the freedom for individuals to live a full and resilient life. This perspective directly connects security to human rights, justice, and socioeconomic progress, making them two sides of the same coin. A state cannot be secure if its citizens are suffering, and a citizenry cannot develop if they are constantly under threat.

In practice, real world cases such as Somalia, Haiti, El Salvador, Afghanistan, and Iraq serve as stark reminders that military-first approaches, without a corresponding focus on political and economic development, are destined to fail.

In **Somalia**, for example, international interventions focused on stabilizing the country through military force and humanitarian aid delivery but failed to understand and address the complex clan dynamics and political vacuums that were the root cause of the conflict. This echoes Ayoob's (1995) argument that internal fragilities are the primary security challenge for many developing states. The lack of a comprehensive political strategy meant that the intervention's success was fleeting at best, and it ultimately left the country in a prolonged state of instability.

Similarly, the repeated interventions in Haiti illustrate the critique made by scholars like Thomas (1987) and Leaning (2004). By focusing on short-term security fixes and ignoring deep-seated issues like political corruption and poverty, these missions failed to empower the Haitian people or build resilient institutions. As a result, the departure of foreign troops has consistently led to a resurgence of violence, proving that a state's security is inextricably linked to the well-being and empowerment of its populace.

The cases of El Salvador, Afghanistan, and Iraq provide further evidence of how a militarized approach, often backed by significant international aid, can fail to create lasting stability. In these instances, military assistance was often criticized for being associated with human rights abuses and for not being paired with effective governance and institutional reforms. This mirrors the arguments of Harvey (2003) and Collier (2007), who highlight how a narrow focus on military intervention, sometimes driven by external interests, can perpetuate violence and underdevelopment. The collapse of the Afghan government following the withdrawal of foreign forces is a powerful and recent example of how a military-first strategy, devoid of genuine, long-term state-building and development, is unsustainable.

### 2.3. A Developmental Approach to Security: China's "No-Model Model" in Africa

China's approach to the development-security nexus in Africa represents a significant departure from the traditional paradigms of Western powers. While Western strategies often prioritize security as a prerequisite for development, often through military intervention and political conditionalities, Chinese engagement is fundamentally rooted in the belief that development is the key to achieving sustainable security (He, 2018). This section will discuss how prominent scholars conceptualize this distinct Chinese approach, analyzing its key tenets and contrasting it with the realist and critical perspectives explored in previous sections.

A core tenet of the Chinese approach is the primacy of economic development as the foundation for peace and stability. This perspective, as articulated by scholars like Tang (2020), posits a "no-model model" of engagement, which is pragmatic and adaptive rather than prescriptive. Unlike Western development aid, which is often tied to political reforms, China's model emphasizes infrastructure investment, job creation, and poverty alleviation. According to Tang, this "coevolutionary pragmatism" addresses the immediate developmental needs of African nations, which Beijing views as the most effective long-term solution to insecurity. This stands in stark contrast to the realist perspective, which, as discussed in the first section, views security as a state's primary concern, often necessitating military strength and strategic alliances to maintain order. While a realist might see Chinese military expansion as a sign of power projection, scholars like Benabdallah (2016) offer a more nuanced view. Benabdallah argues that China's engagement goes beyond traditional military hardware to include "knowledge security" through training and capacity building. This directly challenges the narrow, traditional military perspective, suggesting that China's security role is more holistic and interwoven with its developmental goals.

The second key distinction lies in the synergistic relationship between economic projects and security interests. Scholars like Landry (2021) have highlighted how Chinese development finance flows to Africa differ from Western aid. Landry's comparison reveals that Chinese investments are often directed at large-scale infrastructure projects that not only drive economic growth but also facilitate access to trade routes, which have inherent strategic and security implications for Mali. Xia (2022) further elaborates on this duality with her concept of the "Janus face of stateness," arguing that Chinese investments simultaneously serve economic and state-strategic goals. This view reconciles with the critical perspective from the second section, which recognizes the mutually reinforcing nature of security and development. However, while the critical perspective may focus on how development can be used as a tool of control or neo-imperialism, the scholars on China's approach often highlight a more complex, mutually beneficial, and less overtly interventionist dynamic. The Chinese model, as described by Chichava (2014) in his analysis of Mozambique, showcases a shift from a non-interference policy to a more active, yet pragmatic, form of engagement where economic success is seen as a shared endeavor that naturally contributes to political stability.

Furthermore, China's evolving security role is characterized by a shift from a policy of strict non-interference to a more active, yet measured, engagement in peace and security matters. Etyang (2016) notes this "burgeoning appetite" for security involvement, which is a direct consequence of China's growing economic interests in the region. This is a subtle but crucial distinction from the Western approach, which has historically been more willing to engage in direct military interventions. For example, while Western powers have led military coalitions in Mali, China's presence has been more focused on United Nations peacekeeping. Van der Putten (2015) provides specific insights into this, detailing China's troop deployment in missions like MINUSMA. This focused, multilateral engagement reflects a cautious yet committed approach to ensuring the stability of a region where its economic investments are increasing. This contrasts with the realist perspective that might expect a rising power to use its military for unilateral power projection. Instead, China's actions, as analyzed by these scholars, are portrayed as a carefully calibrated strategy that links peacekeeping to the protection of mutual economic interests.

Moreover, China's approach also considers the role of technology and information. Tugendhat (2021) examines how new forms of Chinese engagement, such as the Digital Silk Road, have both economic and security implications. This digital infrastructure investment not only facilitates trade and communication but also has the potential to influence a country's internal security and governance. This aspect of the development-security nexus is a relatively new frontier and represents a future-oriented dimension of China's strategy. By providing the infrastructure of information, China can achieve a different kind of influence—one that is both economic and strategic. This again contrasts with the traditional Western focus on military and political intervention.

The scholars reviewed here present a cohesive argument that China's approach to the development-security nexus is distinct from traditional Western models. It is grounded in the belief that economic development is the



most effective path to sustainable security, a view that contrasts sharply with the realist "security-first" approach. While it shares some common ground with the critical perspective by recognizing the intertwined nature of development and security, it differs by emphasizing a pragmatic, coevolutionary, and often less overtly interventionist strategy.

In conclusion, the collective wisdom of the previous scholars—from classical realists to neorealists and international security analysts—is clear: a state must be secure before it can develop. They all point to the idea that stability is not a luxury but a fundamental necessity. Critics argue that a state cannot be secure if its citizens are suffering, and a citizenry cannot develop if they are constantly under threat. Finally, the works of Benabdallah, Alden, Landry, Etyang, van der Putten, Xia, Chichava, Tugendhat, Tang, and He collectively paint a picture of a nuanced and evolving Chinese role, where economic engagement is a fundamental tool for achieving long-term stability and securing geopolitical interests.

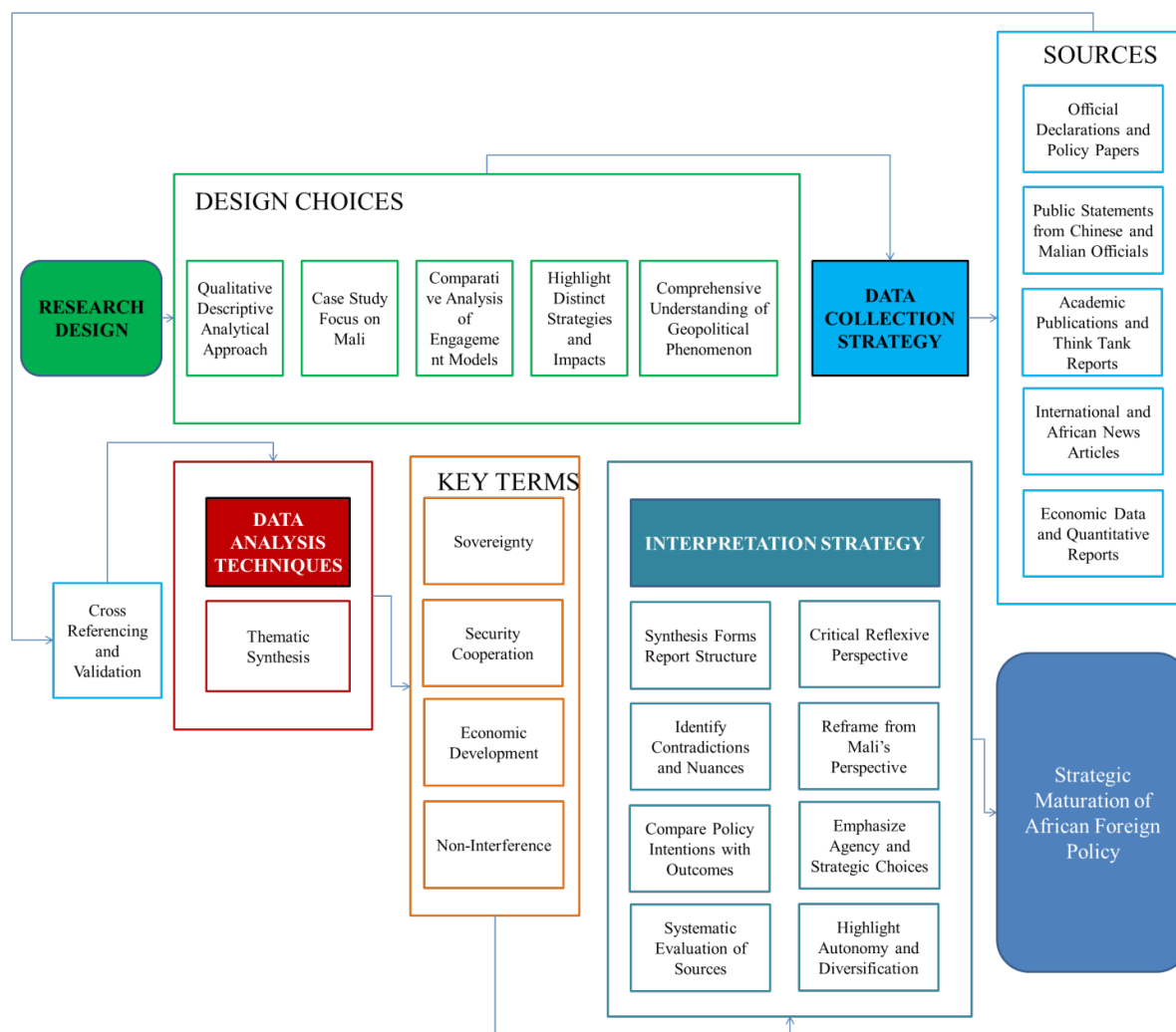
Much of the existing literature on the development-security nexus - though generally insightful and well thought out - suffers from several key gaps, particularly in Mali. First, there's a lack of comparative analysis between Western and Chinese approaches. Most studies focus on Western military-first strategies, overlooking China's development-centric model and thus failing to systematically contrast the two to determine which yields more sustainable stability. Second, there's insufficient exploration of China's evolving security role. Despite its historical non-interference policy, China is increasingly engaged in security, from UN peacekeeping to military training. Research hasn't fully examined how China balances these new security commitments with its economic investments or whether this new hybrid model risks the same militarization pitfalls as Western interventions. Finally, the discourse is largely dominated by Western and Chinese perspectives, with a significant lack of voices for Malian decision makers. It is unclear how they perceive China's presence, whether they see it as empowering or as a new form of dependency, and if China's approach truly addresses their security and development needs from the ground up.

In this case, examining China's evolving role in Mali is highly significant. It directly challenges the dominant Western "security-first" paradigm that has often failed to achieve lasting stability in conflict zones. By analyzing China's alternative, development-led approach, this research contributes to a broader debate on whether economic growth can be a more sustainable pathway to security than military intervention. The study also provides crucial insights into China's shifting foreign policy in Africa, revealing how a rising power protects its economic interests while navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. For Mali and the wider Sahel region, the research is critical because it assesses the potential for China's model to influence regional stability. The findings also hold policy relevance for international actors, offering valuable lessons for Western donors and African governments on effective engagement strategies in fragile states and helping them learn from China's successes and failures in the region.

By doing so, this research makes several original contributions to the field. It proposes a new framework for analyzing China's hybrid approach, synthesizing insights from various theories to challenge the simple binary of "security-first" vs. "development-first." This framework allows for a nuanced assessment of how China merges economic investment with cautious security engagement. The study moves beyond theoretical debates by providing empirical analysis of concrete Chinese initiatives in Mali, filling a gap in the existing literature which often generalizes China's role without case-specific evidence. Another key novelty is the integration of local and geopolitical perspectives, offering a holistic understanding of how China's influence is perceived and utilized by Malian policy makers. Lastly, the research introduces a crucial, forward-looking dimension by exploring the underexamined link between China's investments and Mali's security governance, addressing how infrastructure development through BRI scheme might shape the country's security landscape.

### **III. Research Model and Methodological Framework**

Focusing on a qualitative case study of Mali, we employ a multi-source thematic analysis and comparative framework, interpreted through a critical lens that centers on China's role and Malian agency, while also examining the country's evolving international partnerships with other external powers. This approach can be summarized in the following flowchart.



**Fig. 1 Methodology flowchart**

The following explanation provides crucial context for better understanding of the above methodology flowchart.

### 3.1. Research Design

The research presented in this report is based on a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach. The primary research model is a case study, focusing on the country of Mali to provide an in-depth, contextualized examination of its evolving international partnerships. This choice of design was made to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of a complex geopolitical phenomenon. The study also employs a comparative analysis, contrasting the engagement models of China, Russia, and France to highlight the distinct strategies and their impacts within Mali's specific context. This approach moves beyond a simple, one-dimensional narrative to offer a more comprehensive view of the multifaceted relationships shaping the country's trajectory.

### 3.2. Data Collection Strategy

The data for this report was collected through a comprehensive review of open-source information. The strategy involved gathering materials from a diverse range of sources to ensure a balanced perspective. These sources included official government declarations and policy papers from Russia and China, public statements from African and Malian officials, academic publications, think tank reports, and articles from reputable international and African news outlets. Additionally, quantitative data from the World Bank and reports from economic institutions were used to provide an empirical basis for understanding Mali's development indicators and trade relationships. This multi-source approach allowed for cross-referencing and validation of information.

### 3.3. Data Analysis Techniques

The data was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. Key themes and concepts—such as sovereignty, non-interference, economic development, and security cooperation—were identified and used as a framework for organizing and interpreting the collected information. Information from each source was systematically evaluated to identify how it contributed to or challenged the existing narratives surrounding these themes. This process involved comparing the stated intentions of foreign policies with their perceived on-the-ground outcomes to reveal potential contradictions or a more nuanced reality. The synthesis of these themes formed the basis of the report's structure and arguments.

### 3.4. Interpretation Strategy

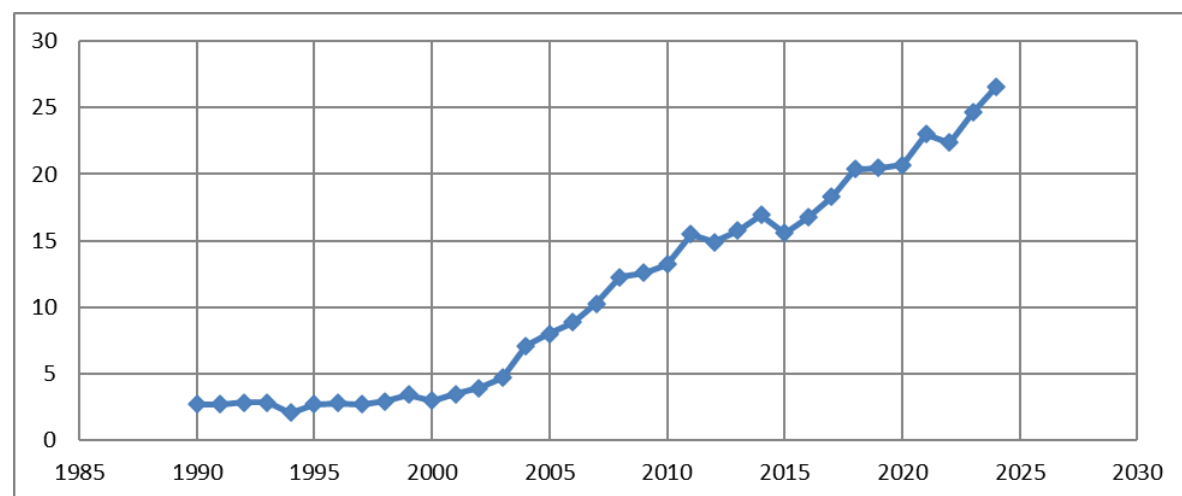
The interpretation of the findings was guided by a critical, reflexive perspective. The primary goal was to move beyond the simplistic "China as an opportunistic power" narrative and instead focus on the agency and motivations of African nations. The interpretation was centered on reframing the dynamics from the perspective of Mali's strategic choices, emphasizing its pursuit of autonomy and diversification in a multipolar world. This approach allowed for an analysis that highlights the complexity of these relationships, presenting them not as a new form of neo-colonialism but as a strategic maturation of African foreign policy, which seeks to leverage a new paradigm of global partnership.

## IV. Between Hope and Concern: A Dive into the Development and Security Landscape of Mali

Since the 1990s, Mali's journey has been marked by both developmental progress and significant security challenges. Analyzing its economic, social, and political indicators—such as GDP, FDI, electricity access, literacy rates, political stability, and infrastructure quality—compared to other developing nations reveals its complex trajectory. This assessment highlights key challenges and opportunities shaping the country's future.

### 4.1. The Economy: Size and Development Stage

A rising GDP usually indicates growing economic size, reflecting improved productivity, higher incomes, and better development prospects, while a declining or stagnant GDP suggests structural weaknesses, limited opportunities, or economic instability, hindering long-term progress. Sustainable GDP growth can be a sign of strong development potential, whereas volatility or contraction raises concerns over future prosperity.



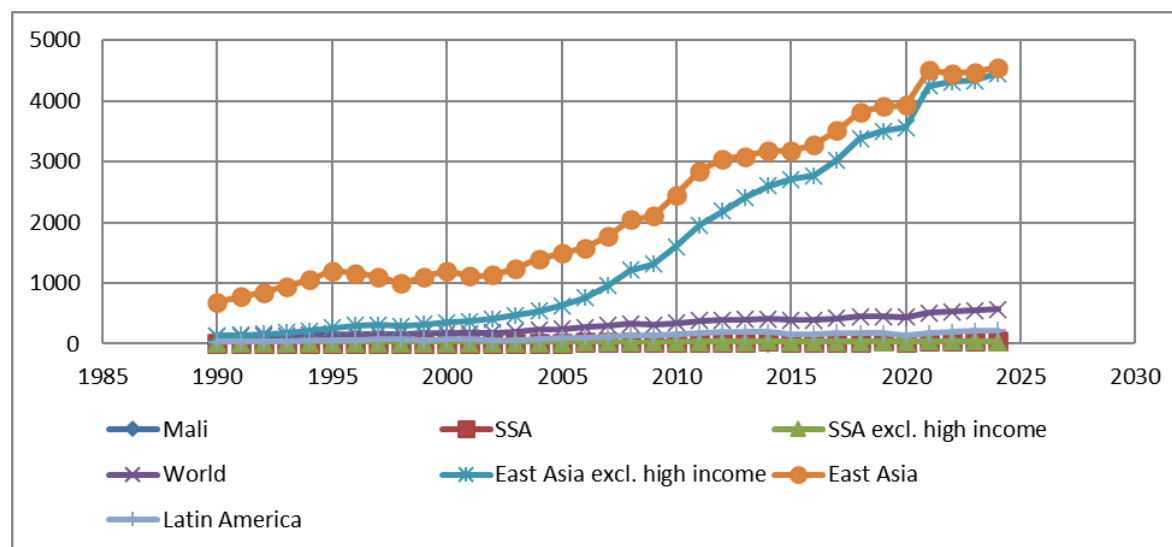
**Fig. 2 Mali's Current GDP (Bln USD)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's GDP has shown a generally upward trend over the past three decades, with significant fluctuations. Starting at \$2.68 billion in 1990, it experienced dips in the mid-1990s and early 2000s but rebounded strongly after 2003, reaching \$26.59 billion in 2024. The most notable growth occurred between 2003 and 2008, with



GDP nearly tripling, reflecting economic reforms or commodity booms. However, progress has been uneven, with occasional declines, such as in 2015 and 2020, likely due to external shocks like global crises or internal instability. Despite these challenges, Mali's long-term trajectory suggests resilience and gradual expansion, though at a slower pace compared to faster-growing regions.



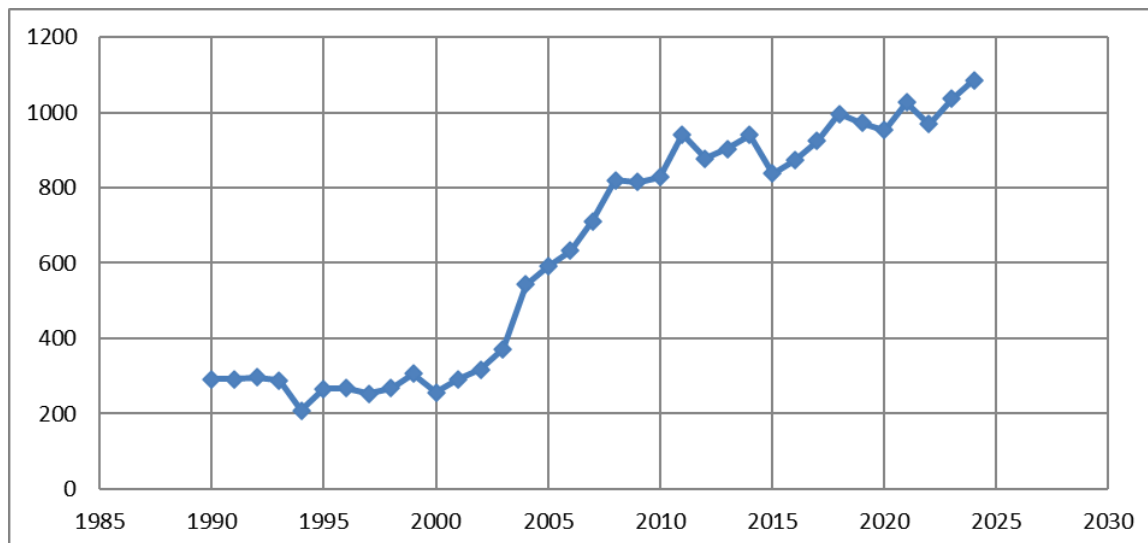
**Fig. 3 Current GDP: Mali vs Regional Averages (Bln US\$)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's GDP remains modest compared to other regions. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) averaged around \$30.43 billion annually (1990–2024), while East Asia (excluding high income) soared to \$1.63 trillion on average. Even within SSA, Mali's GDP is smaller than the regional average. Latin America's average GDP (\$113.63 billion) also far surpasses Mali's. Globally, Mali's contribution is minimal, with the world's average GDP at \$318.86 billion. While Mali has grown, its economy is dwarfed by larger regions, emphasizing its status as a smaller, developing economy. This disparity underscores the need for targeted development strategies to bridge the gap.

#### 4.2. Standard of living and Quality of Life

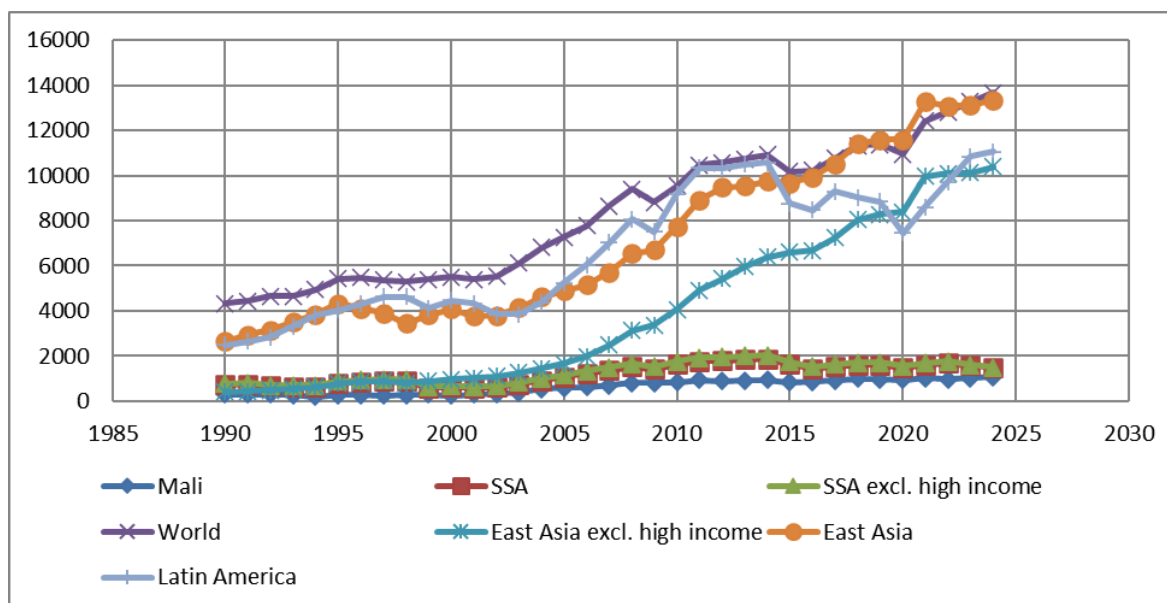
A growing GDP per capita can indicate rising living standards, reflecting improved productivity, income, and economic health. Sustained growth suggests strong development prospects, while stagnation or decline signals structural issues like inequality, poor governance, or limited innovation, hindering long-term progress. A stable, rising trend attracts investment and fosters stability, driving further economic advancement.



**Fig. 4 Mali's Current GDP per Capita (USD)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's GDP per capita has experienced notable growth over the past three decades, rising from \$292 in 1990 to \$1,086 in 2024. Despite fluctuations, such as a sharp decline in 1994 to \$209, the overall trend has been upward, particularly from the early 2000s onward. The most significant increases occurred between 2003 and 2008, followed by steady growth in recent years. This reflects improvements in economic output relative to population growth. However, Mali's GDP per capita remains low compared to global standards, indicating ongoing developmental challenges. The upward trajectory suggests progress, but structural barriers and external shocks continue to influence its pace.



**Fig. 5 Current GDP per capita: Mali vs Regional Averages (US\$)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's GDP per capita is significantly lower than other regions. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) averaged \$1,230 (1990–2024), while East Asia (excluding high income) reached \$3,800. The global average (\$8,300) and Latin America (\$6,500) far surpass Mali's figures. Even within SSA, Mali lags behind the regional average, highlighting its economic challenges. While Mali has made progress, its GDP per capita remains among

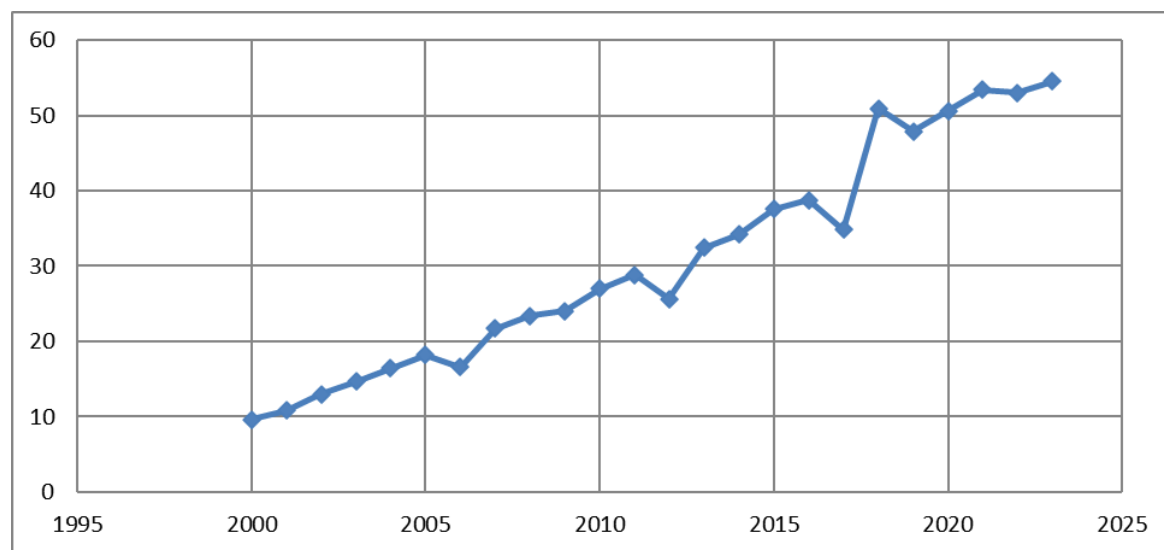
the lowest, underscoring disparities in development. This gap emphasizes the need for targeted policies to enhance productivity, reduce poverty, and align Mali's growth with more prosperous regions.

### 4.3. Availability and access to hard infrastructure

Trends in hard infrastructure like "Access to electricity" and transport infrastructure proxied by the "Logistics performance index" are key indicators of a country's economic development prospects. Consistent growth in these areas suggests a strong foundation for industrialization, trade, and overall economic expansion, while stagnation or decline points to potential barriers to growth.

#### 4.3.1. Access to electricity

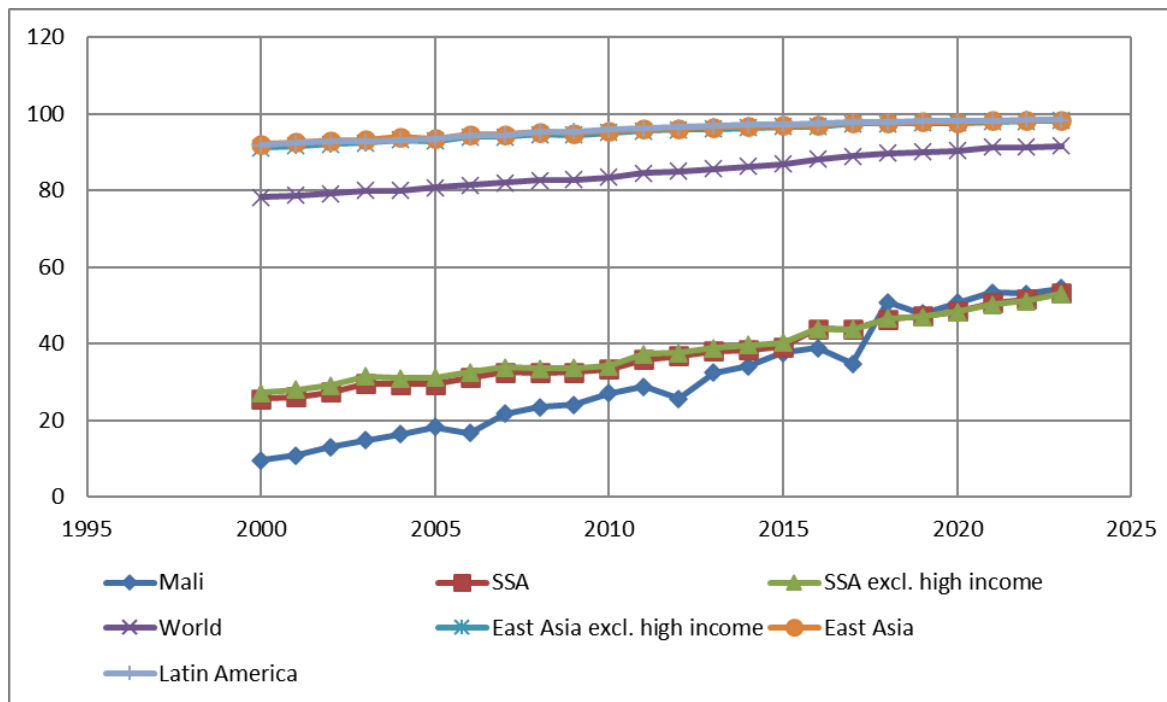
Access to electricity is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving basic standards of living and unlocking human potential. Reliable electricity is non-negotiable for industrialization, powering factories, and fostering innovation.



**Fig. 6 Mali's Access to electricity (% of population)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Access to electricity in Mali has shown steady improvement over the past two decades, rising from just 9.6% in 2000 to 54.5% in 2023. Despite fluctuations, such as a dip in 2006 and slower progress in the early 2010s, the overall trend has been upward, with significant jumps in 2018 (50.9%) and 2021 (53.4%). This growth reflects investments in infrastructure and rural electrification efforts. However, Mali still lags behind global standards, with nearly half its population lacking access. While progress is evident, challenges like funding gaps and geographic barriers must be addressed to achieve universal electrification and support broader economic development.



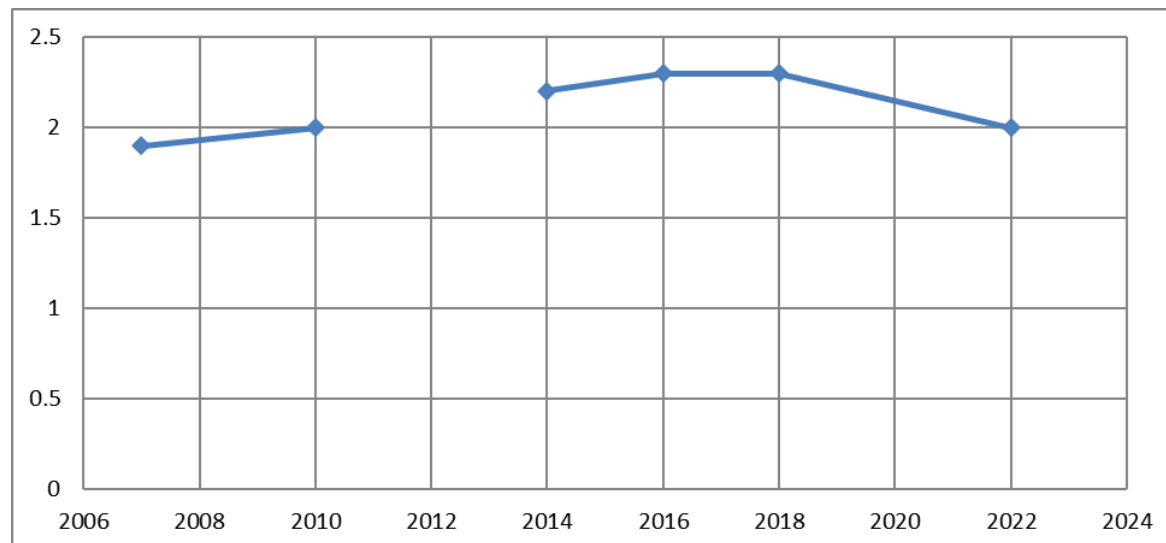
**Fig. 7 Access to electricity Mali vs Regional Averages (% of population)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's electrification rate remains far below regional and global averages. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) averaged 37.3% (2000–2023), while SSA excluding high-income countries averaged 38.9%. In contrast, East Asia (excluding high income) and Latin America maintained near-universal access, averaging 95.6% and 96.2%, respectively. The global average stood at 85.4%, highlighting Mali's significant deficit. Despite recent gains, Mali's electrification rate is less than half that of SSA and a fraction of more developed regions. This disparity underscores the urgent need for accelerated investment and policy interventions to close the energy access gap and foster inclusive growth.

#### 4.3.2. Logistics Performance Index (LPI): quality of trade and transport infrastructure

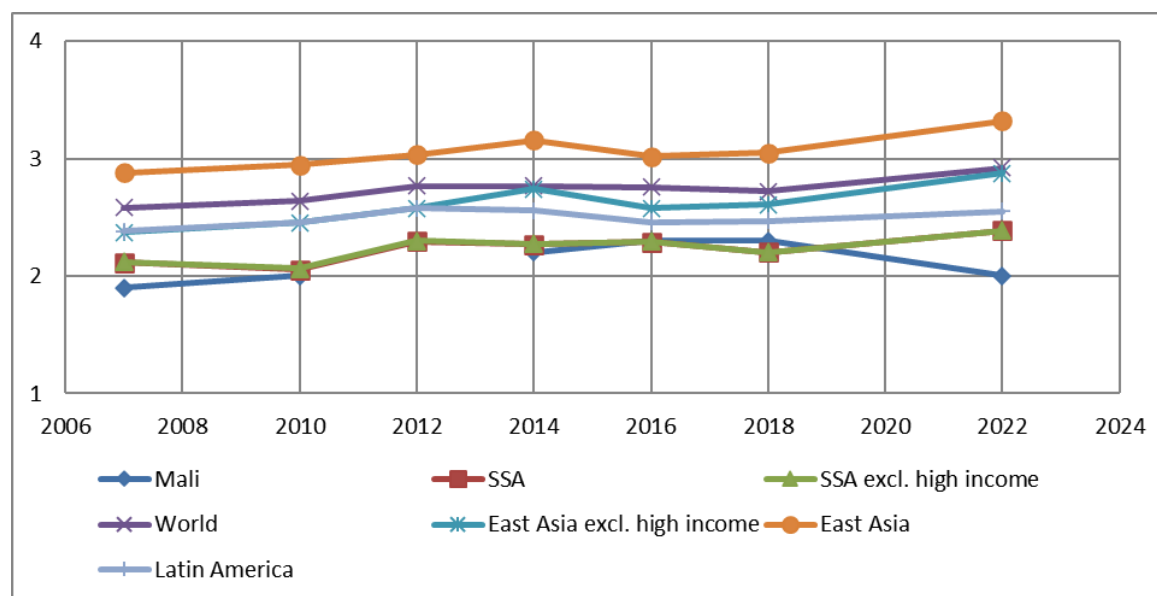
This indicator is vital to a country as it determines a nation's ability to effectively participate in the global economy. High-quality ports, roads, railways, and information technology systems drastically reduce trade costs and transit times, making a country's exports more competitive and attracting foreign direct investment.



**Fig. 8 Mali's LPI (1=low to 5=high)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's LPI, reflecting the quality of trade and transport infrastructure, has shown modest fluctuations over the years, ranging between 1.9 and 2.3 (2007–2022). After a slight dip in 2010 (2.0), it peaked at 2.3 in 2018 before dropping back to 2.0 in 2022. This stagnation suggests persistent challenges in infrastructure development, despite minor improvements. The lack of consistent progress highlights systemic barriers such as limited investment, inefficiencies in trade facilitation, and geographic constraints. While Mali's LPI has not declined sharply, its failure to rise significantly indicates a need for targeted reforms to enhance logistics and connectivity for economic growth.



**Fig. 9 LPI: Mali vs Regional Averages (1=low to 5=high)**

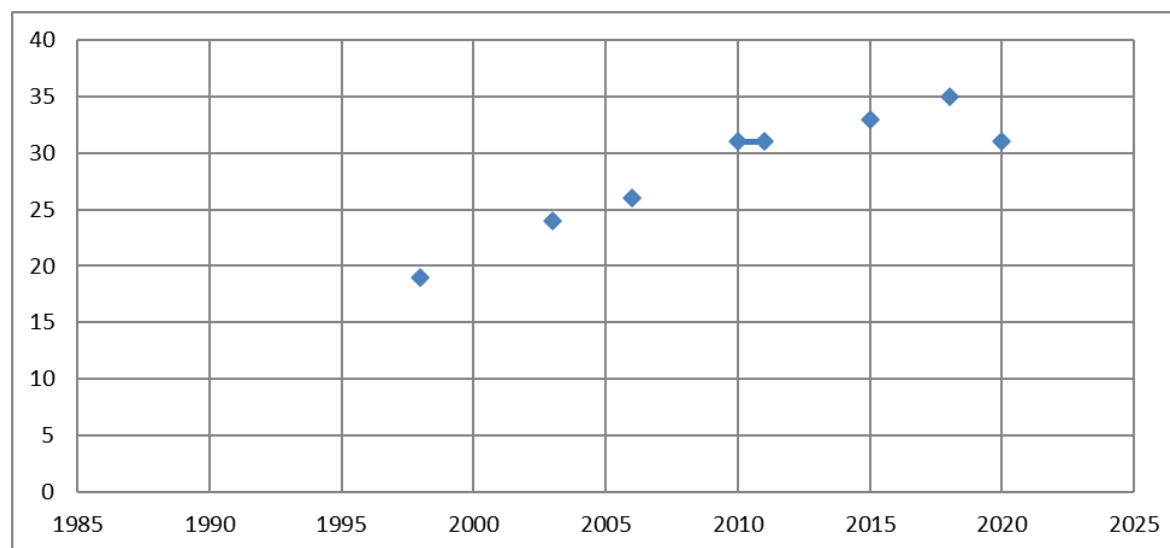
Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's LPI consistently trails behind regional and global averages. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) averaged 2.2 (2007–2022), while the global average stood at 2.7. East Asia (3.1) and Latin America (2.5) outperformed Mali

by wide margins, reflecting stronger infrastructure and trade networks. Even within SSA, Mali's scores lag slightly behind the regional mean. This gap underscores Mali's logistical inefficiencies, which hinder trade competitiveness and economic integration. Closing this disparity requires prioritizing infrastructure upgrades, streamlining customs processes, and fostering regional cooperation to align with more developed logistics systems.

#### 4.4. Human capital and prospect for productive workforce

A rising adult literacy rate signals improved human capital, enabling higher productivity, innovation, and adaptability to technological advances, which fuels economic growth. Stagnant or declining literacy suggests a skills gap, limiting competitiveness and long-term development prospects. Sustained literacy gains correlate with stronger workforce quality and broader economic opportunities.

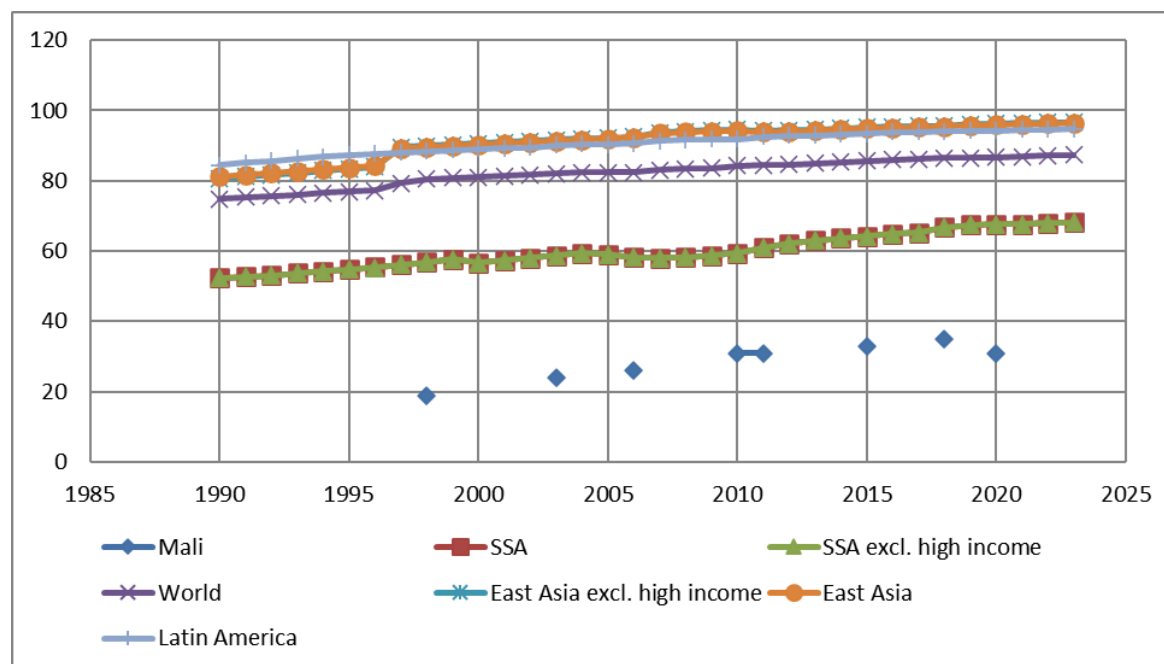


**Fig. 10 Mali's Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's adult literacy rate has shown slow but steady progress, rising from 19% in 1998 to 35% in 2018, with intermittent fluctuations (e.g., a drop to 31% in 2020). Despite this growth, the rate remains critically low, reflecting persistent challenges in education access, gender disparities, and rural-urban divides. The gradual improvement suggests modest gains from policy interventions and international aid, but progress is far slower than needed to meet sustainable development goals. Systemic issues like poverty, conflict, and insufficient infrastructure continue to hinder literacy advancement. Without accelerated efforts, Mali risks falling further behind global and regional benchmarks, perpetuating cycles of underdevelopment and economic marginalization.





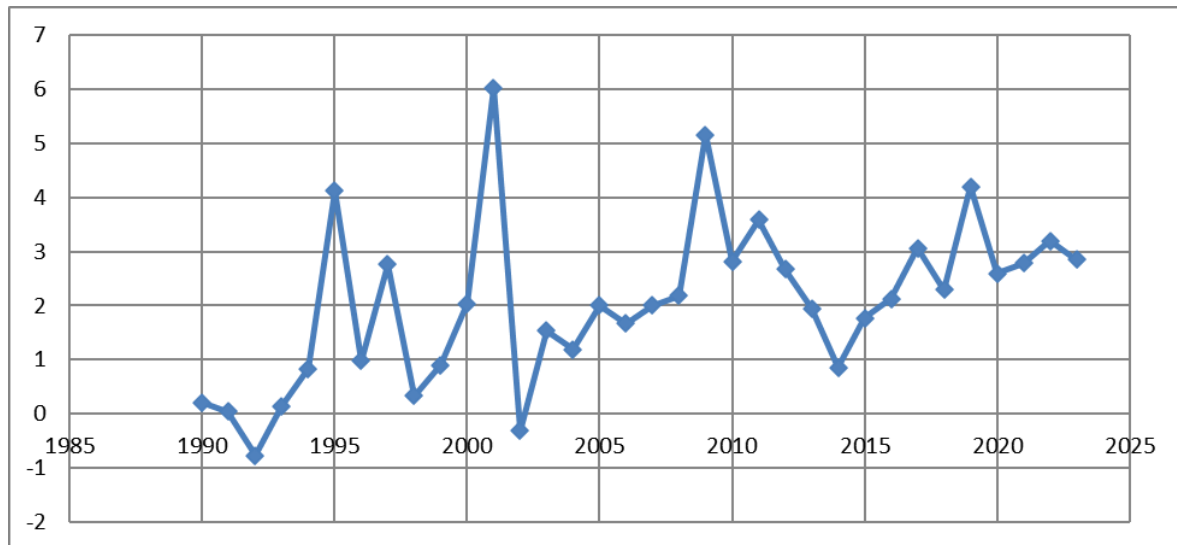
**Fig. 11 Literacy rate, adult total: Mali vs Regional Averages (% of people ages 15 and above)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's literacy rate is among the lowest globally, starkly contrasting with regions like East Asia (94.2% average since 1990) and Latin America (91.5%). Even within Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where the average is 59.4%, Mali lags significantly—highlighting severe educational deficits. SSA excluding high-income countries (59.3%) still outperforms Mali by over 20 percentage points. The global average (82.4%) further underscores Mali's disadvantage. These disparities reflect deeper systemic failures in Mali's education system, exacerbated by conflict, poverty, and limited resources. Closing this gap requires urgent, targeted investments in schooling, teacher training, and gender-inclusive policies to align with regional and global standards.

#### 4.5. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Prospect for tech transfer and job creation

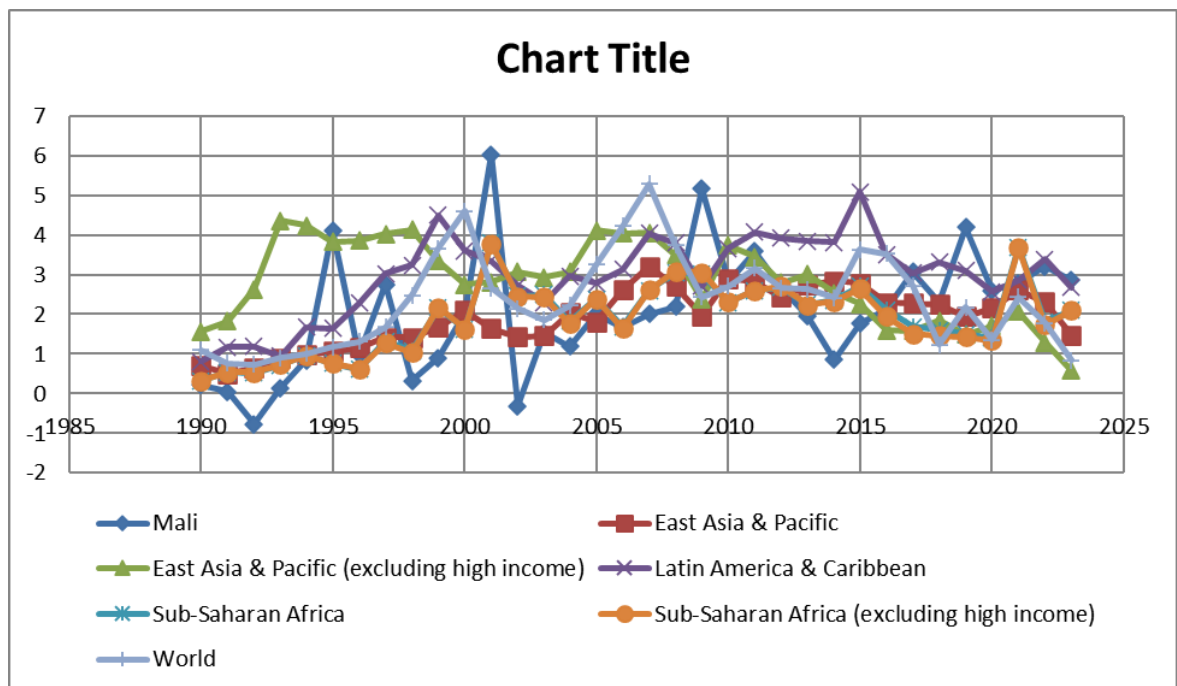
Rising FDI inflows (% of GDP) reflect investor confidence, signaling openness, stability, and industrialization potential, while facilitating technology transfer and job creation—key drivers of sustainable growth. Declining FDI suggests risks like policy uncertainty or weak infrastructure, hindering development. Sustained growth in FDI boosts productivity and competitiveness, strengthening long-term economic prospects.



**Fig. 12 Mali's FDI, net inflows (% of GDP)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's FDI inflows have been volatile, fluctuating between -0.77% (1992) and 6.03% (2001) of GDP, with an average of around 2.3% (1990–2023). The early 2000s saw peaks, coinciding with Mali's rapid GDP growth, likely driven by mining sector investments. However, FDI has not consistently mirrored GDP trends, with dips in 2014 (0.85%) and 2023 (2.85%) despite overall economic expansion. This inconsistency reflects Mali's vulnerability to external shocks, political instability, and reliance on commodity-driven investments. While FDI has contributed to growth, its unpredictability highlights the need for diversification and improved investor confidence to sustain development.



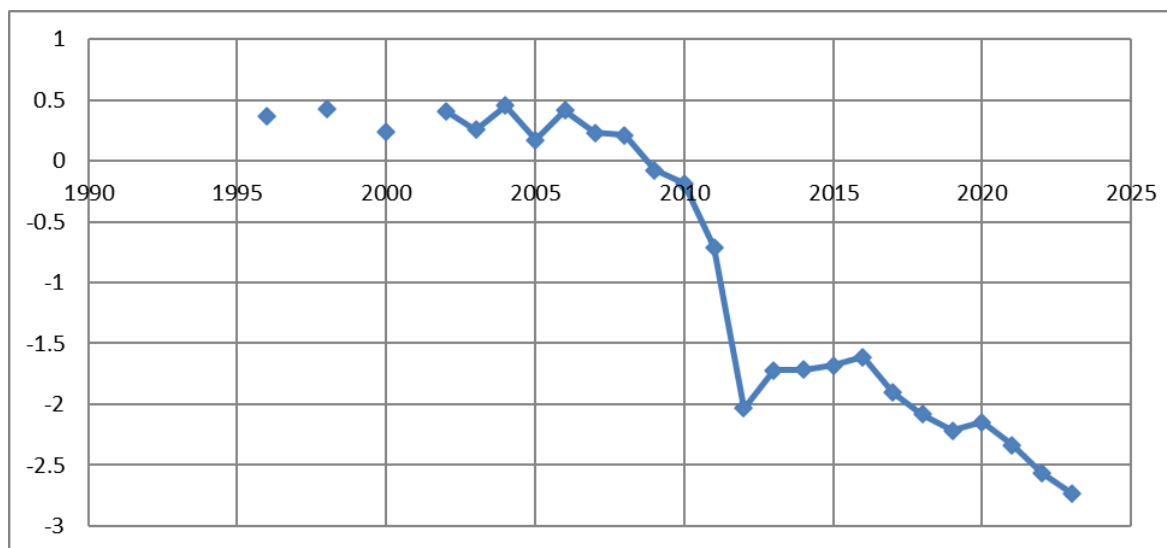
**Fig. 13 FDI, net inflows Mali vs Regional Averages (% of GDP)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WDI (World Bank)

Mali's FDI inflows (2.3% of GDP) lag behind regions like East Asia & Pacific (2.5%) and Latin America (3.2%), which benefit from larger, more diversified economies. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) averages 2.1%, but Mali's higher-than-SSA FDI has not translated into proportional GDP growth, unlike East Asia, where FDI fueled transformative industrialization. Mali's GDP remains small (\$26.6 billion in 2024) compared to SSA (\$30.4 billion) and global averages (\$318.9 billion), indicating FDI's limited scale in driving structural change. To leverage FDI effectively, Mali must address infrastructure gaps, political risks, and economic diversification to align with more dynamic regions.

#### 4.6. Security and stability

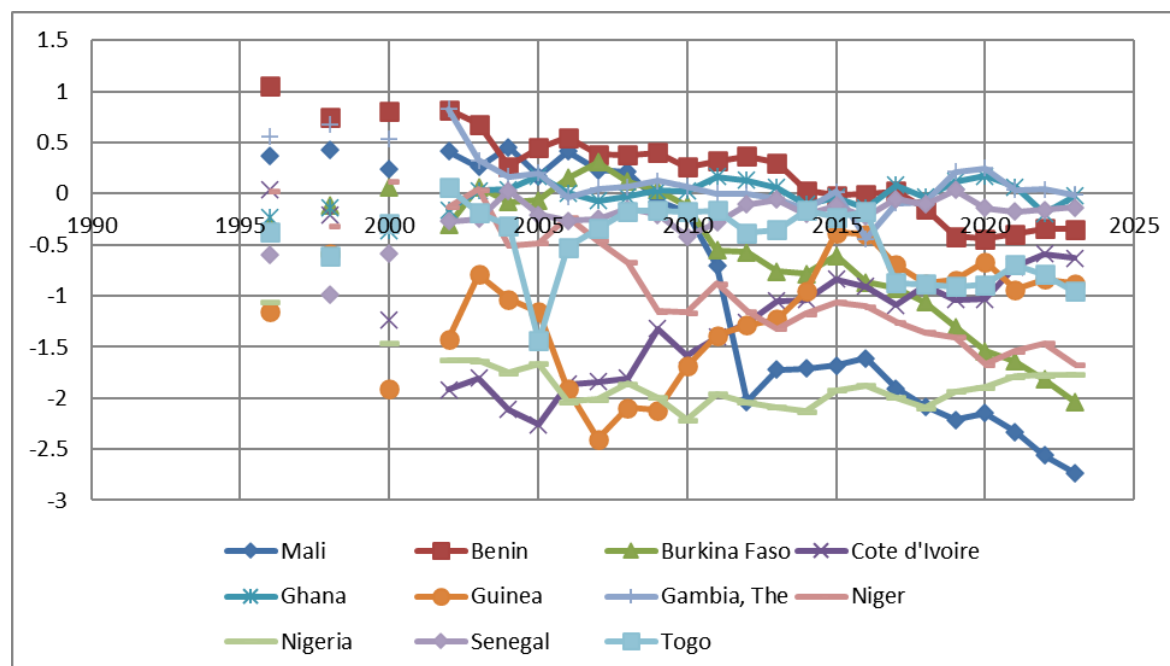
Political stability and low violence can foster investor confidence, reduce uncertainty, and enable long-term planning, driving economic growth. Rising instability or terrorism disrupts productivity, scares capital, and increases security costs, hindering development. A positive trend signals a conducive environment for trade, infrastructure, and human capital growth, while deterioration risks stagnation or decline.



**Fig.14 Mali's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism: Estimate**

Source: Author's graph, data from WGI (World Bank)

Mali's political stability has sharply declined over the past three decades, transitioning from moderate stability in the 1990s (e.g., 0.37 in 1996) to severe instability by 2023 (-2.73). The downturn accelerated after 2012, coinciding with political crises, coups, and escalating jihadist violence in the Sahel. Scores plummeted below -2.0 from 2012 onward, reflecting chronic insecurity and governance challenges. This negative trajectory underscores the impact of internal conflicts, weak state capacity, and regional terrorism. Despite brief periods of relative calm, Mali's instability has become entrenched, posing significant risks to development and humanitarian conditions. The trend highlights the urgent need for sustainable peacebuilding and security reforms.



**Fig.15 Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism: Mali vs Regional Averages (Estimate, the higher the best)**

Source: Author's graph, data from WGI (World Bank)

Mali's political stability scores are among the lowest in West Africa, contrasting sharply with neighbors like Benin (averaging 0.25 from 1996–2023) and Ghana (averaging -0.04). While Burkina Faso and Niger also face instability (averaging -0.65 and -1.03, respectively), Mali's decline is more severe. The region-wide average for the dataset (excluding outliers) is approximately -0.8, with Mali consistently below this threshold post-2010. Globally, Mali's scores align with conflict-affected states, lagging behind more stable developing regions. This disparity underscores Mali's acute governance and security crises, necessitating targeted international support and regional cooperation to mitigate further deterioration.

## V. China's Multidimensional Engagement in Mali: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

China's involvement in Mali is not a recent phenomenon but rather a relationship built on decades of diplomatic, economic, and increasingly, security cooperation. This multifaceted engagement reflects China's broader strategy in Africa, characterized by a pragmatic and evolving approach to state-to-state relations.

### 5.1. A Legacy of Bilateral Relations: From Friendship to Strategic Partnership

The People's Republic of China and the Republic of Mali formally established diplomatic relations on October 25, 1960. Since this foundational moment, the bilateral relationship has progressed smoothly, characterized by a spirit of cooperation. Early Chinese involvement, particularly between 1979 and 2002, was predominantly economic, with Beijing investing a substantial \$58 billion into Mali, thereby laying a strong economic foundation for their relationship.

Historically, China has provided significant assistance to Mali in constructing key development projects. These initiatives include the establishment of textile mills, sugar factories, and the construction of the strategically important Third Bamako Bridge. The formal framework for their economic ties was solidified through the 1978 Trade Agreement and the 2009 Investment Protection Agreement, which became effective in July of the same year. Furthermore, the two nations established a Joint Economic and Trade Commission in February 2009, institutionalizing their economic dialogue.

A significant elevation in their relationship occurred in September 2024, when China and Mali formally established a strategic partnership during the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). During this summit, President Xi Jinping underscored China's unwavering commitment to Mali's economic development and actively encouraged Chinese companies to increase their investments in the country. In return, Mali pledged to provide security guarantees and policy facilitation for these investments. This commitment by China to maintain and deepen relations, irrespective of changes in Mali's political regime, highlights a core principle of China's foreign policy: prioritizing long-term state-to-state relations and strategic economic interests over internal political systems or governance models. This continuity provides a degree of stability in Mali's external partnerships that contrasts sharply with the conditionalities often imposed by Western donors.

## 5.2. Economic Diplomacy as a Pillar of Shared Visions: Investment and Trade

China's economic engagement in Mali is a cornerstone of its foreign policy, with a primary focus on development and trade within the agricultural and energy sectors. This economic diplomacy is designed to be mutually beneficial. Mali serves as a source for various agricultural products, including sesame seeds, avocados, cashews, and chilis, which are exported to China, providing a crucial stimulus for Mali's economy. Beyond agriculture, China has made significant investments in Mali's rich mining sector, particularly in lithium and uranium exploration projects. A notable example is the 2023 commitment by Ganfeng, a Chinese company, to invest \$138 million to gain control of the Goulamina lithium project. This agreement grants Ganfeng exclusive rights to initial sales and allows it to maintain 70% of sales rights as the project progresses.

To provide a clear and quantifiable overview of China's economic footprint in Mali, the following table summarizes key Chinese development and investment projects. This empirical data is crucial for substantiating the nature and extent of China's economic diplomacy and its evolution over time. It also serves as a baseline for analyzing the spatial distribution of projects across Mali and their potential impact on different regions, offering a clear empirical basis for subsequent analysis.

**Table 1: Key Chinese Development and Investment Projects in Mali (2000-Present)**

Project Name / Initiative	Sector	Type of Financing	Approximate Value (USD)	Year Initiated/ Completed	Key Locations/Regions in Mali	Source
Bamako-Ségou Highway	Infrastructure	Loan (preferential rates)	\$ 211.92 million	2010	Bamako, Ségou	<a href="https://china.aiddata.org/projects/1544/">https://china.aiddata.org/projects/1544/</a>
"Third Bridge" in Bamako	Infrastructure	Grant	\$ 81.82 million	2007	Bamako	<a href="https://china.aiddata.org/projects/234/">https://china.aiddata.org/projects/234/</a>
Goulamina Lithium Project (Ganfeng)	Mining	Investment	\$343 million	2023	Goulamina	<a href="#">MiningCom</a> <a href="#">SCMP</a>
Bamako-Dakar Railway Project	Infrastructure	Investment/ Loan	\$1.68 billion	2014	Bamako, Dakar (Senegal)	<a href="https://china.aiddata.org/projects/36445/">https://china.aiddata.org/projects/36445/</a>
Agricultural Products Export (Sesame, Avocado, Cashew, Chili)	Agriculture and raw materials	Trade	Part of \$880M bilateral trade in 2023	Ongoing	Various agricultural regions	<a href="https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/3034_664094/">https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/3034_664094/</a>
Iron Ore & Manganese Ore Export						
Machinery & Electrical Products Import						

Textile Mills & Sugar Factories	Manufacturing	Aid/Investment	Not specified	Historical	Not specified	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China
Mali Digital Project	Technology	Cooperation	Not specified	Ongoing	National	Ecofin Agency
Africa Solar Belt Program	Energy	Cooperation	Not specified	Ongoing	National	Wikipedia
Education & Training Cooperation (Scholarships)	Education	Cooperation/Aid	Not specified	Since 1965	National	<a href="https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/3034_664094/">https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/3034_664094/</a>
Medical Care Cooperation (Medical Teams)	Health	Aid	Not specified	Since 1968	Mali Hospital, Gao (field hospital)	<a href="https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/3034_664094/">https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/3034_664094/</a>
Sénou Vocational and Technical Training Center	Education	Grant	RMB 86.1 million	2015-2018	Bamako-Séno	AidData
Civil Explosives Plant	Manufacturing	Investment	Not specified	2024 (expected completion in 12 months)	Not specified	Ecofin Agency
Solar Power Plants	Energy	Investment/Cooperation	Not specified (PowerChina, TBEA, Beikai Zhongdian Group)	Ongoing	Safo, Kénièba, Koulikoro	China-Global South Project, Ecofin Agency

Source: author's compilation based on various sources

Infrastructure development stands as a hallmark of China's engagement. Major projects include a loan of more \$200 million with preferential rates in 2010 for the construction of the Bamako-Ségou highway, and a roughly \$80 million grant in 2007 for the construction of the 'Third Bridge' in Bamako. China has also invested billions in a railway project designed to connect Bamako to Dakar, Senegal. These infrastructure projects are often critical for improving connectivity and facilitating trade, but they also serve to link resource-rich areas to export routes. According to a recent report by Socialist China (2023), Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has consistently affirmed China's commitment to Mali, assuring his Malian counterpart, Abdoulaye Diop on a visit to China, of continued support for infrastructure, technology, and public health initiatives. Furthermore, China has expressed readiness to deepen cooperation in education, training, medical care, and agriculture, and to implement projects such as the "Mali Digital" project and the "Africa Solar Belt" Program, aimed at promoting peace and development in Mali.

In the context of bilateral trade, exchanges between China and Mali reached \$880 million in 2023, reflecting a robust year-on-year increase of 32.7%. China's exports to Mali primarily include machinery, electrical products, and vehicles, supporting Mali's industrialization and infrastructure development. Meanwhile, China's imports from Mali consist mainly of sesame, iron ore, and manganese ore, which contribute to Mali's economic growth by creating export opportunities. This trade structure aligns with Mali's current economic strengths in natural resources while fostering industrial and technological collaboration. China's investments in Mali span critical sectors such as infrastructure (highways, railways, and bridges) and resource development, which are essential for Mali's long-term growth and connectivity. These projects not only enhance Mali's export capacity but also support local employment and skills development.

China's approach to cooperation with Mali is rooted in mutual benefit and shared development goals. By investing in key sectors, China helps Mali unlock its economic potential while also meeting global demand for essential resources. This partnership contributes to Mali's stability and prosperity, reinforcing a model of South-South cooperation that prioritizes sustainable and inclusive growth. Moving forward, both nations continue to



explore ways to ensure that trade and investment deliver broad-based benefits for the Malian people while strengthening bilateral ties.

In practice, Mali's developmental challenges, as previously highlighted by key indicators like GDP per capita, electricity access, and literacy rates, appear alarming when compared to regional and global averages. The country's GDP per capita, for example, is notably lower than the average for Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions, indicating ongoing developmental hurdles. Similarly, its electricity access rate lags far behind both regional and global standards, with nearly half the population lacking access. Literacy rates also remain critically low compared to benchmarks across Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and Latin America. Additionally, Mali's logistics performance index consistently trails regional and global averages, reflecting persistent inefficiencies in its trade and transport infrastructure. The country's political stability has also sharply declined, posing a significant risk to development and humanitarian conditions.

In response to these challenges, China's development and investment projects in Mali, as detailed in Table 1, represent a collaborative effort to address these key developmental gaps. The initiatives focus on enhancing hard infrastructure, a critical area where Mali's performance has been low. For example, projects like the Bamako-Ségou Highway, the "Third Bridge" in Bamako, and the Bamako-Dakar Railway are designed to improve trade and transport, which directly supports the country's LPI and economic integration. Furthermore, China has engaged in energy-related cooperation, such as the Africa Solar Belt Program and various solar power plant projects, to help close the considerable energy access gap.

Beyond physical infrastructure, the cooperation extends to human capital and economic diversification. Educational initiatives like scholarships and the establishment of the 'Sénou Vocational and Technical Training Center' aim to boost literacy and workforce skills, directly addressing the low adult literacy rate. Investments in sectors like mining, agriculture, and manufacturing, including the Goulamina Lithium Project and the establishment of textile mills and sugar factories, help diversify Mali's economy and attract foreign direct investment, which has historically been volatile. The cooperation also includes medical and technological aid, such as medical teams and the Mali Digital Project, which contribute to overall human development. This multi-faceted approach, grounded in mutual benefit and Malian agency, illustrates a concerted effort to support Mali in overcoming its developmental hurdles by strengthening key sectors and foundational infrastructure.

### **5.3. Evolving Security Sector Engagement: From Peacekeeping to Bilateral Aid**

China's engagement in Mali's security and development landscape has evolved over time in ways that reflect both the changing realities on the ground and Mali's own priorities as it navigates complex regional challenges. In the early stages, as threats from terrorism and instability grew, China joined the international community in supporting peace through the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). By deploying a diverse contingent that included medical teams, engineers, police, and a protection unit from the People's Liberation Army, China highlighted its willingness to contribute to collective security. This step represented a new phase in its cooperation with Africa, underscoring an emphasis on shared responsibility in maintaining peace and stability. The participation of Chinese personnel, including a small contingent of combat troops under a UN mandate, was a demonstration of commitment to multilateral solutions that respond to African states' calls for support.

As Mali's security context shifted, particularly with the drawdown of Western forces and the Malian government's request for MINUSMA's withdrawal, China's approach adjusted in ways that emphasized long-term stability. Instead of focusing solely on traditional security measures, greater priority was placed on development as a foundation for peace. This reflected the idea that sustainable security is best achieved when economic opportunities, infrastructure, and livelihoods are strengthened. The philosophy of "development for security" illustrates how China has aligned its efforts with Mali's own vision of building resilience through growth and prosperity.

Alongside these development-focused efforts, cooperation has also expanded into direct bilateral defense support. In 2024, during a visit to Beijing, Malian leadership explored new avenues of military collaboration, including agreements for equipment, training, and technological exchanges with Chinese partners. These arrangements, pursued at Mali's initiative, reflect the country's agency in diversifying its partnerships and seeking resources that support its sovereignty and national defense. The timing of these agreements, coinciding with the easing of regional embargo measures, also demonstrated how Mali leverages external partnerships to meet its strategic needs while maintaining control over the direction of its policies.

China's engagement further includes the activities of private security companies, which mainly provide advisory and protective services linked to development projects and investment. These companies, staffed largely by former professionals, focus on safeguarding people, infrastructure, and projects vital to both Mali and China's shared economic interests. Their presence emphasizes the link between stability and development, ensuring that investments in infrastructure, trade, and energy can proceed safely and contribute to Mali's broader growth objectives. Importantly, their operations remain guided by Malian law and are part of the broader framework of cooperation between the two countries.

Overall, China's role in Mali represents a multifaceted approach that combines multilateral contributions, bilateral defense cooperation, and development-driven initiatives. Rather than privileging one form of engagement over another, this balanced strategy reflects an understanding that peace and prosperity are interconnected. For Mali, these partnerships are not about dependency but about choice, diversification, and agency in shaping its future. For China, the emphasis is on cooperation, mutual benefit, and respect for Mali's sovereignty, ensuring that both countries work together toward shared goals of security, stability, and development.

## **VI. Critical Assessment: The Development-Security Nexus in China's Mali Strategy**

China's engagement in Mali, framed within its "development for security" paradigm, presents a complex picture of perceived benefits, inherent limitations, and potential unintended consequences. A nuanced assessment requires examining both the stated intentions and the practical outcomes of Beijing's strategy in Mali's highly fragile context.

### **6.1. Beijing's "Development for Security" in Practice: A Contested Efficacy**

China's "development for security" approach is deeply ingrained in its domestic experience, where robust economic success is considered fundamental to achieving and maintaining political stability. This philosophy translates into its foreign policy as a strong conviction in the inherent interconnections between economic development and security. Consequently, China's security involvement in countries like Mali is often advocated to be analyzed not solely through a traditional military lens, but also through the broader spectrum of its economic development contributions, poverty alleviation measures, and job creation initiatives (Benabdallah and Large, 2020; SAIIA Report, 2020).

However, existing analyses and findings (Bisca, 2018; SAIIA Report, 2020; World Bank, 2010) indicate that this approach encounters pronounced limitations when applied within Mali's specific and highly volatile context. A key limitation identified is China's perceived "lack of focus on governance". The argument posits that development projects, without robust government control or the political will to transform them into profitable and sustainable investments, face significant risks of decay, destruction, or even subversive utilization by non-state actors and armed groups. Furthermore, China's engagement strategy remains "largely government-focused and Bamako-centered," which inherently limits Beijing's comprehensive understanding of the "multitude of political actors" and the intricate local dynamics that characterize Mali's complex crisis. This approach stands in direct contrast to the World Bank's emphasis on strengthening "legitimate institutions and governance" as a crucial prerequisite for breaking cycles of violence. This implies that while China's model may demonstrate effectiveness in more stable, state-centric environments, its application in highly fragmented and fragile states such as Mali, where state legitimacy is frequently contested and non-state actors wield significant influence, may inadvertently perpetuate instability. By not adequately addressing underlying governance deficits and local grievances, China's development projects, despite their scale and economic potential, could become vulnerable to the very insecurity they aim to mitigate. Moreover, they risk exacerbating existing tensions by bypassing local communities and inadvertently reinforcing a distant or perceived illegitimate central authority, thereby undermining the long-term sustainability and positive impact of these initiatives.

### **6.2. Perceived Benefits and Contributions: A Malian Perspective**

From the perspective of Malian authorities, China is frequently portrayed as a highly valued and reliable partner. Mali's Foreign Minister, Abdoulaye Diop, has publicly affirmed that China is a "reliable friend and partner" of Mali according to a report by Socialist China (2023). This sentiment is further reinforced by Mali's expressed appreciation for China's contributions to the region and its anticipation of closer multilateral cooperation with Beijing.

Malian officials consistently emphasize the importance they attach to initiatives proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping. They express a keen interest in learning from China's successful development experience and anticipate continued support and assistance from China across various sectors. A tangible example of China's positive impact, particularly at the local level, is the presence of Chinese peacekeepers in Gao. These peacekeepers were equipped with a state-of-the-art field hospital, which received regular visits from the local population, demonstrating a direct and beneficial impact on local health services. The consistent positive framing of China by Malian officials aligns with the Malian junta's stated preference for Russia/Wagner's "support without those conditions", in contrast to Western partners who "kept pressuring them to return to civilian rule, organize elections, etc.". This highlights that the "no-strings-attached" nature of China's engagement, which emphasizes non-interference in domestic affairs, is a significant draw for the current Malian government. This dynamic provides China with a comparative advantage over Western donors who often attach political conditionalities. However, it also raises concerns about the potential for China's engagement to inadvertently legitimize or entrench an authoritarian regime, potentially hindering Mali's long-term democratic development and exacerbating internal divisions by not fostering inclusive governance (SAIIA Report, 2020; Vorobyov, 2025).

### **6.3. Limitations, Criticisms, and Unintended Consequences: Debate on the "Debt-Trap Diplomacy" and Accusations of Neo-colonialism**

While China's engagement in Mali is often lauded by the Malian government, it has also attracted significant criticism and raised concerns regarding its long-term implications, particularly from international observers and some internal stakeholders. These critiques often revolve around issues of debt sustainability, the nature of economic dependence, and the impact on governance.

A prominent criticism leveled against China's lending practices, particularly in Africa, is the concept of "debt-trap diplomacy." Critics argue that China strategically uses debt as leverage to gain control over strategic assets in recipient countries. In Mali's context, the nation's debt to China is estimated to be at least \$13 billion. This criticism often extends to accusations of "creditor imperialism," where countries are purportedly compelled to transfer aspects of their sovereignty or control over vital resources to China to avoid defaulting on their debt obligations (see Mutai's DIA Report, 2025).

However, this narrative is met with counterarguments. Proponents of China's financing model including Baomi and Linyu (2020) and Gong (2024), as reported by Interpret CSIS and Carnegie China respectively, assert that Chinese capital has been a crucial catalyst for Africa's modernization and infrastructure development. Furthermore, empirical evidence to suggest that China has systematically seized assets in Africa due to loan defaults remains limited. Instead, Chinese lenders have frequently demonstrated flexibility by restructuring loans when recipient countries encounter repayment difficulties. A 2022 study revealed that African nations collectively owe more to private Western creditors (approximately 35% of their external debt) than to Chinese lenders which is 12% (see Mutai's DIA Report, 2025). This finding suggests that Africa's broader debt crisis is a complex issue involving multiple creditors, rather than being solely driven by Chinese lending practices. Moreover, the report suggests that, China's overall overseas development finance has experienced a significant decline, plummeting from \$90 billion in 2016 to less than \$5 billion in 2021. This reduction reflects a combination of factors, including China's domestic economic challenges, a strategic shift towards more sustainable and mutually beneficial investments, and increased international scrutiny of its lending practices. While the "debt-trap diplomacy" narrative is prominent, the evidence suggests a more complex reality. The decline in China's overall overseas lending and its willingness to restructure loans indicate a more nuanced approach than a deliberate "trap." The larger issue might be the financial viability of the projects themselves (for instance, the Mombasa-Nairobi railway struggling to cover operational costs) and the Malian government's capacity for financial oversight and transparent loan agreements. Therefore, research should move beyond the simplistic "trap" accusation to analyze the actual terms of Chinese loans to Mali, the financial viability of the projects, and the Malian government's capacity for debt management. The focus should shift to debt sustainability and transparency as key concerns, rather than solely on intentional leverage.

On another account, the concept of neo-colonialism, defined as the practice of exerting control over a poorer, less developed country through economic, globalization, and cultural forces rather than direct military or political control, is frequently applied to China's engagement in Africa. According to a report by Global Order written by Suri (2024), it is argued that China's involvement perpetuates a colonial-era economic model, where African countries primarily export raw materials and commodities to China while importing manufactured goods, is hindering Africa's industrialization and economic diversification efforts. What is apparent however, is that, the

relationship between China and African governments has often been framed through the lens of differing levels of economic and political capacity. Therefore, rather than viewing these dynamics as a form of dependency, many see them as opportunities for cooperation, resource sharing, and complementary strengths. China's emphasis on pragmatic economic engagement, infrastructure investment, and strong ties with African leadership reflects a mutual interest in accelerating development and fostering stability. Its principle of non-interference and flexible, partnership-based approach is welcomed by many African states as a way of affirming their sovereignty and their right to define their own development paths. This creates space for African countries to choose partners in line with their priorities, balancing domestic needs with long-term goals of economic growth, diversification, and governance development.

From a broader perspective, China's engagement with Mali forms part of the evolving dynamics of South-South cooperation, which emphasizes solidarity and shared development experiences among nations of the Global South. For China, this involves balancing its domestic priorities—such as sustaining growth and expanding consumption—with efforts to deepen cooperative trade and investment ties abroad. For African partners, there is increasing recognition of the need to shape these relationships in ways that maximize benefits, including addressing trade imbalances and ensuring that external cooperation aligns with national development strategies.

Not every partnership will perfectly match a country's absorptive capacity or immediate needs, but these engagements nonetheless provide opportunities for infrastructure development, technology transfer, and capacity building. Many Global South nations, including in Africa, continue to seek diversified partnerships—not as a rejection of cooperation with China or Russia, but as part of a broader strategy to strengthen resilience, reduce risks, and maximize developmental opportunities. This trend reflects a strategic maturity and growing agency among African states, which increasingly view external relations through the lens of choice and balance rather than dependency.

In Mali's case, engagement with China and Russia can be seen as part of a pragmatic response to pressing security and development challenges, while also leaving room for future diversification. Whether this represents a transitional alignment to address immediate needs or a longer-term strategy, what remains clear is that Mali, like many of its peers, is actively shaping its international partnerships to reflect its own aspirations for stability, growth, and sovereignty.

#### 6.4. Comparative Analysis: Mali's Strategic Partnerships with China vs France and Russia

In this section, we seek to understand how the distinct approaches of China, France, and Russia influence the security-development nexus in Mali. This question forms a core inquiry of this study, guiding a comprehensive examination of the comparative impact of France, and Russia, two other external powers deeply involved alongside China, on Mali's intricate security-development dynamics. The investigation looks into the specific modalities of their engagement, seeking to understand how their varied strategies, objectives, and historical relationships with Mali have shaped the country's security environment and its developmental trajectory.

Table 2: Comparative Approaches of External Powers in Mali

Aspect	France	Russia	China
<b>Primary Focus</b>	Security-first (counterterrorism + development aid)	Security-first (counterinsurgency + economic reciprocity)	Economic-first (infrastructure + trade)
<b>Stated Objectives</b>	Counter-terrorism, regional stability, training Malian army, facilitating political solution	Counter-insurgency, asserting Russian interests, supporting Malian government	Economic development, improving livelihoods, infrastructure, trade, peacebuilding (via UN)
<b>Security Contributions</b>	Counterterrorism operations (e.g., Serval, Barkhane); tactical successes but long-term challenges	Direct military support (e.g., Wagner/Africa Corps); territorial gains but human rights concerns	UN peacekeeping (MINUSMA); protection of economic projects; non-interference

<b>Development Contributions</b>	Trade ties and aid, but criticized for structural gaps	Humanitarian aid (food, fuel) and resource partnerships (gold, uranium)	Large-scale infrastructure (roads, railways, mines); industrial investment
<b>Approach to Sovereignty</b>	Historically linked aid to governance reforms; now less influential	Unconditional support; respects Mali's sovereign security choices	Non-interference; supports Mali's autonomous governance
<b>Key Strengths</b>	Counterterrorism expertise; historical ties	Immediate security reinforcement; flexible partnerships	Long-term economic growth; infrastructure development
<b>Criticisms/Limitations</b>	Perceived as paternalistic; withdrawal created security vacuum	Human rights concerns; transactional resource extraction	Debt sustainability concerns; limited direct security role
<b>Alignment with Mali's Priorities</b>	Shifted due to geopolitical changes	Aligns with Mali's security-first approach	Aligns with Mali's economic development goals

France's engagement in Mali has historically prioritized a security-first approach, leveraging counterterrorism expertise and long-standing ties to achieve tactical successes against insurgent groups. It also provided development aid and supported governance reforms, though this model has been criticized for creating structural gaps and a security vacuum upon withdrawal. The partnership, once aligned with Mali's needs, has since waned due to geopolitical shifts and Mali's desire for greater sovereignty, underscoring the complexity of balancing immediate security with sustainable development.

Russia's involvement also emphasizes a security-first model, providing immediate counterinsurgency reinforcement and flexible partnerships. This unconditional support for Mali's sovereignty resonates with Bamako's desire for autonomous decision-making. Russia also offers humanitarian aid and resource-based collaborations, such as in gold and uranium, though this transactional approach and concerns about human rights have been noted as potential weaknesses. The partnership highlights Mali's agency in choosing allies that align with its immediate security needs for territorial control.

As earlier noted, China's approach is distinct, prioritizing an economic-first strategy. Its engagement is rooted in the belief that development is key to achieving sustainable security. China's strengths lie in large-scale infrastructure projects—like roads, railways, and mines—that address Mali's infrastructure deficits and foster long-term growth. Its policy of non-interference respects Mali's sovereignty, and its contributions to UN peacekeeping in the country has demonstrate a commitment to stability. While concerns about debt sustainability and a limited direct security role exist, China's model aligns with Mali's long-term development goals by addressing the root causes of instability through economic means.

Each of Mali's partners offers distinct advantages: France, though no more active, provided counterterrorism expertise, Russia continues offering immediate security reinforcement, and China is delivering economic infrastructure. Mali's strategic diversification allows it to leverage these strengths while navigating their limitations. This multi-faceted engagement reflects a shift in Mali's priorities from a purely security-focused approach to a more balanced one that integrates stability with development. By engaging with several partners, Mali exercises its sovereign agency to select cooperation frameworks that best serve its evolving needs.

For Mali to achieve long-term prosperity, it must integrate security and development. While France and Russia's approaches provide vital security support, China's infrastructure-driven strategy addresses fundamental development gaps highlighted by Mali's low performance indicators. As highlighted earlier, Mali's GDP per capita, for instance, remains significantly lower than both regional and global averages. The stagnation of its Logistics Performance Index and low electrification rates underscore the urgent need for transformative economic interventions. China's model, focused on tangible projects like roads and railways, can directly improve trade and connectivity, while its energy infrastructure efforts can close the electricity access gap.

Ultimately, China's development-security nexus is uniquely positioned to address Mali's systemic challenges. Mali's critically low literacy rate, for example, and its inadequate infrastructure are major barriers to growth. By fostering economic growth and creating jobs through infrastructure and industrial investments, China's model tackles the root causes of instability such as poverty and unemployment. Furthermore, China's non-interference



policy allows Mali to maintain its sovereign agency and steer its own development agenda. This approach, focused on long-term economic resilience, offers a sustainable path to bridge Mali's development disparities and achieve lasting progress.

### **6.5. Charting a Distinct Path: A Blueprint for China's Engagement in Mali**

To truly distinguish its approach to the development-security nexus in Mali and create a blueprint model for other fragile states, China needs to strategically evolve its current engagement. While its existing emphasis on economic development and non-interference is a strong foundation, a more holistic strategy is necessary to address the root causes of instability and move beyond the limitations of its "largely government-focused" and "Bamako-centered" approach.

A key step is to enhance local engagement and ensure that development benefits are more equitably distributed across Mali's regions. China's current strategy, though effective in delivering large-scale projects, can inadvertently reinforce the central authority while bypassing local communities and non-state actors. To counter this, Beijing could establish regional development hubs in collaboration with local leaders, community groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These hubs would facilitate smaller-scale, localized projects in areas like agriculture, vocational training, and renewable energy, directly addressing local grievances related to poverty and unemployment. This model would also provide opportunities for technology transfer and skills development at the grassroots level, empowering Malians to participate in their own economic growth.

Furthermore, China must deepen its commitment to capacity building beyond infrastructure. While large projects like the Bamako-Dakar railway are crucial, their sustainability depends on Mali's ability to manage them effectively. A blueprint model would see China invest significantly in governance and institutional strengthening, not through prescriptive conditionalities, but through cooperative partnerships. This could involve knowledge-sharing programs where Malian officials learn from China's successful development experience. Such initiatives could focus on areas like public financial management, project oversight, and anti-corruption measures, directly addressing the risks of projects "without robust government control". This approach would demonstrate a commitment to long-term sustainability and shared governance, fostering a partnership based on mutual trust and shared learning.

Finally, while China's non-interference policy is a significant advantage over Western conditionalities, it can be strengthened by a more proactive, yet neutral, role in peacebuilding. Beyond its valuable contributions to UN peacekeeping, China could leverage its economic influence to convene stakeholders in a non-partisan capacity. By using its status as a trusted economic partner, China could facilitate economic peacebuilding dialogues aimed at connecting isolated, conflict-prone regions to the national economy through development projects. This would position China not just as a provider of aid and investment, but as a key facilitator of peace and reconciliation, reinforcing the idea that "security is viewed as both a prerequisite for and a consequence of successful economic engagement".

By adopting these measures—focusing on localized development, cooperative capacity building, and economic peacebuilding—China can move beyond its current strengths to become a comprehensive partner that addresses Mali's systemic challenges from the ground up. This nuanced, multi-faceted approach would truly demarcate China from other external powers, offering a sustainable and inclusive model for engagement in fragile states that respects national sovereignty while fostering long-term stability and shared prosperity.

## **VII. Conclusion and policy recommendations**

This paper has demonstrated the complex and mutually reinforcing nature of the security-development nexus in the context of Mali's evolving trajectory. Our analysis revealed that while Mali has made notable developmental progress in areas like GDP and infrastructure access, these gains remain fragile and are consistently undermined by persistent security and political instability. The research confirms that a solely militarized approach to security, without addressing the underlying developmental deficits, is insufficient for achieving lasting stability. Instead, sustainable security is a product of comprehensive efforts that foster economic growth, social progress, and robust governance.

China's cooperation with Mali serves as a compelling case study, highlighting a development-first approach that prioritizes economic and social progress as a foundation for security. By focusing on infrastructure projects and



economic partnerships, China's engagement has contributed to Mali's agency and its ability to pursue self-determined development goals. This cooperative model, centered on mutual benefit and respect for Mali's sovereignty, stands in contrast to more traditional, security-centric interventions. It underscores the view that development can and should be a primary tool for peacebuilding.

Based on these findings, we propose several policy recommendations for both Mali and its international partners. First, development initiatives should be holistically integrated with security strategies, prioritizing investments in human capital, education, and rural infrastructure. Second, international partners should continue to support Mali's agency by fostering cooperation that aligns with its national priorities and development plans. Finally, a greater focus on economic diversification, particularly beyond traditional sectors, will enhance resilience and create a more stable foundation for long-term security.

While this research provides a robust analysis of China's role, it is limited by its focus on a single case study. Future research could expand upon these findings by conducting comparative analyses of China's cooperation with other nations in the Sahel. Furthermore, a deeper qualitative investigation into the on-the-ground impact of specific development projects would provide a more nuanced understanding of their contributions to local and national security. Such studies would further illuminate the pathways through which development can lead to enduring peace.

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