

China's Arms Exports and Security Engagement in the Sahel: Trends and Political Consequences, 2010–2024¹

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Abstract:

This study analyses China's military exports and security involvement in the Sahel region, with a main focus on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso between 2010 and 2024. Relying on the SIPRI and ACLED databases, the article discusses correlations between Chinese arms transfers and incidents of political violence and instability and also applies country and year fixed effects panel models. In descriptive terms, Chinese arms exports strengthen military capabilities and move together with the rise in conflict events and fatalities; however, once Russian and French deliveries, the 2017 activation of the G5 Sahel force, and the country-specific Wagner deployments are controlled for, none of the In TIV coefficients are statistically significant. In other words, larger volumes of arms transfers do not, by themselves, drive conflict intensity. Furthermore, the research highlights the multidimensional geopolitical competition involving other international actors such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and India, and presents the diverse local political and civil society reactions that complicate decision-making. The study concludes with concrete policy recommendations aimed at improving transparency, governmental oversight, and international coordination in order to reduce the unintended negative consequences of foreign military assistance in the region.

Keywords:

China; Sahel; arms exports; political violence; security engagement; geopolitical competition; policy implications; governance.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, China has significantly expanded its military presence and security activities in Africa, particularly in the Sahel region. This region, covering Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, continues to face persistent instability marked by frequent coups, terrorist attacks, and other conflicts. During the worsening security, China's growing arms exports and strategic cooperation with countries in the region deserve special attention, as these relationships may shape, but do not in themselves determine, internal political dynamics and security conditions.

As part of China's "Going Out Strategy" and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is taking an increasingly active security role in the Sahel, developing military partnerships with states that can supply critical raw materials and hold significant strategic and geopolitical positions. While Western powers have mainly focused on humanitarian aid and counter terrorism operations, China, taking a pragmatic approach, offers a wide range of military equipment, including small arms, armoured vehicles, and even unmanned aerial drones. Consequently, Beijing has become an important though not exclusive security partner in the region.

However, China's military and strategic initiatives do not operate independently. The United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and India, among other emerging powers, are also increasingly active in the Sahel, making the region a geopolitical battleground. These powers compete through military cooperation, economic investments, and diplomatic engagement, further complicating the regional security dynamics (Sam, 2025; Rudolph, 2024).

Recent academic and policy analyses reveal a nuanced relationship between external military support and local governance structures, civil–military relations, and political stability. While regional governments have widely accepted China's unconditional approach to military and economic cooperation, civil society organizations and opposition parties have expressed growing concerns about national sovereignty, dependency risks, and governance transparency. Furthermore, earlier studies using bivariate analyses found positive correlations between Chinese arms exports and conflict indicators. The fixed-effects results below, however, do not confirm this association once Russian/French transfers and region-wide shocks are controlled for.

Additionally, qualitative case studies indicate that Chinese security cooperation frequently overlaps with civilian infrastructure and economic projects, increasing local debates about dependency and political leverage. The emerging consensus suggests that Sahelian governments face a complex balancing act, navigating diverse international partnerships to enhance security capacities while maintaining political independence and internal legitimacy.

This paper aims to examine the trends of Chinese arms exports and their security implications in Sahel countries between 2010 and 2024 using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Using the SIPRI arms export database and the ACLED conflict database, my analysis seeks to uncover the correlation between Chinese arms transfers and incidents of political violence in the region. Based on these findings, I draw

conclusions about the future implications of China's strategic presence and explore longer-term effects on regional political stability. The study finally provides concrete policy recommendations to strengthen governance oversight, enhance transparency in arms transfers, and promote coordinated international efforts to foster sustainable peace and security in the Sahel region.

The paper is structured as follows: the subsequent literature review synthesizes existing scholarly insights into China's strategic engagement in Africa, highlighting the diverse scholarly perspectives on military cooperation and its geopolitical ramifications. The methodology section outlines the quantitative and qualitative analytical frameworks, explaining the chosen databases and variables used for assessing arms transfers and conflict dynamics. The analysis section presents detailed statistical correlations, also presents descriptive statistics and fixed-effects regression results, and the qualitative case studies illustrating the implications of China's growing security involvement. This is followed by a comprehensive discussion examining the multifaceted regional impacts, local political reactions, and broader geopolitical implications. Finally, the paper concludes with specific policy implications and recommendations designed to improve international cooperation, governance transparency, and regional stability in the Sahel.

Literature Review

The academic literature provides diverse perspectives on Beijing's evolving security and political strategies in Africa. This makes it an exciting yet challenging topic to explore. Devecioglu and Akçomak offer a comprehensive overview of China's African policy during the Xi Jinping era. (Devecioglu & Akçomak, 2024) Focusing especially on the critical role played by energy and raw material demands that shape China's military and economic strategies. According to the authors, China has made significant investments in oil and mineral resource extraction, strategically connected to its military presence to secure a stable supply of resources.

Jean Pierre Cabestan's analysis further deepens our understanding of China's strategic approach by focusing on the "Going Out Strategy" and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), using Niger as a key case study. (Cabestan, 2019) Cabestan provides concrete examples showing how infrastructure projects, such as airports, yield direct military logistical advantages. His research highlights China's strategic commitment to projects that may not offer immediate economic returns but offer significant long-term geopolitical benefits.

Based on this, Bharti and Kumari deliver further insights into the relationship between Belt and Road Initiative projects and military cooperation. (Bharti & Kumari, 2023) Their study specifically illustrates China's creation of military training centers in African countries where significant economic interests exist, reinforcing how China consistently integrates its economic ambitions with security objectives.

Diallo and Descamps move this analysis toward a more practical dimension, exploring how China strategically employs the "Global South" narrative to strengthen

its position in the region. (Diallo & Descamps, 2024) The authors argue that China's strategic messaging provides not just symbolic benefits but concrete political advantages, particularly through active participation in regional forums, presenting significant strategic challenges to European Union interests in Africa.

Expanding on the global implications, Lammich places China's evolving security engagement in Africa within the broader context of global geopolitical ambitions. (Lammich, 2025) Her analysis highlights China's participation in peacekeeping missions as a clear reflection of its strategic intent, indicating a shift toward an active and assertive global military presence.

At the operational level, the Strategic Comments report demonstrates the measurable impacts of China's military cooperation, highlighting the widespread adoption of Chinese-made armoured vehicles and military hardware across Africa. ("Chinese arms sales in Sub-Saharan Africa," 2024) Particularly significant is the finding that "approximately 70% of African armies currently operate Chinese-made armoured vehicles," showing the full extent of China's military integration into African security structures.

Further empirical insights are provided by Him, Zheng, and Chen, who demonstrate the direct diplomatic impact of China's military exports. (He et al., 2025) Their quantitative analysis confirms that African nations receiving significant Chinese military support are statistically more likely to converge with China's positions during UN General Assembly votes, underscoring the diplomatic leverage afforded by military assistance.

Finally, Rudolph shows critical security aspects by analysing the potential threats posed by the Islamic State to Chinese interests in the Sahel. (Rudolph, 2024) He outlines the major events and threats, such as attacks against Chinese nationals, which underscore significant long-term strategic risks for China in the region.

Arduino emphasizes that China's increasing military support in Africa represents a comprehensive security strategy with significant geopolitical implications. (Arduino, 2024) The European Parliament (2019) also highlights China's growing military engagements in Africa, interconnected economic interests with security cooperation, presenting challenges to Western influence. MERICS-IISS' 2020 publication underscores China's wide-ranging military cooperation, combining economic security with increasing local state capabilities. (Nouwens & Legarda, 2020) Moreover, Krukowska stresses that China's involvement extends beyond military equipment to technological advancements in surveillance and data management, providing China with additional strategic advantages in the region. (Krukowska, 2024)

In addition, Alden and Large offer an essential comparative perspective by analysing China's security and development model alongside those of Russia, Turkey, India, and Western countries. (Alden & Large, 2018) Their research highlights those diverse international strategies, ranging from China's pragmatic economic and infrastructure-driven approach to Russia's direct military presence without governance requirements, significantly shape local political dynamics. This complexity underscores the diverse

geopolitical competition in the Sahel region, providing critical insights into how different external influences interact within unstable governance contexts.

Collectively, these scholarly contributions provide a nuanced and detailed understanding of China's multifaceted involvement in the Sahel region. The diverse analyses from various perspectives furnish a rich foundation for the current study, allowing a deeper interpretation of China's military, political, and economic motivations and their broader regional implications.

Methodology

In this study, I used a mixed methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques. The quantitative analysis relied mainly on two key databases: the arms export database provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the conflict events database by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

From the SIPRI database, annual data were collected on Chinese arms exports to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso between 2010 and 2024. Meanwhile, the ACLED database provided annual event counts of political violence and armed conflicts, as well as the associated number of fatalities within these countries during the same period.

Time series and correlation analyses were performed to identify potential relationships between arms exports and political instability. The qualitative analysis relied on insights from the reviewed academic literature, providing a deeper interpretation of the strategic and political dynamics underlying the quantitative data.

The qualitative analysis also incorporated insights from Benabdallah, who provided critical evaluations of China's developmental security strategies in Mali, and Rajosefa, who emphasized future strategic competition implications in the Sahel region. (Benabdallah, 2017; Rajosefa, 2021) These additional qualitative dimensions improved the robustness of the interpretive framework.

The variables used in this research were defined as follows:

- **Total weapons:** Annual aggregated data representing the number of military equipment items, weapons, and armoured vehicles exported by China to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, based on orders placed each year.
- **Total events:** Annual count of all recorded incidents of political violence and armed conflict events.
- **Total fatalities:** Total number of deaths documented annually across all political violence incidents, covering combatants and civilian victims.
- **Event type:** ACLED classifies events into the following main categories:
 - **Battles:** Armed clashes involving two or more organized armed groups.
 - **Explosions/Remote violence:** Attacks involving explosions, missiles, and remotely operated weapons.
 - **Violence against civilians:** Violent incidents explicitly targeting civilian populations.
 - **Protests:** Demonstrations ranging from peaceful to violent actions.

- **Riots:** Aggressive, violent disturbances involving large groups.
- **Strategic developments:** Significant strategic shifts, including changes in territorial control or movements of military forces.
- **Conflict event:** A detailed narrative describing exactly what occurred at the incident location, including the actors involved, weaponry used, precise location, date, and the damages or casualties incurred.

In the second part of the analysis, I added two additional countries to the sample, which are Russia and France. The required data were likewise taken from the SIPRI database, but this time I drew on the SIPRI Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) table. Because the TIV distribution is highly right-skewed, I worked throughout with the $\ln(TIV + 1)$ transformation. Four main explanatory variables appear in the regressions: $\ln_{-}TIV_{-}China$, $\ln_{-}TIV_{-}Russia$, $\ln_{-}TIV_{-}France$, and their one-year lags (lag 1).

From the ACLED database, I collected annual totals for conflict events (total_events) and fatalities (total_fatalities), retaining all six event categories. The model specifications apply country and year fixed effects OLS to fatalities, and country fixed effects Poisson and negative binomial models to event counts, with HC1 robust standard errors. Each regression includes two dummies: the Wagner dummy (Mali \geq 2021, Burkina Faso \geq 2023, Niger \geq 2024) and the G5 Sahel dummy (\geq 2017). Country year cells with missing values were filled with zeros, yielding 45 panel observations (42 in the lag model).

Additional variables:

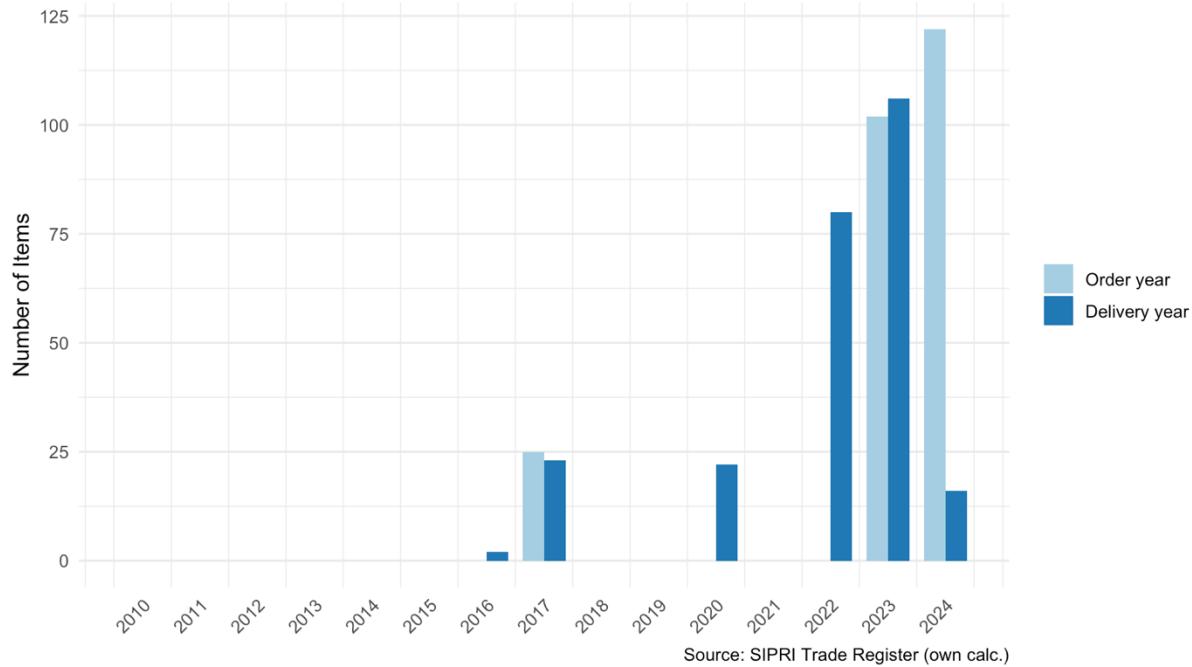
- **TIV value:** The index calculated by SIPRI, expressed in constant 1990 USD, measures the combat value of a major conventional weapon.
- **$\ln_{-}TIV_{-}China$:** The total TIV of weapons delivered from China to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in a given year, transformed by the natural logarithm (+1 offset).
- **$\ln_{-}TIV_{-}Russia$:** The total TIV of weapons delivered from Russia to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in a given year, transformed by the natural logarithm (+1 offset).
- **$\ln_{-}TIV_{-}France$:** The total TIV of weapons delivered from France to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in a given year, transformed by the natural logarithm (+1 offset).
- **Wagner dummy** = 1 from the first year of documented Wagner/Africa Corps presence (Mali \geq 2021, Burkina Faso \geq 2023, Niger \geq 2024); 0 otherwise.
- **G5 Sahel dummy** = 1 from 2017 onward in all three countries, marking the activation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

Analysis

In the analysis, I first examined the SIPRI data on an annual basis. The first figure illustrates trends in Chinese arms exports, highlighting a significant increase in shipments

after 2017, particularly concerning armoured vehicles and small arms. The exports reached their peak in 2022 and 2023, with a combined total of more than 180 military items delivered during these two years.

Figure 1: Chinese Major-Arms Orders vs. Deliveries to the Sahel (2010–2024)

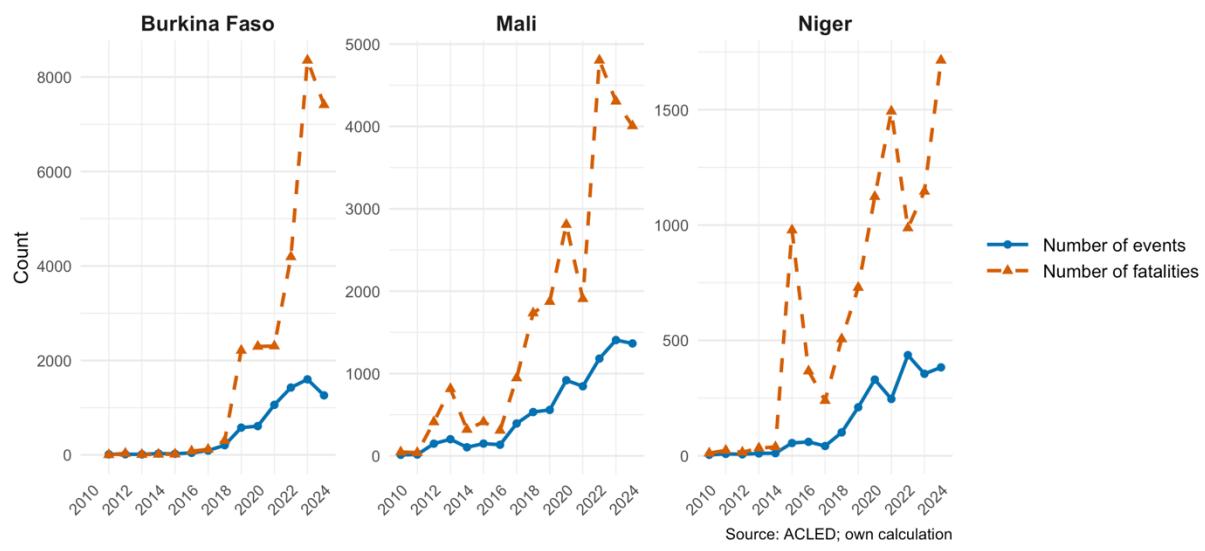


Light blue bars show the year the contracts were placed; dark blue bars show when the items were delivered. Source: SIPRI Trade Register (own calculations)

In descriptive terms, the Chinese exports rise in parallel with worsening security, but the fixed effects models below do not confirm a causal link.

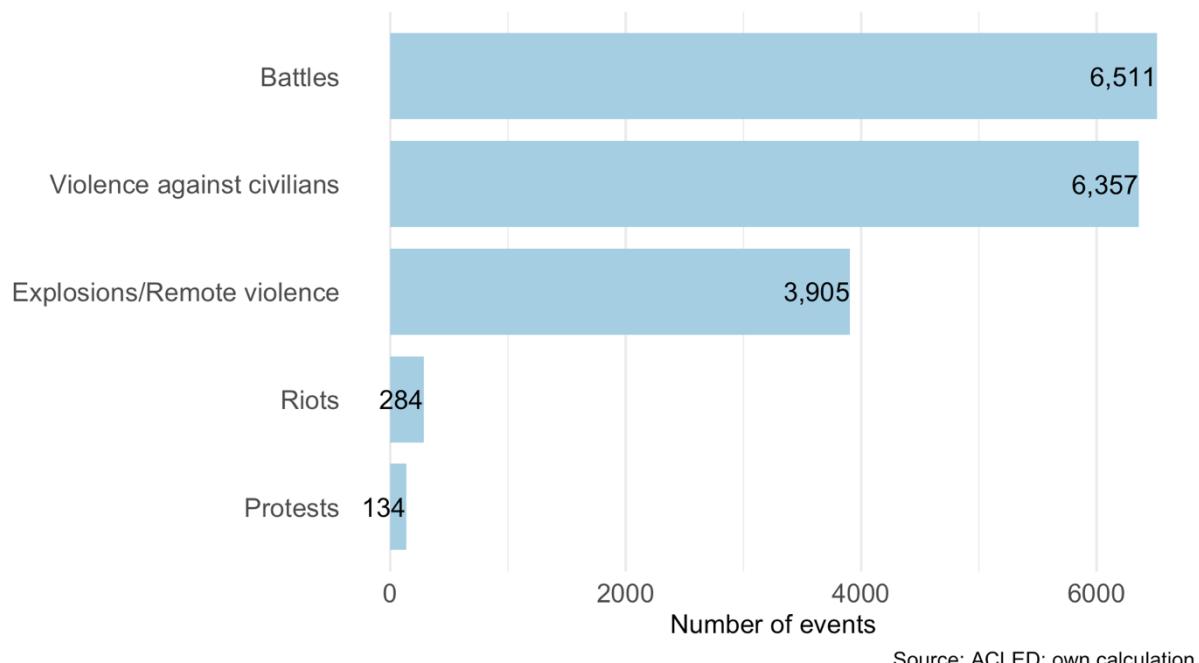
The second figure visualizes the ACLED conflict data. The time series clearly reveals a dramatic rise in both the number of conflict events and fatalities in the Sahel region, especially after 2017, falling exactly at the same point as the surge in arms exports shown in the first figure. While only a few hundred violent incidents were recorded in 2010, by 2022 and 2023, the annual number of conflict events had escalated into the thousands. The increase in fatalities is even more alarming, rising above ten thousand annually by 2023. This rapid escalation underscores a significant deterioration in regional security and presents increasing challenges for local state institutions seeking to maintain stability.

Figure 2: Annual conflict events and fatalities in the Sahel (ACLED, 2010–2024)



Analyzing event types provides further important insights: the overwhelming majority of all recorded incidents consist of armed clashes ("Battles") and acts of violence against civilians (Figure 3). Together, these two categories account for more than 12,800 events, making up the vast majority of the total number of recorded incidents. The dominance of these conflict types highlights the complex security challenges facing the region, where conflicts extend beyond conventional interstate warfare to include complex internal conflicts, terrorism, and asymmetric warfare dynamics.

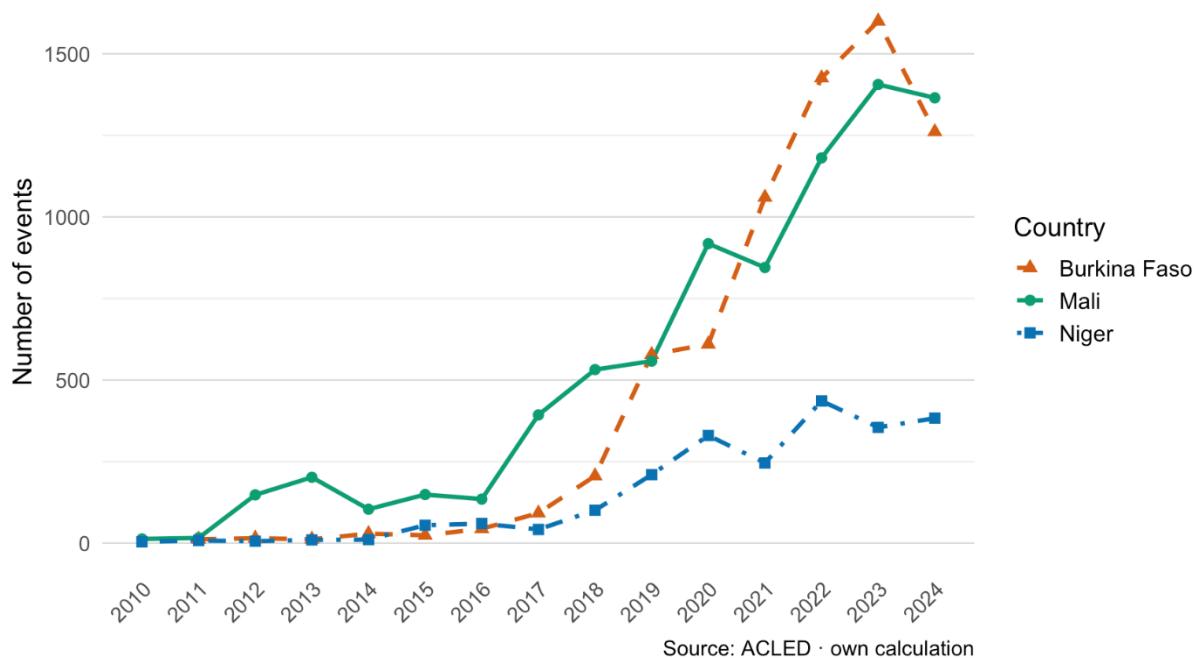
Figure 3: Distribution of event types (2010–2024)



Horizontal bars indicate the cumulative number of ACLED events in each category. Own calculation

Breaking down the conflict dynamics by country shows clear trajectories. Mali and Burkina Faso experienced exponential increases in the number of conflict events starting from 2017, whereas Niger saw a more moderate rise. This divergence raises critical strategic questions: in Burkina Faso and Mali, the escalation in conflicts coincided with a rise in Chinese military support. This raises an important issue regarding whether the surge in arms imports provided these countries with improved capacity to manage conflicts more intensively, or, in contrast, contributed directly to escalating violence. Table 1 examines this question and shows that exporter effects prove nonsignificant once shocks are controlled.

Figure 4: Conflict events by country (2010–2024)



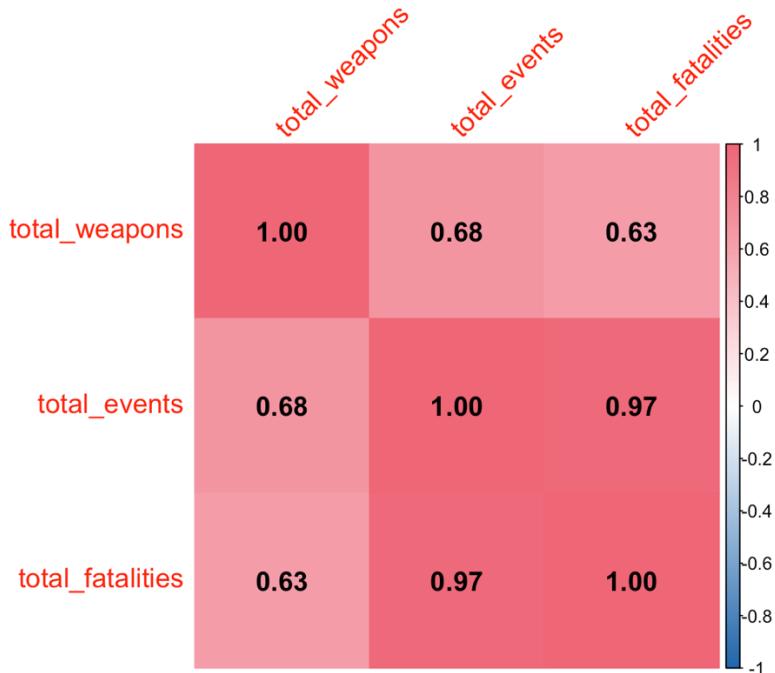
Dashed vertical lines mark the first documented Wagner presence: 2021 (Mali), 2023 (Burkina Faso), 2024 (Niger).

Finally, a quantitative correlation analysis resulted in the following key findings:

- A strong positive correlation (0.72) exists between Chinese arms exports and the number of conflict events, indicating that increased arms exports occur at the same time as the escalation of conflict incidents.
- An extremely high positive correlation (0.98) was observed between conflict events and fatalities, logically suggesting that a higher number of incidents is directly associated with a greater number of casualties.
- A moderately strong positive correlation (0.65) was identified between arms exports and the number of fatalities, suggesting that the presence of Chinese weapons may indirectly correlate with the intensity of violence and the resulting death toll.

Although these relationships disappear once exporter and year fixed effects are introduced (see Table 1).

Figure 5: Correlation matrix: SIPRI (weapons) vs. ACLED (events, fatalities)



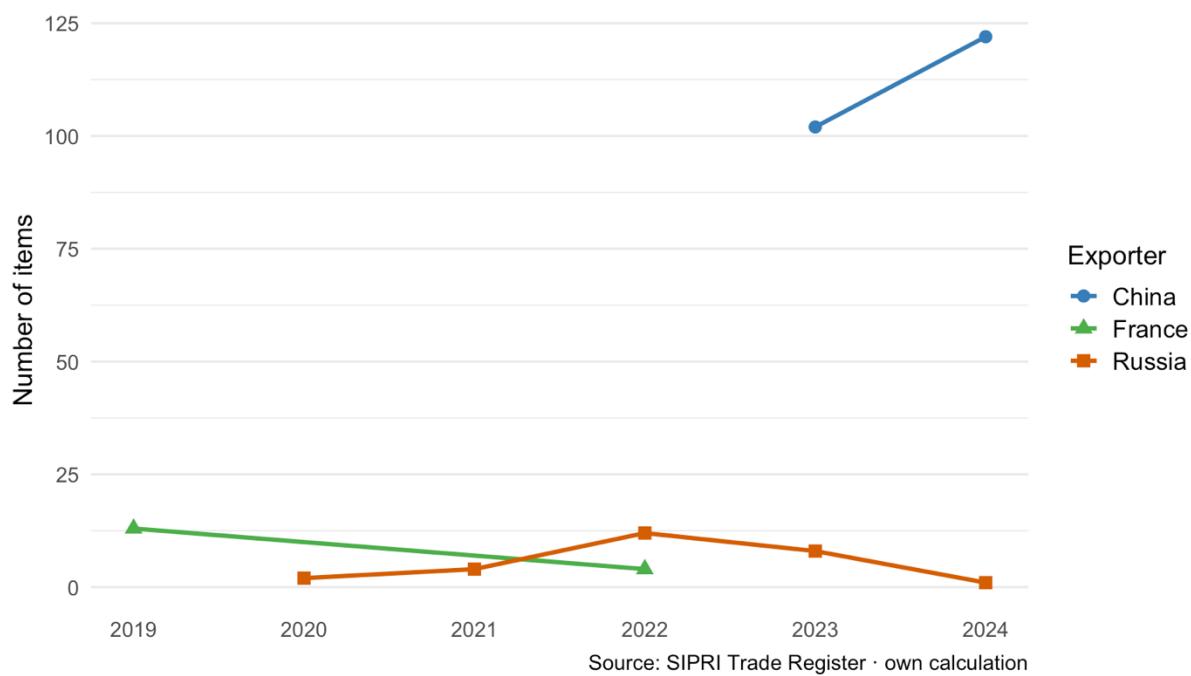
Cell colors reflect Spearman ρ ; coefficients are shown inside the cells.

A qualitative analysis of conflict events adds further depth to our understanding. According to the ACLED data, the majority of conflicts include not only military engagements but also significant violence targeting civilians. This shows a critical issue: increased military presence and growing availability of arms do not automatically lead to greater stability. Instead, under certain conditions, they may increase instability, especially when weapons fall into the hands of non-state actors or are misused by poorly controlled state forces.

Furthermore, integrating qualitative evidence from Devermont and Blank, the analysis acknowledges China's peacekeeping operations and security engagements as missions serving dual purposes, combining humanitarian objectives with strategic influence. (Devermont, 2020; Blank, 2009) Kamerling provided additional context, highlighting China's increasing military footprint as part of broader geopolitical strategies. (Kamerling, 2016)

In addition to China, I included Russia's and France's export data in the analysis to obtain a truly comparative examination. Comparing all three exporters allows for assessing qualitatively different arms export models within the same quantitative framework. In the overall comparison, China's post-2022 export boom is clearly much higher than French and Russian levels (Figure 6).

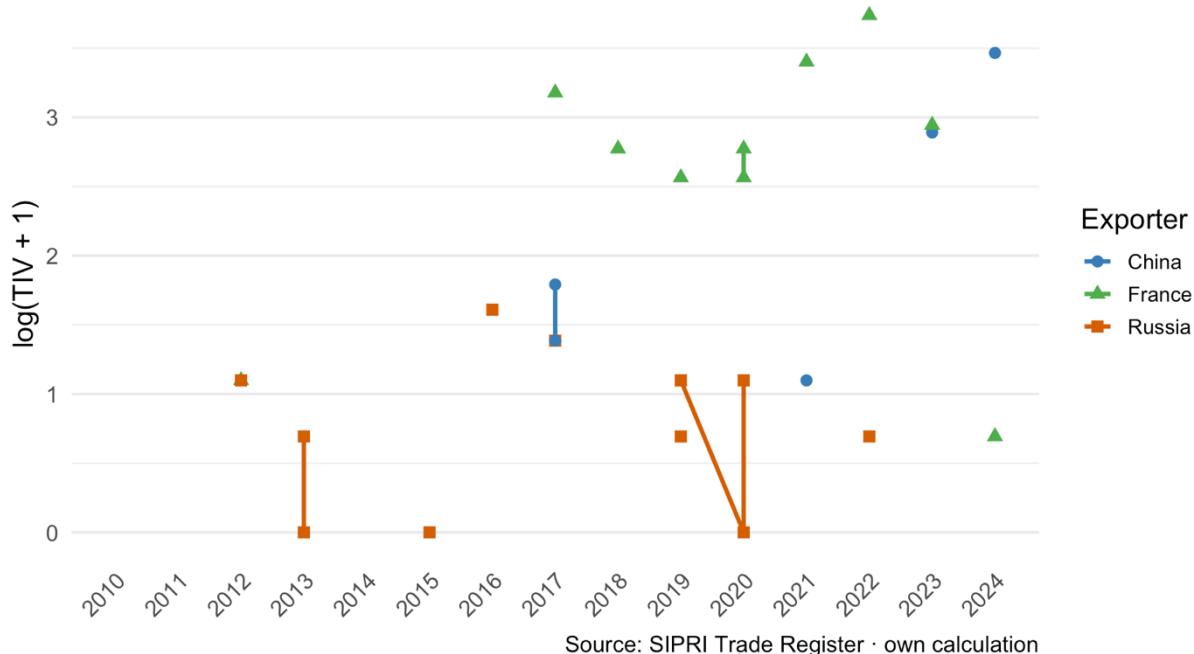
Figure 6. Major items delivered to the Sahel (2010 – 2024)



Blue markers represent Chinese deliveries, green markers show French deliveries, and orange markers indicate Russian deliveries. Source: SIPRI Trade Register (own calculations)

Next, I introduced the SIPRI TIV indicator, which measures the combat value of major weapon systems in constant 1990 USD. To prevent extreme values from skewing the series, I applied a log (TIV + 1) transformation. The results show that France's highest TIV peak occurred in 2016/18, when successive deliveries of Puma helicopters, Bastion APCs, and SA 342 Gazelles coincided with Operation Barkhane and the build-up of the G5 Sahel force. China, by contrast, increased dramatically in terms of item counts in 2022, but mostly with inexpensive armoured vehicles; the truly high-value package, like Wing Loong UAVs and modern IFVs, appears only in 2024, pushing the log TIV above the earlier French peak (Figure 7).

Figure 7: log-TIV value of deliveries (2010–2024)



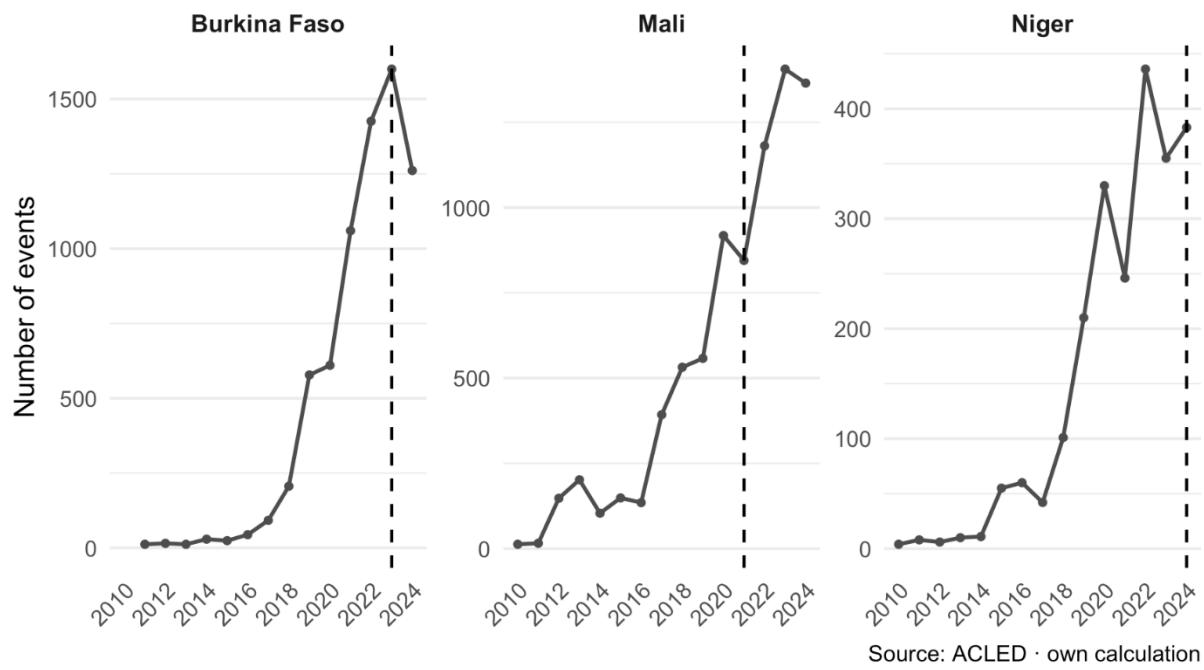
The log scale demonstrates the 2016–18 French peak and the later 2024 Chinese spike.

I then ran a fixed-effects panel model (within estimator) that controls for all time-invariant country traits and common year shocks on 45 observations (42 in the lag specification). The Chinese, Russian and French β coefficients proved non-significant for fatalities. A fixed effects Poisson Generalized Linear Model on event counts yielded the same null result, and a negative binomial robustness test ($\phi \approx 6.6$) did not alter the conclusion. (Table 1)

Although the present sample reveals no medium or large-sized relationship between arms transfers and conflict intensity, this does not rule out the possibility of a smaller effect that the current data cannot detect. Future research should draw on longer time series and a broader set of countries to capture subtle effects.

As Figure 8 illustrates, the rapid rise in violence had already begun before the arrival of Wagner contingents, following a region-wide trajectory.

Figure 8. Conflict events before and after Wagner arrival



The graph shows the annual number of conflict events in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between 2010 and 2024. Source: ACLED (own calculation)

To summarize, the extended analysis shows that between 2010 and 2024, the intensity of conflict in the Sahel cannot be explained by changes in Chinese (nor Russian or French) arms export TIV once country and year fixed effects are controlled for. Descriptive figures point to China's dramatic surge, yet the panel regressions consistently show a null effect. The escalation of violence is instead connected to region-level shocks, the 2017 launch of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the post-2021 terror surge, and the spread of Wagner effects that the year dummies already captured.

Discussion

This study provides a deeper understanding of China's expanding military footprint in the Sahel by exploring arms export trends (2010–2024) and similar shifts in the region's security environment. The evidence points to a *complex* relationship: external military support can bring strategic advantages but may also coincide with increasing instability. A key descriptive finding is the sharp increase in Chinese arms deliveries to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso after 2022, a surge that aligns with Beijing's broader, long-term geopolitical ambitions in Africa. Cabestan likewise observes that China is prepared to make sizeable, even unprofitable in the near term, security investments to consolidate its strategic position. (Cabestan, 2019) Yet fixed effects panel tests show that, once other exporters and region-wide shocks are held constant, higher Chinese volumes do not by themselves explain the escalation of violence.

The results indicate a substantial decline in the security situation in recent years, evidenced by increased numbers of conflicts and fatalities. While causal inference

requires caution, the strong positive correlation (0.72) between Chinese arms exports and conflict events requires further investigation. However, once Russian and French transfers, the G5 Sahel activation and country-specific Wagner deployments are controlled for in fixed effects panel models, this correlation is no longer statistically significant. Research by He, Zheng, and Chen similarly notes that military exports hold diplomatic and political influence, though this influence can be ambivalent, potentially increasing instability. (He et al., 2025)

Analysis of event types clearly indicates a dominance of armed clashes and violent actions against civilians. These conflicts point to the complex security challenges in the region, moving beyond traditional interstate tensions to asymmetric conflicts and terrorist attacks. Rudolph also emphasizes the significant threats posed by non-state actors and extremist groups to regional stability and indirectly to China's strategic interests. (Rudolph, 2024)

Country-specific breakdowns indicate a significant increase in conflict events in Mali and Burkina Faso, corresponding with rising Chinese arms imports, whereas Niger experienced a more moderate increase. This highlights that military support does not necessarily stabilize but may escalate violence, especially where state control is weak. Research by Bharti and Kumari further demonstrates the close integration of China's economic and military cooperation, strongly affecting regional dynamics and requiring careful management. (Bharti & Kumari, 2023)

Qualitative analysis of conflict events also highlights challenges. According to ACLED data, weapon shipments intended to support government forces may increase instability, especially if they fall into poorly controlled or non-state actors' hands. Diallo and Descamps also point out that while China uses narratives of partnership and mutual benefits, actual outcomes often diverge from the intended effects on stability. (Diallo & Descamps, 2024)

Thus, the findings show that while Chinese arms exports officially aim to strengthen regional stability, reality is significantly more complex. There is a genuine risk that external military support could unintentionally worsen conflict dynamics and instability, especially in contexts of weak governance and contested legitimacy. Consequently, further research and political strategy formulation are essential, as suggested by Lammich, emphasizing that China's African engagement should be examined using an integrated approach. (Lammich, 2025)

Overall, China's military and strategic presence in the Sahel clearly reflects its growing geopolitical ambitions, yet its impact is far from consistently positive. Regional and global decision makers must handle this dynamic with care, ensuring that external military support contributes to stability rather than becoming a driver of further conflict.

Mtakwa notes that China's military cooperation strategies are not simply transactional but form part of broader regional influence-building strategies, potentially reshaping traditional alliances and affecting regional power balances. (Mtakwa, 2023) Singh also points out how China's security initiatives compete directly with other international actors, complicating international coordination efforts. (Singh, 2023)

China's increasing security presence in the Sahel region can be better understood within the broader context of intensifying geopolitical competition. According to Alden and Large, China's approach to security and military cooperation in Africa differs significantly from traditional Western models. (Alden & Large, 2018) Western interventions, especially from the United States and the European Union, typically emphasize conditions related to democratic governance, respect for human rights, and institutional reforms. By contrast, China generally helps with fewer political conditions, focusing instead on infrastructure development and strategic economic investments meant to support geopolitical influence and resource access. Russia's involvement, notably through Wagner Group operations, presents yet another contrasting model characterized by direct military presence and limited developmental objectives, often deepening instability by strengthening authoritarian tendencies. Emerging regional actors like Turkey and India further diversify this geopolitical landscape, mixing diplomatic influence, economic aid, and targeted military action. This complexity requires Sahelian states to navigate carefully, balancing external engagements to protect their national sovereignty and manage internal political stability (Alden & Large, 2018).

Local governments have, in response, adjusted foreign policies to balance Chinese military support with Western aid, indicating a more pragmatic turn but also promoting debates on sovereignty and dependency (Rajosefa, 2021).

Moreover, research indicates that China's military cooperation forms part of a broader geopolitical competition in the Sahel. Sam uses policy analysis to argue that US, Chinese, Russian, Turkish, Iranian, and Indian engagements are part of a multi-actor competition, shaping regional political allegiances and complicating aid dynamics. (Sam, 2025)

Finally, Benabdallah's case study on Mali shows that Chinese involvement in security infrastructure often overlaps with civilian development projects, generating complementarities but also raising concerns about dual-use projects and political leverage. (Benabdallah, 2017)

The expanding Chinese military engagement in the Sahel region has provoked diverse and complex responses among local political actors and civil societies. While regional governments have largely welcomed Beijing's pragmatic approach to security and development assistance, opposition groups and civil organizations have voiced substantial concerns. Local political debates increasingly focus on issues of national sovereignty, dependency, and potential debt risks connected to China's financial and infrastructural investments. Moreover, there is growing anxiety over transparency and accountability in government dealings with China, raising critical questions about governance standards and the public. Civil society groups emphasize the importance of monitoring military assistance to prevent misuse by state forces and inadvertent empowerment of authoritarian tendencies.

According to Elischer, civil-military relations in the Sahel have increasingly shown praetorian tendencies, characterized by the heightened political influence of military elites. (Elischer, 2019) These dynamics have increased concerns among local civil

societies regarding external military partnerships, such as those with China, potentially intensifying authoritarian governance practices and reducing civilian oversight.

Politically, opposition parties across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have frequently highlighted the risks of overly relying on Chinese support, calling for more balanced and diversified international partnerships. The concern that strong dependence on a single external power might compromise national interests and autonomy is frequently echoed in local media and political discourse. These dynamics underscore the difficult balance governments must strike in leveraging external support without alienating domestic constituencies concerned with national independence and political accountability.

Policy Implications

Drawing on the analysis presented, several concrete policy recommendations emerge for both international and local policymakers. First of all, strengthening arms regulation and monitoring is crucial for regional stability in the Sahel. In the African context, implementing effective marking, tracing, and destruction programs can significantly reduce the spread of illicit arms and reduce the risk of weapons falling into the hands of non-state actors (Adeniyi, 2017).

Additionally, promoting multilateral security frameworks is essential. Sahelian countries should actively engage in coordination within established international forums such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the African Union (AU), and ECOWAS. As Lammich highlights, institutionalized cooperation mechanisms, particularly AU-China channels, provide effective platforms for coordinating international efforts aimed at regional stabilization. (Lammich, 2025)

It is also important to integrate a comprehensive security development nexus into international engagements. Following China's own security development model applied in Africa, aligning military assistance with civilian development projects can address the over-militarization of development programs and enhance their overall effectiveness (Bertha & Napoleon, 2020).

Strengthening governance at the local and regional levels should likewise be a priority. International stakeholders need to support efforts to build capacity for improving governmental transparency and control mechanisms. Improved governance capacities are especially essential in the Sahel states facing fragility, where weak governmental structures directly contribute to security risks such as insurgency and coups (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020).

Empowering civil society organizations, media, and local communities to actively oversee arms flows and monitor conflict events can make an important contribution to regional security. Developing and supporting programs to build transparent oversight mechanisms and effective early warning systems could significantly enhance regional stability.

Moreover, forming strategic partnerships for joint peacekeeping initiatives between Sahel states and international partners is highly recommended. According to Lammich, China's willingness to participate in African Union-led peacekeeping missions presents

opportunities for joint or observer status operations involving both Western and Chinese forces. (Lammich, 2025)

Finally, regular strategic dialogue is important. Developing consistent forums involving Sahelian countries, China, the United States, and other international stakeholders could support joint threat assessments, avoid policy conflicts, and manage the complications resulting from great power competition. Such regular dialogues could constructively address geopolitical rivalry and maintain regional stability, as noted by Sam and Singh. (Sam, 2025; Singh, 2023)

Conclusion

The analyses presented in this study clearly illustrate that China's military and defence industrial cooperation with the Sahel region has substantial yet mixed consequences. On one hand, such cooperation strengthens the military capacities of regional states; but on the other, it may indirectly contribute to increased conflict intensity, especially under conditions of weak state control and governmental uncertainty. The findings show that raw trends move together, yet exporter volumes are not a significant driver once country and year shocks are controlled. The main risks come from regional shocks and weak governance. Note that the analysis covers three countries over fifteen years, which means it is best suited to detect medium to large effects. Limited measurement uncertainties in the SIPRI and ACLED data are tempered by country and year fixed effects, but very small effects cannot be entirely ruled out.

The presence of China in the Sahel region also significantly reshapes local political dynamics. Sahelian governments, confronting persistent internal security threats and instability, increasingly look to Beijing for comprehensive support, including military, diplomatic, and economic aid. This shift has led to important changes in regional foreign policies and political alignments, reflecting a pragmatic strategy of balancing between traditional Western alliances and deepening cooperation with China. Such a transition, however, raises critical questions about national sovereignty, dependency risks, and the long-term sustainability of these strategic partnerships.

Considering the contributions of multiple international actors identified by Sam, Besenyő, and Rudolph, future research needs to adopt a more wide-ranging approach that not only examines China's activities but also situates them within the broader competitive geopolitical context. (Sam, 2025; Besenyő, 2019; Rudolph, 2024) This research should extend to the geopolitical influence of other key international actors such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and India, whose involvement adds additional layers of complexity and competition to regional security dynamics.

Future studies should also explore more deeply the potential for coordinated international responses to reduce unintended negative impacts on regional stability (Rajosefa, 2021). Multilateral cooperation, involving both Western nations and China within institutional frameworks such as the African Union and ECOWAS, could play a key role in fitting with divergent security policies and ensuring effective coordination of international efforts. Closer dialogue, joint security operations, and shared development

strategies between these powers could significantly reduce competition-driven tensions and strengthen regional stability.

Future research should pursue more in-depth investigations, particularly focusing on the internal dynamics of individual countries and a deeper understanding of China's long-term strategic intentions. Given the weak governance structures and political volatility of the Sahel states, future analyses would benefit significantly from detailed case studies examining local government capacities, institutional resilience, and the effectiveness of existing oversight mechanisms. Such detailed studies would also help policymakers craft context-specific solutions tailored to each country's unique governance challenges.

Lastly, policymakers need to develop integrated strategies that carefully balance security and developmental objectives, using transparent governance practices, stronger civil society engagement, and more robust arms control mechanisms. Responsible and proactive management of China's military cooperation and, indeed, all international military involvements, remains essential. This approach would help realise the benefits of international partnerships while minimizing potential risks, ultimately promoting sustainable peace and long-term stability in the Sahel region.

Even though the analysis did not reveal a clear causal connection between Chinese arms transfers and the increase in conflicts, the study provides a valuable basis for future research seeking to better understand the long-term political and security implications of arms transfers.

Notes on Contributor

Hanna Tietze completed her undergraduate studies in Applied Economics at Corvinus University of Budapest, where she gained a strong foundation in quantitative economic analysis and data-based research. She continued her studies in the International Economy and Business master's program offered by the MNB Institute, which shaped her interest in how political decisions, geopolitical changes, and economic processes are connected. She also studied development economics at Fudan University. In her research and through her participation in the National Scientific Students' Conference (OTDK), she studied the stock market effects of political transitions and government policies in the United States, Hungary's economic and strategic exposure to China, and the dynamics and crisis sensitivity of ownership structures in the Hungarian stock market. In her work, she uses quantitative economic methods to examine the economic effects of political and institutional change. Her current research focuses on China's security and defense-industry expansion, especially in the Sahel region, and its political and economic consequences for fragile states and the international system.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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Appendix

Term	OLS fatalities	Poisson events	Lag 1 OLS fatalities	Lag 1 Poisson events
In TIV China	505.8 (500.2)	0.035 (0.040)		
In TIV Russia	48.1 (431.2)	0.195 (0.191)		
In TIV France	-463.7 (247.3)	-0.148 (0.078)		
Wagner dummy	2 881.0 (1 693.1)	0.018 (0.188)	2 319.0 (1 408.1)	-0.212 (0.214)
lag In TIV China			269.7 (743.3)	0.005 (0.064)
lag In TIV Russia			-325.4 (502.6)	0.058 (0.178)
lag In TIV France			-133.0 (270.7)	-0.075 (0.079)
Fixed effects: country	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed effects: year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	44	44	41	41
R ² / Pseudo R ²	0.820	0.951	0.779	0.942
BIC	793.8	1 208.7	749.5	1 300.8

Table 1: Regression results for arms transfers and conflict intensity in the Sahel (2010 – 2024)