

The “Francophonie Économique”: A Discursive and Strategic Analysis of France’s Neo-Mercantilist Turn in Africa

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Abstract— The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) has traditionally been presented as a vehicle for cultural cooperation and linguistic promotion. This paper argues that under the presidencies of François Hollande and, more decisively, Emmanuel Macron, the institution and the broader concept of Francophonie have been strategically reconfigured into a tool of neo-mercantilist policy in Africa. Faced with intensified global competition from China, Russia, and Turkey, and a rising wave of anti-French sentiment in its traditional spheres of influence, France has undertaken a deliberate discursive and strategic shift. This paper employs critical discourse analysis to trace the evolution of French official rhetoric, identifying a systematic move away from the lexicon of “coopération” and “rayonnement” (cultural influence) towards a new vocabulary of “partenariats économiques,” “écosystèmes d’affaires,” and “Francophonie économique.” Concurrently, it analyzes policy documents and financial flows to demonstrate how this discourse is operationalized through development aid, investment treaties, and diplomatic initiatives. The findings reveal that the Francophonie économique is not merely a supplementary economic dimension but a fundamental reorientation of French foreign policy. It represents an attempt to leverage linguistic and historical ties to secure market access, promote French corporate interests, and maintain geopolitical relevance in a multipolar world, thereby masking a realist pursuit of power within a neoliberal and cooperative discursive framework.

Keywords: Francophonie; neo-mercantilism; French foreign policy; Africa; critical discourse analysis.

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INTRODUCTION: THE REINVENTION OF AN EMPIRE?

The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), encompassing eighty-eight states and governments, has long stood as a monument to France's global cultural ambition. Historically, its *raison d'être* was the preservation and promotion of the French language and the values of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" (Hague, 2018). For decades, this cultural mission provided the legitimizing narrative for France's special relationship with its former African colonies, a relationship often critiqued as *Françafrique*—a shadowy network of political, military, and economic patronage (Verschave, 1998). However, the early 21st century has ushered in a period of profound geopolitical upheaval that is challenging the foundations of French influence on the African continent. The assertive economic and political forays of China, the growing presence of Russia through security proxies like the Wagner Group, and the increasing involvement of Turkey and the Gulf States have dramatically crowded a space France once considered its "*pré carré*" (backyard) (Adebajo, 2022).

Simultaneously, a powerful wave of anti-French sentiment has swept across Sahelian nations, culminating in the expulsion of French ambassadors and military forces from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Whitehouse, 2023). This popular backlash, often articulated by military juntas seeking nationalist legitimacy, is directly aimed at the perceived neocolonial continuities of the *Françafrique* system. It is within this context of eroding influence and intensified multipolar competition that a significant transformation in French foreign policy discourse and practice is observable. Under President Emmanuel Macron, who declared the *Françafrique* era "dead and buried," a new project has been articulated with increasing vigour: the "*Francophonie économique*" (Macron, 2017).

This paper contends that the *Francophonie économique* represents a deliberate and strategic neo-mercantilist turn in France's approach to Africa. It is not merely an addendum to the cultural mission of the OIF but a fundamental re-purposing of the Francophone institutional and linguistic network to serve explicit economic and geopolitical ends. The core argument is that the French state, recognizing the diminishing returns of its traditional cultural soft power and the toxicity of its security-focused posture, is now attempting to leverage the shared French language as a competitive advantage for its corporations and a vehicle for maintaining its sphere of influence. This shift is twofold: it is **discursive**, marked by a systematic adoption of a neoliberal and partnership-oriented vocabulary that obfuscates realist intentions; and it is **strategic**, evidenced by the re-alignment of development aid, diplomatic efforts, and investment strategies towards concrete commercial objectives.

To substantiate this thesis, this paper will first situate the argument within the relevant theoretical frameworks of International Relations, particularly neo-mercantilism and the debate between realism and soft power. It will then trace the

historical evolution of *Francophonie* from a cultural to an economic project. The core of the analysis will involve a critical discourse analysis of key French policy statements and OIF documents, deconstructing the new lexicon of economic engagement. Subsequently, the paper will examine the practical implementation of this discourse through case studies in the digital economy and sustainable development sectors, as well as an analysis of the instrumentalization of development finance. The study will conclude by evaluating the effectiveness and contradictions of this neo-mercantilist turn, arguing that while it represents a pragmatic adaptation to new global realities, it risks being undermined by the persistent legacies of *Françafrique* and the very sovereigntist backlash it seeks to circumvent.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEO-MERCANTILISM, SOFT POWER, AND THE REALIST LOGIC OF LANGUAGE

To comprehend the significance of France's pivot towards a *Francophonie économique*, it is essential to ground the analysis in the theoretical traditions of International Relations. The shift cannot be adequately explained by liberal institutionalism, which would emphasize cooperation for mutual gain, nor by a purely culturalist reading of soft power. Instead, a synthesis of neo-mercantilism and a critical realist understanding of power provides the most robust explanatory framework.

From Classic Mercantilism to Neo-Mercantilism in a Globalized World

Mercantilism, the dominant economic theory of the early modern period, posited that state power was directly proportional to its accumulation of precious metals, achieved through a positive balance of trade and state-led protectionist policies (Gilpin, 2001). While the advent of free-market liberalism ostensibly rendered mercantilism obsolete, its core logic—the subordination of economic policy to the goal of state power and security—has persisted in modified forms. **Neo-mercantilism** describes a situation where states operating within a nominally liberal international economic order nevertheless employ strategic policies to enhance the competitive position of their national corporations, secure strategic resources, and run sustained trade surpluses (Gilpin, 2001). The goal is not autarky, but rather the maximization of national advantage within the global system.

France's relationship with Africa has long exhibited neo-mercantilist characteristics. The CFA franc currency arrangement, which pegged the currencies of fourteen African countries to the French Treasury, has been widely criticized as a mechanism ensuring monetary stability for French businesses and guaranteeing a flow of African reserves to Paris (Amin, 2020). Furthermore, French energy giants like TotalEnergies have historically enjoyed privileged access to strategic resources in countries like Niger and Gabon. The *Francophonie économique* can be seen as a modern, more sophisticated

iteration of this long-standing logic. In an era where overt economic coercion is less feasible, the shared language and institutional networks of the OIF provide a unique, low-friction platform to advance French commercial interests against those of competitors like China, whose language and cultural codes remain alien to many African elites (Huang & Wang, 2021).

THE LIMITS OF SOFT POWER AND THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF CULTURE

Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of "soft power"—the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment—has often been invoked to explain the utility of *Francophonie*. From this perspective, the promotion of the French language, education, and culture creates a reservoir of goodwill that makes other countries more amenable to French leadership. However, the sharp rise of anti-French sentiment in West Africa demonstrates the limits and fragility of this form of power when it is perceived as a veneer for hard strategic interests (Cannon & Ali, 2023).

The *Francophonie économique* discourse attempts to resolve this tension. It represents an effort to reinvent French soft power by decoupling it from the toxic legacy of *Françafrique* and re-anchoring it in the ostensibly neutral and mutually beneficial realm of economic partnership. As argued by Barthélémy (2019), this is a move from "cultural soft power" to "economic soft power," where attraction is based on the promise of growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship rather than shared cultural values. However, a critical realist would argue that this "economic soft power" is merely a discursive strategy that masks the underlying continuity of France's pursuit of relative gains. The language of partnership and mutual benefit serves to legitimize a policy that is, at its core, designed to bolster France's economic standing and, by extension, its geopolitical weight in the face of relative decline and increased competition (Layne, 2018). Therefore, this paper positions the *Francophonie économique* not as an application of soft power, but as a form of **instrumentalized soft power**—where cultural and linguistic assets are weaponized for neo-mercantilist ends.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM CULTURAL RAYONNEMENT TO ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

The transformation of *Francophonie* into an economic project did not occur in a vacuum. It is the culmination of a gradual, decades-long evolution, driven by both internal reassessments within France and external pressures from a changing global order.

The Genesis: Francophonie as Cultural and Political Project

The modern institutional framework of *Francophonie* was established in 1970 with the creation of the Agency for Cultural and Technical Cooperation (ACCT), the precursor to the OIF. This was largely a project of “*rayonnement*”—the radiation of French culture and language as a means of maintaining France’s global status after decolonization (Glaser, 2020). The primary focus was on education, teacher training, and cultural exchanges. During this period, the economic dimension was secondary and largely implicit, functioning through the opaque channels of *Françafrique* rather than the official institutions of *Francophonie*. The relationship was characterized by a duality: the high-minded, idealistic discourse of cultural solidarity coexisted with a parallel reality of clientelist networks securing political stability and economic advantages for the *Métropole* (mother country) (Bayart, 2000).

Early Stirrings: Recognizing the Economic Potential

The first significant shift towards an economic discourse began in the 1990s and early 2000s. As globalization accelerated, French policymakers began to articulate the potential of the Francophone space as an economic bloc. The then-Secretary-General of the OIF, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, spoke of moving from a “cultural community” to a “economic and political community” (Boutros-Ghali, 1999). This period saw the commissioning of reports and the organization of forums exploring the economic potential of the French language. The argument was that shared language reduced transaction costs, facilitated business networks, and created trust, thereby fostering trade and investment within the Francophone zone (OIF, 2005). However, these initiatives remained largely aspirational and were not yet central to the French state’s strategic doctrine. They represented a growing awareness rather than a coherent policy.

The Macron Doctrine: A Strategic Reorientation

The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 marked a critical juncture. A president who came to power without the baggage of the old *Françafrique* networks, Macron explicitly sought to break with the past. In his seminal speech at the University of Ouagadougou in November 2017, he declared, “I am from a generation that does not come to tell Africa what to do” (Macron, 2017). While the speech was wide-ranging, its core economic message was clear: the future relationship would be built on entrepreneurship, innovation, and partnership with African youth and civil society, not with entrenched political elites.

It is here that the *Francophonie économique* found its most potent champion. Macron fused the language of startup culture and disruptive innovation with the institutional framework of the OIF. He championed initiatives like the Digital African Fund, launched by the French Development Agency (AFD), and consistently framed the

French language as the “language of business, innovation, and the future” in Africa (Macron, 2018). This was a deliberate discursive move to rebrand France as a dynamic, modern partner, distinct from both its own colonial past and the state-centric, infrastructure-focused approach of its Chinese competitor. This period represents the full maturation of the economic turn, where the discourse moved from the periphery to the very center of French African policy, becoming the primary legitimizing narrative for its continued engagement. The following sections will deconstruct this discourse in detail and analyze its practical manifestations.

DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS: DECONSTRUCTING THE LEXICON OF THE “FRANCOPHONIE ÉCONOMIQUE”

The transformation of French policy is most immediately apparent in its official rhetoric. A critical discourse analysis of speeches, policy documents, and OIF communications reveals a systematic and deliberate construction of a new narrative. This narrative strategically employs a specific lexicon to frame the relationship as modern, equitable, and economically rational, thereby distancing it from the paternalistic and political overtones of the past. This discursive shift is not merely cosmetic; it constitutes a fundamental re-signification of the purpose of Franco-African relations and the very institution of *Francophonie* itself.

The Demise of “Coopération” and “Rayonnement”

The traditional pillars of French discursive engagement with Africa have been the concepts of “*coopération*” and “*rayonnement*.” *Coopération*, a term laden with the legacy of post-colonial agreements, implied a hierarchical relationship where France provided expertise and aid to developing nations. While ostensibly neutral, it carried a paternalistic undertone, reinforcing a donor-recipient dynamic (Charbonneau, 2008). Similarly, “*rayonnement*” (which translates to “influence” or “radiance”) was the cornerstone of cultural diplomacy, evoking the image of France as a “nation whose influence is measured by the radiation of its culture and the reach of its language” (Fumaroli, 2011, p. 45). This was a soft power project predicated on a unidirectional flow of culture from the *Métropole* to the former colonies.

In the discourse of the Macron presidency, these terms have been conspicuously relegated to the background, if not entirely abandoned in key policy speeches. Their usage now tends to be confined to specific cultural or educational programs, stripped of their former centrality to the overall bilateral relationship. This discursive demotion is a strategic move to symbolically break with the past. As President Macron himself stated in Ouagadougou, the goal is to move beyond a relationship based on “the postures of the past” and “a kind of condescension” (Macron, 2017). The

words "*coopération*" and "*rayonnement*" are discursively entangled with those very postures, making them incompatible with the new narrative of partnership.

The Ascendancy of "Partenariat" and "Écosystème"

In place of the old lexicon, a new vocabulary has been aggressively promoted, drawn predominantly from the worlds of business and Silicon Valley-style innovation. The most pivotal term is "*partenariat*" (partnership). This word is deployed incessantly to connote a relationship of equals, of mutual benefit and shared risk. It suggests a clean break from the hierarchical *coopération* and positions France not as a patron, but as a stakeholder in a joint venture with African nations. For instance, the French Development Agency (AFD) now consistently frames its interventions not as aid but as "*partenariats financiers*" and "*partenariats techniques*" (AFD, 2022).

Closely linked to *partenariat* is the term "*écosystème*." This biological metaphor, ubiquitous in tech and business circles, is used to describe the interconnected network of actors necessary for economic success: startups, investors, incubators, universities, and government agencies. By advocating for the development of a "*écosystème francophone des startups*" or an "*écosystème d'affaires*," French discourse frames its engagement as an organic, bottom-up process of fostering environments conducive to growth, rather than a top-down imposition of projects (Le Drian, 2021). This language is powerfully seductive; it presents French involvement as a facilitative, non-directive force that empowers local entrepreneurs, thereby obscuring the potential for French corporations and capital to become the dominant species within this cultivated ecosystem.

The "Nouveaux Acteurs" and the Language of Disruption

Integral to this new narrative is the focus on "*les nouveaux acteurs*" (the new actors) in Africa. This refers explicitly to the young entrepreneurs, the innovators, and civil society leaders, as opposed to the traditional governmental elites associated with *Françafrique*. This discursive move serves a dual purpose. First, it aligns France with the forces of modernity and change, appealing to a demographic that is often deeply skeptical of both its own rulers and former colonial powers. Second, it strategically bypasses the increasingly problematic and unstable regimes in the Sahel, offering a parallel channel of influence. The language used here is one of "disruption," "innovation," and "agility," consciously mirroring the lexicon of the tech world to paint France as a dynamic and forward-thinking partner (Macron, 2018).

This is powerfully exemplified in initiatives like the French Presidential Council for Africa (CPA), which was explicitly created to engage with these *nouveaux acteurs*—artists, entrepreneurs, and activists—outside of formal state channels (Élysée, 2019). The discourse surrounding the CPA emphasizes "listening," "dialogue," and "co-creation,"

a stark contrast to the secretive, top-down dealings historically characteristic of Franco-African relations.

The Strategic Ambiguity of “Souveraineté” and “Stabilité”

Even as the economic discourse ascends, traditional realist concerns of security and sovereignty have not disappeared; they have been semantically repackaged. The term “*souveraineté*” (sovereignty) is now frequently invoked, but in a novel context. France now claims to support African “sovereignty” in key sectors like cybersecurity, digital technology, food, and health. For example, the French government speaks of supporting “*la souveraineté numérique de l’Afrique*” (Africa’s digital sovereignty), which is framed as a defensive measure against the dominance of American and Chinese tech giants (Pannier, 2022). This framing positions France not as a threat to sovereignty (as its military presence was often perceived), but as a partner in defending it, creating a discursive alliance against common (non-Francophone) rivals.

Similarly, the goal of “*stabilité*” (stability), long a euphemism for propping up friendly regimes, is now increasingly linked to economic development. Instability is discursively framed as a product of unemployment and lack of economic opportunity, which the *Francophonie économique* aims to remedy. As stated in a French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2023) report, “Economic development is the best guarantee of long-term stability.” This creates a moral and pragmatic justification for the economic pivot: it is not merely about profit, but about securing a more stable and prosperous neighborhood, thereby merging neo-mercantilist interests with the language of developmental peacebuilding.

The “Language of the Future”: Instrumentalizing French

Finally, the most profound discursive shift lies in the redefinition of the French language itself. No longer primarily a vessel for Molière or the Rights of Man, it is now relentlessly promoted as a practical tool for economic advancement. President Macron has famously called French “the language of freedom, of innovation, of creation, and of the future,” directly linking it to economic opportunity (Macron, 2018). The language is framed as a marketable skill, a “passport” to a vast economic network.

Reports commissioned by the French government, such as the one by economist Jacques Attali (2014) titled “*La Francophonie et la Francophilie, Moteurs de Croissance Durable*” (Francophonie and Francophilia, Engines of Sustainable Growth), quantitatively argue that sharing a language increases bilateral trade by significant margins. This instrumentalization of language is a key mechanism of the neo-mercantilist turn. It transforms a cultural asset into a competitive economic advantage, arguing that the shared linguistic space naturally creates trust, reduces transaction costs, and facilitates business for French companies vis-à-vis their non-Francophone

competitors. The discourse thus sells the language itself as a gateway to the “*écosystème*” and the “*partenariats*” it promises, completing a coherent, self-reinforcing rhetorical framework for France’s renewed economic offensive.

CASE STUDIES IN THE NEW ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

The discourse of the *Francophonie économique* would be little more than empty rhetoric if not for its concrete implementation through specific policies and sectoral initiatives. The translation of this new lexicon into practice is most evident in two key strategic sectors: the digital economy and sustainable energy. An examination of these areas reveals the precise mechanisms through which the French state is leveraging the Francophone space for economic and strategic gain.

The Digital Frontier: Cultivating a Francophone “*Écosystème*”

The digital economy represents the quintessential arena for the new French approach. It is a high-growth sector, dominated by youth—the primary target of the “*nouveaux acteurs*” discourse—and one where France believes it can compete effectively against both American and Chinese models. The French strategy is not to build a wall around the Francophone internet, but to cultivate a vibrant, interconnected digital market where French companies and platforms are the preferred partners.

A flagship initiative is the **Digital African Fund**, managed by the AFD with an initial endowment of several hundred million euros. Its stated goal is to invest in African startups and digital platforms, providing them with the capital and technical expertise to scale (AFD, 2021). However, a closer look reveals a strategic orientation. The fund explicitly prioritizes startups that “contribute to the structuring of Francophone digital ecosystems” and that can create “regional champions.” This focus ensures that successful ventures are integrated into a Francophone-centric network, potentially creating markets and dependencies that favor French technological standards and services.

Furthermore, France actively promotes initiatives like “**French Tech**,” a government-led program to brand and support its own startup ecosystem, which has been extended to several African cities including Dakar, Abidjan, and Kinshasa. These hubs serve as physical nodes that connect local African entrepreneurs with French capital, mentors, and corporate partners. While beneficial for the entrepreneurs involved, this process also functions as a powerful funnel, aligning African innovation with French economic interests. As noted by Guérin (2022), this creates a form of “digital extraversion,” where the most promising African tech talents and ventures are incentivized to orient their growth towards partnership with, and often acquisition by, French or European entities, thereby ensuring that the value generated within the Francophone digital space is ultimately captured in Paris or Brussels.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ENERGY: THE “PARTENARIAT” FOR STRATEGIC RESOURCES

The energy and sustainable development sector provides another clear case study of the neo-mercantilist logic underpinning the new discourse. Here, the language of “green partnership” and “energy transition” serves as a vehicle for securing access to critical resources and contracts for French multinational corporations.

The case of **Nigeria and the energy giant TotalEnergies** is instructive. While Nigeria is an Anglophone country, its size and economic weight make it a crucial prize, and French engagement there demonstrates the pragmatic application of economic statecraft beyond the strictest Francophone borders. TotalEnergies has secured massive investments in Nigerian oil and gas fields, but now frames its new projects through the lens of the energy transition and local partnership. However, this discourse often clashes with local realities. For instance, despite rhetoric on community engagement, TotalEnergies has faced significant local opposition and legal challenges in Nigeria over environmental damage and a lack of benefit sharing with host communities (Vwawware, 2023). This highlights a key contradiction: the discourse of mutually beneficial “partenariat” can be undermined by the enduring practices of a corporate entity whose primary fiduciary duty is to its shareholders in Paris.

Within the Francophone zone, the focus is increasingly on **green energy and critical minerals** essential for the digital and energy transitions. France, through its public investment bank Bpifrance and the AFD, is financing exploration and mining projects for minerals like cobalt, lithium, and rare earth elements in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Niger. The discourse is one of “responsible sourcing” and “value addition within Africa,” positioning France as an ethical alternative to Chinese mining operations (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022). Yet, the underlying strategic imperative is clear: to diversify Europe’s supply chains away from Russian and Chinese dominance and to secure these strategic inputs for French and European industries. The *Francophonie économique* provides a ready-made network of political and linguistic familiarity through which to negotiate these sensitive and highly strategic deals, dressing a raw competition for resources in the language of sustainable and shared development.

THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF DEVELOPMENT FINANCE: AFD AND PROPARCO AS VECTORS OF NEO-MERCANTILISM

The operational arm of the *Francophonie économique* is the French Development Agency (AFD) and its private sector subsidiary, Proparco. These institutions have undergone a significant transformation in their mandate and operations, moving from traditional poverty-focused development aid to becoming central instruments of French

economic diplomacy. Their financial power is now explicitly deployed to create commercial opportunities for French businesses and to shape African economies in ways that align with French strategic interests.

From Aid to Investment: The Blurring of Mandates

The AFD's evolving mission statement reflects this shift. While it retains its core developmental objectives, its language now heavily emphasizes supporting "sustainable and shared economic growth," "the private sector," and "innovation" (AFD, 2023). This reorientation aligns perfectly with the *Francophonie économique* discourse. Development is no longer an end in itself but is reconceptualized as a precondition for a stable and profitable economic partnership. This allows the AFD to justify interventions that directly or indirectly benefit French commercial interests under the umbrella of promoting "mutual" growth.

Proparco's role is even more direct. As a development finance institution (DFI) focused on the private sector, its investments in African banks, investment funds, and companies are inherently commercial. However, its strategy is strategically aligned with French foreign policy. Proparco prioritizes investments that strengthen the "structuration of value chains" linking Africa and France, and that support the expansion of French SMEs into African markets (Proparco, 2022). By de-risking entry for French companies through loans, equity, and guarantees, Proparco acts as a vanguard for the private sector, using public development finance to pave the way for private profit. This model of "aid for trade" is a classic neo-mercantilist tactic, using state resources to enhance the competitive position of national capital abroad (Langan, 2017).

CREATING DEPENDENCIES: THE "ECOSYSTEM" IN PRACTICE

The work of the AFD Group in fostering "écosystèmes" goes beyond rhetoric. A prime example is its support for the **banking and financial sector** in Francophone Africa. The AFD and Proparco are major investors in regional banking groups like the Groupe Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP) of Morocco and others with strong ties to the French financial system. By strengthening these institutions, they help create a financial architecture that is interoperable with and dependent on French financial norms and capital. This, in turn, makes it easier for French businesses to operate and for African businesses seeking to partner with France to access finance, but on terms set by a financial system where French institutions hold significant influence.

Similarly, the AFD funds numerous programs for "capacity building" and "professional training" in sectors like digital technology, agriculture, and energy. While these programs have developmental benefits, they also serve to create a cadre of professionals and officials trained in French methods and standards, and who are

naturally oriented towards French partners. This creates a long-term, structural dependency that locks in French influence far more effectively than short-term political alliances. As argued by Hibou (2021), this is a form of “bureaucratic imperialism,” where power is exercised not through coercion but through the subtle, everyday administration of norms, standards, and technical systems. The *Francophonie économique*, facilitated by the AFD, is thus a project of re-engineering the economic and bureaucratic landscape of Francophone Africa to ensure its enduring compatibility with, and subordination to, French economic interests.

LIMITS AND CONTRADICTIONS: THE PERSISTENT SHADOW OF FRANÇAFLRIQUE

Despite the sophisticated discursive reframing and strategic reorientation, the project of *Francophonie économique* faces profound challenges. Its implementation is hampered by deep-seated structural contradictions and persistent legacies of the very past it seeks to transcend. The gap between the rhetoric of modern partnership and the on-the-ground realities of French engagement reveals the limits of this neo-mercantilist turn and illustrates why it has thus far failed to stem the rapid decline of French influence in key regions.

The Sovereignty Paradox: New Discourse, Old Structures

The most glaring contradiction lies in the realm of monetary sovereignty. The continued existence of the CFA franc, now reconfigured as the Eco for the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), fundamentally undermines the discourse of partnership and sovereignty. While reforms pushed by President Macron, such as the removal of French representatives from the BCEAO’s monetary policy boards and the end of the requirement to keep fifty percent of foreign reserves in the French Treasury, were presented as a historic break (Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021), many African intellectuals and economists remain deeply skeptical.

Critics like Ndong Samba Sylla argue that the fundamental architecture of monetary dependence remains intact. The fixed peg to the Euro, managed from Paris, and the principle of free convertibility guaranteed by France continue to limit the monetary policy autonomy of member states, effectively outsourcing a key lever of economic sovereignty (Sylla, 2020). This creates an irreconcilable dissonance: France promotes “digital sovereignty” and “economic sovereignty” through one set of policies while presiding over a system that denies its partners full monetary sovereignty through another. For the critics and protestors in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey, the CFA franc remains the ultimate symbol of *Françaflrique*, a tangible proof that the new partnership is merely a discursive smokescreen for enduring control. As articulated by

a prominent Malian journalist, “You cannot speak the language of partnership while holding the keys to our central bank” (Keita, 2022, p. 45).

The Enduring Network: Informal Power and Elite Capture

The discursive shift towards *nouveaux acteurs* has not fully displaced the old networks of *Françafrique*. While Macron’s administration has publicly distanced itself from the “Godfathers” of the past, the complex web of personal, political, and business ties that link French and African elites remains partially intact and continues to influence policy outcomes (Glaser, 2021). Major French corporate interests in sectors like logistics (Bolloré), oil (TotalEnergies), and construction (Vinci) maintain deep, long-standing relationships with political elites across Francophone Africa.

These relationships can distort the implementation of the *Francophonie économique*. For instance, large-scale infrastructure contracts financed by the AFD, while now subject to more transparent tender processes, may still be perceived as favoring well-connected French conglomerates with established lobbying power, over more innovative but lesser-known SMEs from either France or Africa. This perpetuates a system of elite capture that benefits a small, interconnected class while doing little to address the broader populist grievances that fuel anti-French sentiment (Châtaigner, 2023). The attempt to build a parallel diplomacy with civil society and entrepreneurs, while laudable, exists alongside these enduring corporate-state nexuses, creating a two-track system that often appears schizophrenic to African observers.

The Geopolitical Backlash: A Crowded and Resentful Arena

The *Francophonie économique* was conceived, in part, as a response to increased geopolitical competition. However, the strategy has struggled to gain traction precisely because this competition has intensified and taken a form that directly weaponizes anti-French sentiment. Russia, through the Wagner Group and its diplomatic channels, has adeptly positioned itself as an anti-imperialist alternative to France. Its discourse is simple and effective: it portrays France as a neo-colonial power obsessed with extracting resources and maintaining dominance, while presenting itself as a partner that respects sovereignty and offers straightforward security deals without political conditionalities (Shurkhal, 2023).

This narrative resonates powerfully with military juntas in the Sahel who seek to legitimize their coups by rallying nationalist sentiment against a historical scapegoat. In this context, the sophisticated, economically-focused discourse of the *Francophonie économique* is easily dismissed as a mere Trojan horse. The juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have not only expelled French troops but have also actively sought to undermine French economic interests, canceling contracts and encouraging popular boycotts of French goods (International Crisis Group, 2024). France’s economic strategy

is thus vulnerable to political blowback that its competitors, with less historical baggage, are able to avoid or even catalyze to their advantage. The very attempt to use economic tools to secure influence has been outmaneuvered by rivals using more direct forms of political and military leverage, wrapped in a potent anti-Western narrative.

The Chinese Contrast: A Different Model of Engagement

The limitations of the French approach are thrown into sharp relief when compared with the Chinese model. China's engagement in Africa is arguably the purest form of contemporary mercantilism, focused overwhelmingly on securing resources and infrastructure contracts for its state-owned enterprises, financed by loans that create long-term dependencies (Brautigam, 2020). However, it lacks the historical baggage and the accompanying paternalistic discourse. China does not lecture on governance or human rights; it offers deals presented as strictly business-to-business or state-to-state, based on a principle of "non-interference" (Alden & Large, 2021).

This presents a significant challenge to the French model. The *Francophonie économique*, with its talk of shared values, civil society, and sustainable development, imposes a set of normative conditionalities that the Chinese model avoids. For African leaders seeking rapid, large-scale infrastructure with minimal political strings attached, the Chinese offer is often more appealing. While France promotes its "ethical" alternative, the sheer volume of Chinese financing, the speed of project delivery, and the absence of political preconditions make it a formidable competitor. The French discourse of a value-based partnership, therefore, struggles to compete with the perceived pragmatism and transactional efficiency of the Sino-African relationship, forcing France into a defensive position where it must argue for a more "sustainable" form of debt and development, a nuanced message that is easily lost in the political fray (Doshi et al., 2022).

Conclusion: A Sustainable Pivot?

The *Francophonie économique* represents a deliberate and sophisticated attempt by France to adapt its foreign policy to the realities of the 21st century. It is a clear recognition that the traditional tools of *Françafrique*—clientelist politics and military guarantees—are no longer sufficient or sustainable. Through a calculated discursive shift, France has sought to rebrand its relationship with Africa, moving from a language of cultural hierarchy and political patronage to one of economic partnership and mutual benefit. This is not a mere public relations exercise; it is a genuine neo-mercantilist strategy that seeks to leverage the unique asset of the Francophone space to secure market access, promote French corporate interests, and maintain geopolitical relevance against rising competitors.

However, the ultimate success of this pivot remains deeply uncertain. The analysis presented in this paper reveals a policy fraught with internal tensions and external challenges. The discourse of “partenariat” and “souveraineté” is consistently undermined by the enduring reality of the CFA franc, a monetary structure that symbolizes continued French oversight. The focus on “nouveaux acteurs” and “écosystèmes” coexists uneasily with the persistent influence of old corporate networks inherited from *Françafrique*. Most critically, the entire economic strategy is vulnerable to a potent geopolitical backlash, where rivals like Russia skillfully exploit historical anti-French resentment, rendering the new economic discourse irrelevant in the face of raw political and security concerns.

The case of the *Francophonie économique* offers a broader lesson for the study of International Relations. It demonstrates the power of discourse in reframing foreign policy, but also its limits when material structures and historical legacies remain unchanged. It shows that neo-mercantilism in a post-colonial context is an exceptionally complex endeavor, where economic statecraft is inevitably interpreted through the prism of a fraught historical relationship. The instrumentalization of language and cultural ties for economic gain can backfire spectacularly when those very ties are perceived as instruments of domination.

For France, the path forward is perilous. A genuine decoupling of its economic strategy from the structures of the past—most notably a more profound reform of the monetary system—would be a necessary, though not sufficient, step to enhance the credibility of its new discourse. Furthermore, it must accept that its influence will inevitably be more contested and relative than in the past. The *Francophonie économique* may allow France to retain a privileged position in some stable, growing economies of West and Central Africa, but it is unlikely to restore its hegemony in the turbulent Sahel. The pivot, therefore, is perhaps best understood not as a guaranteed solution to France’s African dilemma, but as a necessary, risky, and incomplete adaptation to a new multipolar era where the rules of engagement are being rewritten by a multitude of actors, both old and new. The shadow of *Françafrique* is long, and escaping it requires more than just a change in vocabulary; it demands a fundamental and unequivocal break with the structures that cast it.

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