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An Alternative Approach to U.S. Sahel Policy

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Executive Summary

The Sahel region of Africa is in freefall. Upwards of 19 million people need humanitarian assistance, five coups have occurred since 2020, jihadists and militias are killing thousands, and security forces and Russian mercenaries abuse civilians with impunity. The Sahel's primary external actor, France, pursues intensive counterterrorism with the aim of helping Sahelian national authorities to reassert legitimacy; France also seeks to retain influence over its former colonies. But French policy has floundered. Anti-French sentiments drove France mostly out of Mali, one epicenter of the Sahel crisis, and many other Sahelians resent perceived French encroachments on their sovereignty.

The United States lacks a real policy for the Sahel. Rather, U.S. policy drifts and reacts. Important humanitarian and development programs are overshadowed by securitized rhetoric and undermined by the considerable U.S. military activity in the Sahel, including vestiges of the "War on Terror." The White House's 2022 National Security Strategy, its Africa Strategy, and a forthcoming Sahel Strategy envision diverse efforts going beyond counterterrorism, but they read as laundry lists of priorities rather than as concrete plans of action. The vagueness of existing policy risks allowing obsolete assumptions and programs to continue.

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The United States has no vital security or economic interests in the Sahel, which is not a major destination for U.S. products or investments. Sahelian extremists have never attacked the territorial United States, although the U.S. military presence has made U.S. personnel in the region a target, a dynamic which is in Washington's power to change. The rapid degradation of conditions in the Sahel limits Washington's ability to intervene militarily without doing more damage, making de-escalation the wisest course.

There are important non-vital U.S. interests involved in the region. The Sahel is one of the regions of the world most affected by poverty, hunger, disease, displacement, and climate change. A further deterioration in these conditions could exacerbate regional instability, and responding to the Sahel's humanitarian needs should be part of the overall U.S. role in the world. What lies within Washington's power is to help mitigate the fallout from the region's crises.

The approach envisioned in this brief would shift the U.S. role from hectoring, hawkish security purveyor back to traditional development practitioner and relief distributor.¹ Such a shift would promote regional stability and support humanitarian efforts. The brief recommends a five-step policy reform:

- Provide fuller transparency to Congress and the public about the extent of U.S. military activities in the Sahel. A more detailed knowledge of costs and deployments, as well as of the nature of U.S. military missions, would allow for more rigorous assessments of what is working and what is not.
- Downsize counterterrorism programs and end militarized rhetoric, while pushing France to do the same. Clearing away the debris of the "War on Terror" and "Countering Violent Extremism" will save money and reduce the potential for harm. Distancing the United States from France will reduce the risk of the U.S. being tainted by association with an increasingly unpopular outside actor. A limited role for the U.S. could remain in terms of intelligence support to non-authoritarian regimes, and military-military cooperation efforts that prioritize long-term relationships over short-term tactical training.
- Compete with Russia and China by highlighting tangible, non-security assistance rather than scolding Africans and attempting to counter other actors' propaganda. Drop the pretense of moral superiority and show Sahelian civilians that the United States can concretely make their lives

¹ I thank Alexis Arieff, Kamissa Camara, Samuel Gardner-Bird, Nathaniel Powell, and Sarang Shidore for their invaluable comments on drafts of this paper.

better. Stressing that the United States is in the Sahel to help ordinary people, not to fight wars or compete with Russia, will win greater goodwill and influence.

- Increase funding and rhetorical emphasis for humanitarian relief, mitigating the climate emergency, and building civilian state capacity. U.S. interventions in the humanitarian sphere are considerable, and deserve more emphasis from senior policymakers. Meanwhile, investing in the ability of Sahelian states to deliver services is cheaper than counterterrorism. The efficacy of building civilian state capacity is easier to measure than counterterrorism gains, and can do more in the long run to help overcome insurgencies and mitigate the impacts of climate change.
- Use quiet diplomacy and targeted public statements to pressure military and civilian leaders to build robust democracies over the long term. The best time to prevent coups is before they occur, and a key trigger for coups is civilian overreach and declining legitimacy.

Introduction

A February 2020 New York Times article titled “Terrorism Threat in West Africa Soars as U.S. Weighs Troop Cuts” acted as a veritable advertisement for U.S. military assistance to the Sahel – a desperately poor region that includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Reporter Eric Schmitt interviewed American generals, African officers, and pro-counterterrorism experts to argue that, as one section heading put it, “Small U.S. assistance is crucial to a larger French mission.” It is misleading to call such assistance “small” – U.S. security assistance to the Sahel totaled at least \$323 million in 2018–19.²

The article presented the United States as an armed savior for the Sahel:

² Schmitt, Eric. “Terrorism Threat in West Africa Soars as U.S. Weighs Troop Cuts.” *New York Times*, February 27, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/world/africa/terrorism-west-africa.html>.

“Military officials and independent analysts stressed that American and other Western military aid may at best buy time for African allies to address poverty, lack of education, government corruption and other grievances that extremist groups seek to exploit. But there is little confidence that these daunting, endemic problems will be resolved soon. That leaves the United States and its European allies to keep the threat from spreading.”³

The message is contradictory. The experts and military officials quoted in the article implicitly disavow U.S. responsibility for the ultimate fate of the region, while insisting that the United States and its allies must remain militarily involved.

Counterterrorism in Africa, its backers claim, not only constrains jihadists but also wins over African governments and populations. In his March 2022 Posture Statement to Congress, AFRICOM’s then-Commander, General Stephen Townsend, said, “As VEOs [violent extremist organizations] remain the number one concern for many African countries, U.S. counterterrorism support is also a key avenue by which we compete strategically on the continent. In Africa, helping partners tackle shared security goals to address VEO challenges is an effective way America wins influence over strategic competitors.”⁴ Both the “War on Terror” and the “great power competition” paradigms are inherently escalatory, and AFRICOM wants to pursue both simultaneously. This has the effect of further militarizing U.S. policy in Africa and its sub-regions.

To the extent that policymaking is iterative and that public statements do not merely express policy but also make it, there is a clear difference between the positions of the Department of Defense (DOD) and the State Department. While AFRICOM emphasizes counterterrorism and great power competition, State Department spokespersons often hedge on key issues of democracy and human rights, suggesting that the U.S. government is relatively noncommittal and disinterested when it comes to Sahelian

³ Schmitt. “Terrorism Threat.”

⁴ “Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander, United States Africa Command, before the Senate Armed Forces Committee.” March 15, 2022. 6. <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20%20ISO%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Cleared.pdf>.

politics.⁵ Civilians thus cede the rhetorical ground to the military and its boosters, who constantly make the case for a continued “War on Terror.”

The “light footprint”⁶ of the United States’ extension of the “War on Terror” in the Sahel has involved significant logistical and intelligence support for France’s even greater counterterrorism commitments and political involvements, and U.S. training efforts for Sahelian militaries have sometimes paralleled and indirectly supported French and European efforts. Washington’s approach often amounts to outsourcing Sahel policy to France, although there have been periodic disagreements.⁷

The United States can distance itself from French policy in the Sahel and in the process win greater goodwill.

France, however, has little to show for nine years of intensive counterterrorism in the Sahel. As the former colonial power and a powerful force in postcolonial African politics, France is heavily resented in much of the Sahel. French leaders reinforce that resentment when they act in a high-handed manner – witness the January 2020 summit in Pau, where Emmanuel Macron effectively summoned Sahelian heads of state for a public show of deference to France.⁸ The United States can distance itself from French policy in the Sahel and in the process win greater goodwill.

Meanwhile, Washington grandstands over Russian and Chinese influence in Africa. Certainly, Russia’s activities in the Sahel have increased dramatically since 2021, primarily in Mali, where Russia has become one key partner of a new,

⁵ See one telling exchange between Department Spokesman Ned Price and journalists about the military coup in Chad in April 2021: U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing - April 20, 2021.” <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departement-press-briefing-april-20-2021/>.

⁶ Miles, Donna. “AFRICOM Will Maintain ‘Light Footprint’ in Africa.” American Forces Press Service, June 13, 2012. <https://www.africom.mil/article/9018/africom-will-maintain-light-footprint-in-africa>.

⁷ Chivvis, Christopher S. *The French War on Al Qa’ida in Africa*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁸ Douce, Sophie. “G5 Sahel: le sommet de Pau n’a pas fait taire les critiques au Burkina et au Mali.” *Le Monde*, January 14, 2020. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/01/14/sahel-le-sommet-de-pau-n-a-pas-fait-taire-les-critique-s-au-burkina-et-au-mali_6025849_3212.html.

military–dominated transitional government.⁹ To a lesser extent, Russian influence is also observable in Burkina Faso, and there is considerable debate about the extent of Russia’s abetment of – or capitalization on – the September 2022 coup there. The United States is placing an excessive focus on countering Russia in Mali and the Sahel. This posture risks a pointless and expensive propaganda war. American lecturing on Russia sometimes meets with indifference – or even alienation – among Africans who do not subscribe to the idea that their continent is, or should be, a region of “great power competition.”

This brief builds and expands upon existing critiques of Washington’s policy in the Sahel. It argues that a major shift in U.S. policy is needed to help stabilize the Sahel and ensure that its humanitarian and climate needs are addressed.¹⁰ After a short summary of the Sahel’s recent history, the main themes of U.S. policy – its own security presence in fighting militancy, its support for the much larger French military mission, the lens of the “great power competition,” and the dynamics surrounding humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations – are analyzed and critiqued.

The Sahel and its recent history

The Sahel, which for the purposes of this paper comprises Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, is one of the poorest and most vulnerable regions in the world. All the Sahelian countries except Mauritania and Senegal are landlocked. These countries sit at the bottom of the Human Development Index – for 2021–22, out of 191 countries, Chad ranked 190, Niger ranked 189, Mali ranked 186, Burkina Faso ranked 184, Senegal ranked 170, and Mauritania ranked 158.¹¹ Their resource endowments,

⁹ Rich, David. “Au Mali, une nouvelle guerre d’influence entre la France et la Russie.” *France24*, September 17, 2021.

<https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20210917-mali-une-nouvelle-guerre-d-influence-entre-la-france-et-la-russie>.

¹⁰ Camara, Kamissa. “It Is Time to Rethink U.S. Strategy in the Sahel.” United States Institute of Peace, April 15, 2021. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/it-time-rethink-us-strategy-sahel>.; Devermont, Judd. “False Choices: U.S. Policy toward Coastal West Africa and the Sahel.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 24, 2021.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/false-choices-us-policy-toward-coastal-west-africa-and-sahel>.

¹¹ United Nations Development Program. “Human Development Report 2021/2022.” 274–75. https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22pdf_1.pdf.

including gold, uranium, oil, natural gas, and iron, have not brought mass prosperity. A vast percentage of the Sahelian population, for example 85 percent of Niger's population, relies on subsistence agriculture and pastoralism.¹²

The Sahel has experienced numerous rebellions and military coups throughout its post-independence history (all six Sahelian countries are former French colonies, and all of them achieved independence in 1960). Between the early 1960s and the late 2000s, Sahelian rebellions were sometimes quite serious, but the policy options available to Sahelian governments were straightforward and fairly effective, at least in the short term — i.e., repress rebellions and/or sign deals.¹³ Such rebellions often had an ethnic or sub-regional character, and rebel leaders were typically willing to bargain with national governments and accept government positions.

The Sahel region in Africa



The past decade has been different. The arrival (and eventually, the local appeal) of jihadist groups linked with al-Qaida and, later, with the Islamic State, changed these

¹² Feed the Future. "Niger." <https://www.feedthefuture.gov/country/niger/>.

¹³ Ghanmi, Lamine. "Niger's Government, Tuareg Rebels Pledge Peace." Reuters, April 7, 2009. <https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/nigers-government-tuareg-rebels-pledge-peace>.

dynamics, and aroused American and European attention in new ways. During the 2000s, jihadists conducted raids and constructed a highly profitable kidnapping economy.¹⁴ During the 2010s, jihadists carved out substantial spheres of political–military influence, challenging state control explicitly or implicitly across much of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as well as in nearby Nigeria.

An era of mixed democratic performance is giving way to a more troubled period. There were five coups in the Sahel between 2020–22 – two in Mali, one in Chad, and two in Burkina Faso.

The period from approximately 1991–2020 was uneven for the Sahel in terms of democratization, but brought numerous positive developments. During the Cold War, military dictators benefited from superpower patronage, and in some cases significant French support,¹⁵ and often clung to power for life (or until the next coup). A wave of democracy in the 1990s changed that pattern. In 1991 the military removed Mali’s longtime dictator, Moussa Traore, following mass pro-democracy protests; for the next 20 years, Mali had a civilian government and multiparty elections. Niger has had a civilian government since 2011, following repeated efforts to wrest power from military regimes and civilian authoritarians. Senegal has seen two successful transitions of power from a defeated incumbent president to an opposition challenger, in 2000 and 2012. In Burkina Faso, protests led to the ousting of longtime dictator Blaise Compaoré in 2014, ushering in a hopeful, albeit brief, phase of democratization.

None of these countries has a perfect democracy. Anti-democratic trends exist alongside democratizing forces, sometimes even in the same country: presidents bid for third terms, incumbents leverage the courts to harass opposition figures, and

¹⁴ Callimachi, Rukmini. “Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror.” *New York Times*, July 29, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>.

¹⁵ Powell, Nathaniel. *France’s Wars in Chad: Military Intervention and Decolonization in Africa* Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

authorities arrest journalists and bloggers.¹⁶ Yet democracy retains significant appeal in the Sahel.

Now, an era of mixed democratic performance is giving way to a more troubled period. There were five coups in the Sahel between 2020–22 – two in Mali, one in Chad, and two in Burkina Faso. Niger saw a coup attempt in March 2021, and officers took power in the Sahel-adjacent country of Guinea in September 2021. Although the “War on Terror” is not the central cause of these coups, it is striking that every new Sahelian junta in the post-9/11 period, from the makers of Mauritania’s 2005 coup to the authors of Burkina Faso’s 2022 coups, have justified their actions heavily in terms of promises to restore security.¹⁷ Military coups are a response not just to insecurity, but also to the securitization of the region’s politics; if the top policy priority is counterterrorism, if the assumed means of defeating insurgencies are primarily military, if special forces are glorified, and if soldiers conclude they are suffering high casualties due to feckless civilian presidents, then it is unsurprising that they turn to coups.

The war on terror in the Sahel

Prior to 9/11, U.S. policy towards the Sahel was very limited and was primarily oriented to humanitarian relief, development, Cold War politics and, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, democracy promotion. Commendably, the United States was a key responder to the Sahelian drought of the late 1960s and the 1970s, notably through the Sahel Development Program administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development.¹⁸ The Peace Corps also had a significant presence in the Sahel. In terms of bilateral relationships, their character and strength varied: whereas Mali was a “donor darling” for the United States and various European governments,¹⁹ Mauritania was ostracized during the 1990s over its poor human rights record and its president’s

¹⁶ Elischer, Sebastian, and Lisa Mueller. “Niger Falls Back Off Track.” *African Affairs*, April 2019. 392-406.

¹⁷ Foster, Noel. *Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy*. Boulder. FirstForum Press, 2011; Booty, Natasha. “Mali and Burkina Faso: Did the Coups Halt Jihadist Attacks?” BBC News, July 30, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62052598>.

¹⁸ Comptroller General. “The Sahel Development Program – Progress and Constraints.” Report to Congress, March 29, 1978. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/id-78-18.pdf>.

¹⁹ Bergamaschi, Isaline. “The Fall of a Donor Darling: The Role of Aid in Mali’s Crisis.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, September 2014. 347–78.

support for Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War. Transactionalism characterized some relationships: Mauritania won its way back into Washington's good graces partly by recognizing Israel in 1999.²⁰ Before and after 9/11, however, the Sahel was typically towards the bottom of American overseas priorities, with skeletal presences at embassies and rare visits from senior officials.

After 9/11, operating on the theory that the primary enabling factor of those attacks was the existence of a "terrorist safe haven" in Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers and pro-"War on Terror" commentators in Washington readily identified a number of other supposed potential "safe havens," among them the Sahel and Nigeria. The State Department and the DOD quickly established a program called the Pan-Sahel Initiative for Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad, running from 2002-04; in 2005, the program was replaced with the broader Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative/Partnership (TSCTP), which has grown to include 12 African member states. The annual exercise Flintlock has focused on hard combat skills.

Groups affiliated with al-Qaida have had astonishing growth in the Sahel, particularly since 2012, and the Islamic State collected two powerful affiliates in 2015 in the Sahel and Nigeria. Yet the Sahelian "War on Terror" ramped up long before this escalation, did little to inhibit it, and may have even accelerated it. North African jihadists had a light presence in the Sahel in the 1990s, mostly for logistical purposes. Jihadist activity has grown in the Sahel since the early 2000s, with jihadists finding little purchase in some countries (particularly Mauritania, for complex reasons) and greater opportunity elsewhere (particularly Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger).²¹ The 2010s brought a surge in jihadist attacks and ambitions, including the rise and fall of several jihadist "proto-states," namely in Mali and in the Sahel-adjacent country of Nigeria.²²

The mass violence associated with jihadism in the region now, though, is complex and multi-faceted, involving not just affiliates of al-Qaida and the Islamic State but also

²⁰ N'Diaye, Boubacar. *Mauritania's Colonels: Political Leadership, Civil-Military Relations and Democratization*. London. Routledge, 2017. Chapter Seven.

²¹ Thurston, Alexander. *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

²² Lia, Brynjar. "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, August 2015. 31-41.

ethnic militias, bandits, and other actors. State security forces are also leading purveyors of violence against civilians in the Sahel, as demonstrated by data and analysis from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, along with numerous reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and local human rights organizations.²³ There is substantial debate about why people join jihadist groups, but in brief, there are a range of economic, identity-based, religious, ideological, revenge-based, and circumstantial motivations that produce complex movements.²⁴ Given this complexity, counterterrorism can inadvertently inflame the drivers of insurgencies.

The War on Terror has perpetuated and enhanced an American tendency to overlook and excuse authoritarianism in trusted partners.

The growth of the jihadist presence highlighted contradictions in U.S. policy. First, there was a danger of self-fulfilling prophecy in the “War on Terror” – the first major jihadist attack in the Sahel, a raid on a Mauritanian army outpost in 2005, was explained by its perpetrator afterwards as a response to U.S. military activities there.²⁵ Second, at a policy level, some U.S. partners in the region appeared to be “with us and against us”²⁶ – Mali’s President Amadou Toumani Touré (in power 2002–12) and Burkina Faso’s President Blaise Compaoré (in power 1987–2014) have both been seriously accused of accepting American training and assistance while simultaneously tolerating jihadist

²³ Nsaibia, Héli. “State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians.” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, May 20, 2020. <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-result-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/>; and Human Rights Watch. “By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists’: Abuses by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso.” May 21, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/05/21/day-we-fear-army-night-jihadists/abuses-armed-islamists-and-security-forces>.

²⁴ United Nations Development Program. “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment.” 2017. <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

²⁵ “Hiwar ma’a al-Qa’id Khalid Abi al-’Abbas.” Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, 2007.

<https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/107121/read?part=181&page=2508&index=781568/781577>.

²⁶ Tankel, Stephen. *With Us and Against Us: How America’s Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* New York. Columbia University Press, 2018. Chapter Seven.

activities in their own countries.²⁷ Third, U.S. training has had no discernable effect on the actual behavior of Sahelian (and Nigerian) militaries when confronted with jihadist insurgencies; those militaries have struggled to confront jihadists and conventional rebels, even in pitched battles, and Sahelian militaries have chronically and severely abused civilians, enflaming insurgencies and sapping ordinary citizens' trust in authorities.²⁸

Fourth, the War on Terror has perpetuated and enhanced an American tendency to overlook and excuse authoritarianism in trusted partners; in the Sahelian context, this dynamic has particularly affected American (and French) relations with Chad, to which Western powers have looked as a regional security guarantor, with mixed results. Washington, Paris, and Brussels tacitly accepted the coup in Chad in April 2021 and did not seriously seek to reverse the Malian coup of August 2020, which helped set the stage for the follow-on coup in Mali in May 2021 and for the Burkinabe coups of January 2022 and September 2022. Washington and Paris have also often turned a blind eye to "civilian authoritarianism" in Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and even Senegal, declining to question flawed election results, challenge civilian leaders' treatment of journalists and opposition figures, or raise pointed questions about massive corruption scandals.

It is true that the "War on Terror" has not reached the Sahel in the sense of publicly acknowledged combat missions, raids, and airstrikes; within Africa, Libya and Somalia have seen greater U.S. military action than the Sahel. It is also true that the "War on Terror" has been rebranded and rhetorically softened in certain ways since the Bush administration, with the Obama and Biden administrations preferring more clinical and innocuous-sounding phrases such as "overseas contingency operations" and "light

²⁷ Lacher, Wolfram. "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahara-Sahel Region." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf; and Penney, Joe. "Blowback in Africa: How America's Counterterror Strategy Helped Destabilize Burkina Faso." *The Intercept*, November 22, 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/22/burkina-faso-us-relations/>.

²⁸ Turse, Nick. "The U.S. Is Losing Yet Another 'War on Terror'." *Rolling Stone*, October 17, 2022. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/war-or-terror-africa-sahel-niger-pentagon-1234612083/>; Powelson, Simon. "Enduring Engagement Yes, Episodic Engagement No: Lessons for SOF from Mali." Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013. https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/38996/13Dec_Powelson_Simon.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

footprint.”²⁹ Regarding the Sahel, American officers and officials sometimes imply that the United States has achieved an almost magical balance in the region: in the words of one officer, “We can have a large effect with a very small force.”³⁰ The refrain that the U.S. security presence is negligible becomes a justification for continuing what are actually significant levels of expense, training, and deployments; the idea that the impact is meaningful becomes an argument that no policy alternatives are viable. Yet the U.S. military presence has a major negative impact — by shoring up Sahelian authoritarians, enabling France’s dead-end policies in pursuing its own endless war on terror, shrinking the space available for locally-driven negotiations, and in general destabilizing politics.

The refrain that the U.S. security presence is negligible becomes a justification for continuing what are actually significant levels of expense, training, and deployments; the idea that the impact is meaningful becomes an argument that no policy alternatives are viable.

In fact, it is very difficult to tell the extent of U.S. spending, deployments, and activities in the Sahel. The most visible counterterrorism effort for northwest Africa is the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a long-running regional foreign assistance initiative, led by the State Department, that focuses largely on providing training and equipment to the region’s militaries. TSCTP has been managed in an opaque and unaccountable way, according to two U.S. government audits.³¹ U.S. training

²⁹ Burkeman, Oliver. “Obama Administration Says Goodbye to ‘War on Terror’.” *The Guardian*, March 25, 2009.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/mar/25/obama-war-terror-overseas-contingency-operations>.

³⁰ Schmitt. “Terrorism Threat.”

³¹ United States Government Accountability Office. “Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in Northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management.” June 2014.

<https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-14-518.pdf>; and United States Department of State Office of Inspector General. “Audit of the Department of State Bureau of African Affairs Monitoring and Coordination of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program.” September 2020.

<https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/aud-mero-20-42.pdf>.

ventures, moreover, appear awkward and ineffective – a National Guard training program in Niger, according to a Rolling Stone story from August 2022, involves a significant amount of poor communication and frustration for several reasons, including Americans’ lack of proficiency in French.³² Such reporting mirrors larger findings from academic literature about the ineffectiveness, resentment, and unintended consequences that characterize major European training and security initiatives in Mali and Niger.³³

Beyond TSCTP and the publicly advertised training efforts, some U.S. military activities only come to light when there is a scandal – as with the four U.S. soldiers killed in an ambush in Tongo Tongo, western Niger in 2017, or with at least two murky incidents involving U.S. personnel in Mali.³⁴ Substantial investigative reporting from multiple journalists has suggested that American special forces are closely involved in African militaries’ combat operations,³⁵ that the United States has a substantial network of bases in Africa,³⁶ and that the CIA uses one Sahelian country (Niger) as a key hub in the drone program.³⁷ The Tongo Tongo ambush triggered some reforms and attempts at greater congressional oversight, but the wide portfolios of congressional staffers and the murky and sometimes undefined terms used in laws and policy documents give the

³² Maurer, Kevin. “The Candy Maker, The Cop, and The Fireman Fighting America’s Shadow War.” *Rolling Stone*, August 28, 2022. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/niger-west-africa-american-special-forces-report-1396333/>.

³³ Tull, Denis. “Rebuilding Mali’s Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and Its International Partners.” *International Affairs*, March 2019. 405–22; Wilén, Nina. “The Impact of Security Force Assistance in Niger: Meddling with Borders.” *International Affairs*, July 2022. 1405–21; and Bagayoko, Niagalé. “Explaining the Failure of Internationally-Supported Defence and Security Reforms in Sahelian States.” *Conflict, Security & Development*, 2022. 243–69.

³⁴ Whitlock, Craig. “Report: Special Forces Soldiers Killed with Prostitutes in Mali Were on Bar Crawl.” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/04/21/report-special-forces-soldiers-killed-with-prostitutes-in-mali-were-on-bar-crawl/>; and Lemothe, Dan. “Troops Charged in Green Beret’s Death in Mali Planned to Record Him Being Sexually Assaulted, Marine Says.” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2019/06/05/troops-charged-green-berets-death-mali-planned-record-him-being-sexually-assaulted-marine-says/>.

³⁵ Morgan, Wesley. “Behind the Secret U.S. War in Africa.” *Politico*, July 2, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/02/secret-war-africa-pentagon-664005>.

³⁶ Turse, Nick. “Pentagon’s Own Map of U.S. Basis in Africa Contradicts Its Claim of ‘Light’ Footprint.” *The Intercept*, February 27, 2020. <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/27/africa-us-military-bases-africa/>.

³⁷ Schmitt, Eric, and Christoph Koettl. “Remote C.I.A. Base in the Sahara Steadily Grows.” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/08/us/politics/cia-drones-sahara-niger-libya.html>.

DOD substantial room to conduct operations that go beyond what Congress might expect or understand.³⁸ In any case, secretive activities have continued; much of this investigative reporting has come since 2017.

The obfuscation of the extent of the U.S. military presence in Africa has to do not just with classification imperatives but with management of perceptions among Africans — and Americans. As one retired military officer put it in the context of discussing the shifting “War on Terror” at the global level under Biden, “My strong sense is that the lesson in every subsequent administration has been to try and keep military action off the front pages as absolutely as much as possible.”³⁹ This dynamic also puts critics at a disadvantage, open to the charge that criticism is shrill or outdated; simultaneously, any withdrawal or even imagined withdrawal invites a chorus of arguments that the Sahel will be destabilized as a result. Yet the Sahel is already destabilized.

Tracking jihadist leaders and destroying their camps may produce some short-term gains, but has not disrupted the overall trend of mounting insecurity.

A better approach would be to end TSCTP and phase out the various deployments by Special Operations Command Africa and other military entities. Training in tactics has not produced more effective Sahelian militaries beyond superficial and short-term acquisition of a few skills, which do not translate into battlefield successes; tracking jihadist leaders and destroying their camps may produce some short-term gains, but has not disrupted the overall trend of mounting insecurity. Military-to-military cooperation between the United States and Sahelian countries should focus instead on cultivating meaningful and long-term ties between the United States and emerging Sahelian military leaders, a goal best accomplished by bringing promising officers to the

³⁸ Schulman, Loren DeJonge. “Working Case Study: Congress’s Oversight of the Tongo Tongo, Niger, Ambush.” Center for a New American Security, October 15, 2020. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/working-case-study-congresss-oversight-of-the-tongo-tongo-niger-ambush>.

³⁹ Williams, Jordan, and Ellen Mitchell. “Here’s How Biden Has Shifted the War on Terror.” *The Hill*, September 11, 2022. <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/3636890-heres-how-biden-has-shifted-the-war-on-terror/>.

United States for advanced education. By emphasizing combat skills, the United States sends a message that dovetails with France's counterterrorism myopia, and in this way promotes a "body count" mentality among Sahelian militaries; the United States can structure military cooperation differently to make sure that civil-military relations and human rights are more than an afterthought, but are at the forefront of cooperation. In terms of intelligence-sharing, meanwhile, the United States should avoid inadvertently empowering authoritarian regimes (civilian or military), and should make security assistance and cooperation heavily conditional on the actual human rights records of Sahelian militaries, applying vetting mechanisms through the Leahy Law broadly and transparently. On the whole, the United States should take a long-term view of military-to-military cooperation, aiming not to make existing militaries more battle-ready but thinking about how to cultivate relationships that will matter to the 10-year trajectory of a region riddled with military coups and military abuses against civilians.

The "War on Terror" has not just been a military venture – it has also distorted the theory and practice of development. The "countering violent extremism" (CVE) agenda, which peaked under the Obama administration, cast a long shadow. CVE has in some cases complicated the lives of potential peacemakers in conflict zones by tarring them with unwanted associations with the U.S. government or other foreign actors. CVE also involved rebranding various traditional development activities, such as jobs training and support to civil society, as CVE ventures. The Sahel was the target of multiple CVE initiatives coming from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), including USAID's "Peace Through Development" initiatives (phase one ran from 2008-2011, and phase two from 2011-16), part of TSCTP. The second phase alone cost over \$61 million, and even USAID-commissioned assessments noted that local populations in the Sahel balked at the "violent extremism" label: "There is concern among the local population," the authors of an assessment of PDEV I wrote, "that the United States has exaggerated the security risk of violent extremism and the violent extremism label is an unfair negative portrayal of the country."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ EnCompass. "USAID/West Africa Peace Through Development (PDEV): Program Assessment Report." March 2011. 42. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACR829.pdf; and International Relief and

The assumptions of CVE continue in the development community's current buzzwords such as "resilience" and "inclusion."⁴¹ The notion of resilience often rests on an unstated assumption that recruitment to extremist groups reflects individual and communal alienation.⁴² Those assumptions in turn justify nebulous social engineering projects, distracting funds and attention away from more tangible development accomplishments, and risk tarring vulnerable communities as security threats.

The U.S. as France's supporting actor

Since 2013, the United States has mostly supported the dead-end interventionist policies pursued by France. After intervening in Mali in 2013 to dislodge jihadists and safeguard Mali's capital, France oversaw the establishment of a complex security architecture comprising both French and multilateral deployments. Despite multifaceted plans meant to bring stability and development to Mali, in practice France pursued a decapitation strategy, assassinating top jihadist leaders. Tactical successes against jihadist groups – and the French have had many, including killing the overall leader of a major al-Qaida affiliate in 2020⁴³ – have not bent the curve of the violence that afflicts the region.

The French presence, meanwhile, went from popular to deeply resented, especially in Mali, in under less than a decade. Yet France clung to its strategy even as security conditions degraded and Malian politics became more contentious. Even the coup of August 2020 seemed to provoke little introspection on France's part, and possibly even generated a sense of relief in Paris; it was only after May 2021, when the ruling junta more openly revealed its will to power, its willingness to defy France, and its curiosity about exploring a partnership with Russia, that France balked. There followed a period

Development. "Final Performance Report of USAID Peace through Development II, 2011–2016." Undated. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00SX61.pdf.

⁴¹ United States Agency for International Development. "Preventing Violent Extremism Actions through Increased Social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE)." Fact Sheet, May 2021. <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/PEACE-Fact-Sheet-May-2021.pdf>.

⁴² USAID. "Counter Development Cooperation Strategy for Niger." July 2022. 16. <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/CDCS-Niger-July-2027.pdf>.

⁴³ "Sahel: AQMI confirme la mort de son chef, Abdelmalek Droukdel." Le Monde/AFP, 19 June 2020. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/06/19/sahel-aqmi-confirme-la-mort-de-son-chef-abdelmalek-droukdel_6043353_3212.html.

of mounting Franco-Malian diplomatic tensions, still ongoing, and an angry French withdrawal from Mali – only to effectively replicate the same approach, just with Niger as the new key operational hub.⁴⁴

The United States has tended to support French operations and policies over the past decade, deferring to France’s perceived interests in the Sahel and taking advantage of French dominance to keep the American “footprint” light.

In many ways, French emphasis on counterterrorism and day-to-day political stability has been a contributing factor to the worsening insecurity – much of which is not driven by al-Qaida and the Islamic State – and to the epidemic of coups in the region. France’s own hawkishness has also contributed to a body count mentality, reflected in many French statements if not in official French policy, that sends precisely the wrong signals to Sahelian governments about how far to go in disregarding human rights.⁴⁵

The United States has tended to support French operations and policies over the past decade, deferring to France’s perceived interests in the Sahel and taking advantage of French dominance to keep the American “footprint” light. The U.S. military has provided logistical and intelligence support for major French operations, such as the initial anti-jihadist campaign in 2013 (Operation Serval), and for individual French raids. U.S. training and surveillance missions are meant to complement French counterterrorism goals.

There have been points of disagreement between Washington and Paris – the United States did not, for example, support French-led requests, as recently as 2021, for the

⁴⁴ Irish, John. “Ahead of Mali Withdraw, France Prepares Future Sahel Strategy.” Reuters, July 13, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/ahead-mali-withdraw-france-prepares-future-sahel-strategy-2022-07-13/>.

⁴⁵ Nsaibia, Héni. “State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians.” Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, May 20, 2020. <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-result-s-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/>.

United Nations to give the French-backed G5 Sahel Joint Force a U.N. Chapter VII Peacekeeping Mandate.⁴⁶ On the whole, however, Washington has outsourced its Sahel strategy to Paris. As detailed in the next part of this briefing, the United States could be a better friend to France by helping both Washington and Paris end the Sahelian iteration of the “War on Terror.”

The United States could do significantly more to help France find a more constructive course in the Sahel. First, de-emphasizing talk of “great power competition” and Russian disinformation could help France have a more honest reckoning with why its policies and attitudes are so widely disliked. Second, the United States could warn France more bluntly that Niger, the current hub of France’s counterterrorism efforts, is a fragile and impoverished country that could easily become the next Sahelian country to see a coup – especially if French escalation there contributes to popular discontent and places unreasonable expectations on Niger’s military.

Third, the United States can signal that it is backing away from support for the regime in Chad, another lynchpin of France’s Sahel policy; the Chadian security forces’ massacre of more than fifty pro-democracy protesters on October 20 shows that Washington should suspend security assistance, and that France is politically unwise to position itself as a friend to the country’s military rulers. Finally, Washington can encourage Paris to think more holistically about the long-term future of the Sahel, rather than joining Paris in assuming that counterterrorism promotes stability in a linear way.

The frame of great power competition in the Sahel

A recent element of U.S. policy in the Sahel, and across Africa, has been “countering” Russia, which adds to an older focus on “countering” China. A recent blitz of anti-Russian U.S. government statements has not been successful when it comes to

⁴⁶ Mills, Richard. “Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the G5 Sahel Joint Force.” United States Mission to the United Nations, November 12, 2021. <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-g5-sahel-joint-force/>.

swaying African and Sahelian views.⁴⁷ Rather than continually and often counterproductively attempting to draw a contrast between itself and its rivals, Washington should focus on making the case that the United States offers tangible (rather than merely “values-based”) benefits to African countries. This case is best made, as mentioned above, by de-emphasizing counterterrorism and emphasizing humanitarian relief, development, and climate change mitigation.⁴⁸

“Countering” Russia and China thus appears to mean pairing long-standing policies with newly charged rhetoric and propaganda – and the evidence so far seems to indicate that African leaders and publics balk at being lectured to.

Russia and China indeed do have a presence in the Sahel, and Russia’s presence is particularly unhelpful, fueling human rights abuses, conflict, and economic exploitation. Kremlin-linked mercenaries in the Wagner Group, deployed in Mali since late 2021, have been credibly accused of participating in the worst massacre perpetrated on Malian soil in recent years, occurring in the town of Moura in March 2022.⁴⁹ Malian authorities have leveraged their Russian ties to provoke and alienate France, which formally withdrew its soldiers from Malian soil in stages in 2021–22.

Yet Russian influence has limits. Wagner’s mercenaries have not turned the tide in Mali’s fight against jihadists. When Mali faced sweeping economic sanctions in the first half of

⁴⁷ Thurston, Alex. “Biden’s New Africa Strategy Is Shortsighted and Stale.” *Responsible Statecraft*, August 12, 2022.

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/08/12/bidens-new-africa-strategy-is-shortsighted-and-stale/>.

⁴⁸ Puig Cepero, Oiolo, et al. “Climate Change, Development and Security in the Central Sahel.” *Cascades*, June 29, 2021.

<https://www.cascades.eu/publication/climate-change-development-and-security-in-the-central-sahel/>.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch. “Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers.” April 5, 2022.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>.

2022, the country's key economic lifelines proved to be some of its neighbors,⁵⁰ rather than Russia.

Framing “competition” between the United States and Russia (or China) as a zero-sum battle for influence and power casts Sahelians as pawns, misreads local anti-Western sentiments as the result of Russian disinformation, and – as in the case of the Wagner Group's deployment to Mali – mistakes symptoms of underlying dysfunction for causes. Securitized policies have also created openings for Russia's own military ventures by feeding cycles of violence in the region.

Meanwhile, it is not clear what American policymakers really mean by “countering” Russia and China. In AFRICOM's 2022 Posture Statement, for example, General Stephen Townsend said starkly that China and Russia “leverage opportunities to erode U.S. influence with African nations” and “exert political influence at U.S. expense.”⁵¹ Yet the solutions on offer are apparently just maintaining previously existing U.S. policies, most of them generic. Townsend told Congress, “Security cooperation efforts with partners not only improve their capability to address internal security concerns, but also degrad[e] our competitors' ability to exploit relationship gaps.”⁵² He went on to complain about a lack of funding for such efforts, implying that Russia and China are gaining political ground in Africa, and that the solution is for the United States to simply double down on militarized policy. “Countering” Russia and China thus appears to mean pairing long-standing policies with newly charged rhetoric and propaganda – and the evidence so far seems to indicate that African leaders and publics balk at being lectured to. France's efforts to discipline and punish the Malian junta over its Russia ties in 2021–22, for example, only pushed the junta further into a partnership with Moscow. If U.S. rhetoric contains a veiled threat to punish countries that align with Russia and China, it is not clear that such a threat is working.

⁵⁰ Hoije, Katarina, and Baudelaire Mieu. “Landlocked Mali Turns to Neighbors to Sidestep Trade Sanctions.” *Bloomberg*, January 19, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-19/landlocked-mali-turns-to-neighbors-to-sidestep-trade-sanctions>.

⁵¹ “Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend.” 3.

⁵² “Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend.” 7.

Conclusion: Rethinking U.S. policies in the Sahel

The five steps outlined earlier in this brief represent a path towards reorienting Washington's Sahel policy away from a militarized and counterproductive approach and toward one that stabilizes the region and meets its humanitarian needs.

First, the United States should transparently clarify the extent of its activities in the Sahel. The United States is not at war in the Sahel, and so there should be nothing to hide.

Second, the United States should streamline policy by winding down and right-sizing its counterterrorism programming and covert deployments. The U.S. should also work to persuade its ally France to do likewise. The existing approach has been counterproductive and has only further boosted the jihadist insurgency. Also, the Biden administration's "all of the above" instincts appear untenable globally and even more so in the Sahel, where limited resources and attention spans mean that the administration will have to pick a priority. It should not be counterterrorism.

Third, the United States should be cautious about deploying the frame of "great power competition," especially in a lecturing tone that is almost certain to alienate many African leaders and citizens. The United States can win friends in Africa through a demonstration effect – not in the counterterrorism sphere, where tactical successes fade quickly amid a security situation that many ordinary Sahelians experience as grim and deteriorating – but in the spheres of humanitarian relief and development. The United States can also, by backing away from support for authoritarian regimes such as the one in Chad, demonstrate that it applies values consistently and not selectively.

Fourth, the United States should draw attention to the substantial humanitarian and development work it already does in the region. The United States is already the top humanitarian donor to the Sahel, with USAID's Sahel Regional Office dedicating approximately 80 percent of its annual \$840 million budget to humanitarian activities.⁵³

⁵³ United States Agency for International Development. "Sahel Regional Office Summary." July 23, 2021. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/SRO_Summary.pdf.

The United States also provides hundreds of millions of dollars annually in development and humanitarian assistance to the region through other channels, including bilateral USAID missions in Mali and Niger, USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Such spending is likely higher than that of programs such as TSCTP, under which the Biden Administration has proposed \$33.4 million in military assistance for Fiscal Year 2023, in addition to unspecified levels of internal security force assistance and development aid under the initiative.⁵⁴ The opacity around counterterrorism budgets, however, makes it harder to assess humanitarian spending in comparison to military spending. Cutting TSCTP and the counterterrorism budget would free up even more funding for vitally needed humanitarian interventions.

The United States can win friends in Africa through a demonstration effect – not in the counterterrorism sphere, but in the spheres of humanitarian relief and development.

The United States has the opportunity to reframe itself as a primarily humanitarian rather than a security partner, an approach that would more accurately reflect existing U.S. commitments and likely win the United States substantially more goodwill in the Sahel. In keeping with the Biden administration’s Africa Strategy, moreover, Washington should also look for more opportunities to assist the Sahel with mitigating and reversing the effects of climate change, especially the effects on the most vulnerable.⁵⁵ In public relations, meanwhile, the Biden administration should not allow generals to shape perceptions of policy, but should rather put civilian efforts front and center.

The United States is well-positioned to support a multilateral approach to development and democratization in the Sahel. Flashes of anti-Americanism in the region are

⁵⁴ United States Department of State. “Congressional Budget Justification – Fiscal Year 2023.” 173. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FY-2023-Congressional-Budget-Justification_Final_508comp.pdf.

⁵⁵ The White House. “U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa.” August 2022. 9-10. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/U.S.-Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-Africa-FINAL.pdf>.

minimal compared to the strong anti-French sentiment in the region, not all of which is ginned up by Russia. Indeed, the United States is sometimes seen in a more favorable light precisely because it never had a colonial empire on the African continent, and because of the (inconsistent, but sometimes meaningful) U.S. support for African decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. The United States has a strong network of civil society contacts in Africa and the Sahel, fostered partly through institutions such as the National Democratic Institute, and the United States has a good relationship with the Economic Community of West African States, the key regional bloc for West Africa. With regional institutions taking a leading role, and working closely with the European Union and major European and Asian lenders, the United States can play a coordinating role in redirecting energies away from security efforts and towards basic development and humanitarian relief.

Washington should look for more opportunities to assist the Sahel with mitigating and reversing the effects of climate change, especially the effects on the most vulnerable.

Relatedly, there is no path towards a viable future for the Sahel without addressing the fundamental lack of capacity of Sahelian states. Since the 1980s and a wave of “structural adjustment” imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the public sector – a potential engine of development and employment – has been seriously constrained in the Sahel through conditional loans and programs that demand austerity budgets and anemic bureaucracies. The U.S. government cannot directly dictate the policies of international financial institutions, but Washington does have two powerful tools: It can change its own rhetoric, to temper expectations about the private sector as the main engine of job creation and to champion a robust public sector for Sahelian countries; and it can invest in Sahelian states, including by scaling up funding for training civil servants, expanding state infrastructure and services, and urging strings-free debt relief.

Finally, in terms of how to respond to the region's political turmoil, the answers are not easy. The United States has seen the limits of its own influence in real time on these issues. Yet the United States could do more to avoid abetting coup-makers – or the civilian authoritarians whose overreach can trigger coups. Reducing counterterrorism assistance and “War on Terror” rhetoric would help the United States distance itself from problematic militaries, military rulers, and civilian authoritarians. U.S. programs to build up special forces units have perhaps even exacerbated intra-military rivalries and therefore elevated coup risks. The United States could also be more privately critical of authoritarian abuses, and – sparingly – more publicly critical of flawed elections, authorities' arrests of journalists, and security forces' abuses against civilians.

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