## **QI Panel: The Coup in Niger and U.S. Policy in the Sahel**

August 16, 2023  
12-1 PM EST

**Alex Thurston 00:00**

Welcome to US policy in the Sahel at the Quincy Institute. My name is Alex Thurston. I'm a non resident fellow with the Quincy Institute and I teach in the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Cincinnati. We're here today to consider the recent coup in Niger and to discuss some of the national and regional and geopolitical implications of CU. Just to give some quick background on the Quincy Institute, where an action oriented foreign policy think tank based in Washington advocates a grand policy a grand strategy of strain, we aim to move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy, economic engagement, and a focus on existential threats such as climate change. Our vision is a world where peace is the norm and where war is the exception. To give a brief bit of background on the coup in Niger and the circumstances that sparked this webinar. On July 26, a military coup deposed the elected president of Nigeria, Mohammed Bazoom. The coup seems to have originated in a power struggle between the zoom and the head of the presidential guard, general Abdul Rahman Ciani. But the coup has all sorts of, again, regional and geopolitical implications. The Economic Community of West African States or ECOWAS has considered intervening militarily in Niger, the to reverse the coup. The coup has been condemned by Washington, Paris, Moscow, etc. The coup adds to a series of coups in West Africa, including in Mali and Guinea and Burkina Faso in and further afield, such as in Chad and Sudan. So there's a lot at stake in the coup in terms of, you know, democratic norms in terms of the prospects for stability and security in the region. The coup comes amid amidst a multi year jihadist insurgency that has affected Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in particular, there are questions about whether the coup creates an opening for Russia and or for the Wagner group to increase their influence in Niger and in the Sahel. And in Africa broadly. There's also implications for the United States, which has been a major actor in Asia for at least the past decade, Washington has spent at least $500 million training and arming Nigerian armed forces. Nuclear has been treated as a critical counterterrorism partner by the United States and France. And prior to the coup, the United States had something like 1100 troops stationed in the region in Asia. So there's a lot again to consider. I should also add that many people in Asia have been suffering tremendously both before and after the coup, Niger, even in sort of normal circumstances, one of the poorest countries in the world heavily food insecure. And the coup comes again in a context where there's been displacement of at least 700,000 people where there has been endemic insecurity in different parts of the country. So this is, again, something that has massive implications for

ordinary people. We're lucky to be joined here by three experts who I think have specialties and backgrounds that will really complement one another and let us have a really rich discussion. Miss Hannah Armstrong is a veteran analyst at the South Africa who has worked with numerous institutions and think tanks, among them the International Crisis Group, she was senior Sahel analyst from 2018 to 2021. Some of his recent work includes a really brilliant paper for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which looks at trends in security and actually a fall in levels of violence in Western Asia. And this is a paper that I've been recommending widely is as critical background for thinking about the EU and its implications. Professor advocate and abajo is a professor and senior research fellow at the University of Pretoria Center for the Advancement of scholarship. He holds a PhD from the University of Oxford where he was a Rhodes scholar. He is the author of numerous books, many of which have to do with topics related to peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict management, Civil War, etc. Other topics that are that are crucial for thinking about with regard to new shear. He also has considerable experience working with bodies such as the United Nations International Peace Institute, and aside from his many scholarly publications, he's also a public intellectual contributing regularly to newspapers such as business to in Nigeria. Finally, our third panelist is Dr. Stephanie Seville, who's the co director and senior researcher at the cost of war project based at Brown University. She's trained as an anthropologist and obtained her PhD from Brown at the cost of war project for papers include one which came out in 2021, called the costs of the United States Post 911 security assistance, how counterterrorism intensified conflict in Burkina Faso and around the world. So again, you know, directly relevant to the topics that we'll be talking about today with regard to the style and Dr. Seville is a frequent contributor to the media on topics really To among others, the US role in counterterrorism and military training programs and in Africa and elsewhere. In terms of the format for today, I'm going to ask a round of two rounds of questions to each of the panelists, and then I'll throw out a couple of questions for all of the panelists to respond to. And then we'll take questions from the participants from the attendees from all of you. As we talk, if questions occur to you, please put them in the q&a. And then we can answer them basically, in the second half of the, of the webinar. And I see that some folks have already started to post their questions, which is excellent. So thanks for doing them. Okay, so I thought we would start with Hannah, actually. So the coup makers in Niger have said that they are reacting to insecurity and bad governance. How do you assess that claim? And could you tell us about Nigeria's trajectory in recent years and what has led to this cool?

**Hannah Rae Armstrong 05:57**

Thanks, Alex. And hi, everybody. So I mean, it's it's sort of ironic that the coup leaders are citing insecurity. Because if you sort of look at the areas in Niger which are dealing with insecurity, which, you know, is on the rise across the Sahel region, Niger is battling insurgencies on at least three of its borders, and is really the only country in the region to have begun to meet some sort of positive progress over the past 18 months, which really sort of coincides with President bazooms. Time in power. It's kind of a controversial way of achieving this, this progress. So if you look at the region of North Liberty, which is which runs along the border with Mali, there was a really steep drop in violence from 2021 to 2022. And some of the contributing factors for that top and violence were policies that really came directly from President Bazoom, that we're orienting the military to embrace orienting the various sort of security structures of the country to explore, you know, other options for dealing with the extremist insurgents operating on its borders. And so this led to initiatives to old dialogue. And these were starting to sort of bear some, some fruits. So it's a bit it's a bit ironic, that of the three countries, you know, Niger, Niger was was actually starting to sort of make some some progress on insecurity, it was also doing a really good job of sort of protecting its borders. So where extremist insurgencies were, you know, sort of raging on borders with Nigeria, Burkina Faso and and Mali, they were they remained relatively contained to the borders. And this was, you know, in part, because of Bazoom and his predecessors policies on sort of how to deal with these these types of violence, which in other countries, the response to these types of violence had actually made the violence a lot worse. Having said that, in a broader context, there's been a very steep rise in insecurity in the country of Asia, there's also been a huge influx of foreign funding to fight this insecurity. And so for many Nigerians you know, what, what they see is not these sort of incremental, significant shifts in violence on the border, but rather the fact that there's hundreds of millions of dollars flowing into the country and arise overall and violence and the number of sort of bad guys, you know, trying to we're actively putting their lives at risk the lives of their of their community. Yeah, so so this was this was just to get some kind of sense on security. I think I've gotten off track from your, from your question, Alex. And I don't want to I don't want to ramble on too much.

**Alex Thurston 09:07**

No, no, this is great. This is great. And that's a really crucial point about kind of the the optics of the of the foreign assistance and I think definitely important that we should come back to Professor our budget. The Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS has struggled to contain or respond to the recent coos in Maliki and Burkina Faso Niger. As I was mentioning in the introduction, with the coup and new there, ECOWAS has threatened to intervene militarily as it has previously in the Gambia and elsewhere. How would you characterize the Colossus record diplomatically and militarily in terms of responding to coos and conflicts in the region?

**Adekeye Adebajo 09:43**

Well, I think, coalesces Redcord generally, what's quite good in the 1990s, for example, ECOWAS pioneered peace enforcement in Liberia and Sierra Leone. It was in both countries for a decade, you know, resulting in 1500 fatalities and spending at least $2 billion. And it was able to stabilize both countries and then hand over to the UN to kind of complete the process. In the 2000s, also under the ECOWAS as executive secretary at the time Ghanaian Muhammad Chambres, I think ECOWAS did quite well, in terms of governance, its governance protocol, obviously, had been put in place in 2001. And I think they did very well in places like Togo and Guinea, and Burkina Faso and other places to try to manage governance issues. They're less in the last decade or five to 10 years, I would say ECOWAS has struggled that bit. And you now have a quarter of the, of the community basically on the military role. And I think what ECOWAS tried to do with the recent coups in places like Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea was to put pressure on them to return to civilian role and to negotiate, you know, two year transitions or career transitions, which wasn't always convincing, but at least there was some kind of process in place and all those military regimes what suspended from echolife and remain suspended. But at least there was some negotiation. What happened in this particular case in Niger moved away from that, in that they're threatened military action, within a week, if the junta did not reinstate the constitutionally elected president. And I think that was a bit of a mistake. Because unlike two unlike like three decades ago, when Nigeria, for example, was under military rule, and take those sorts of interventions, because, you know, unlike Tinubu, the generals or Bachchan, Babangida did not have a parliament or public opinion to consider. I think ECOWAS and Nigeria are a much weaker position. Now, Nigeria's military is barely coping with militants

of Boko Haram. And ISAWP. As you know, Alex from your work, let alone deploying troops outside. So I think ECOWAS is in a rather difficult situation, I'm boxed itself into a corner by threatening military force. And I think it's now trying to move away from that with to number facing lots of pressure from traditional and religious groups. And they obviously lots of trade in and family relationships between Nigeria and this year. And also, if fear has been expressed in parts of Nigeria, that northern military officers in Nigeria, might even threaten to number himself with a coup, you know, based on the kinds of actions that they take. So I can go into the other country's policies and where other countries stand. But for now, I think that's how I would state the history of it.

**Alex Thurston 13:33**

Great, thanks. Yeah, there's a lot of there's a lot of threads there. I'd like to pick up when we come when we come back to. And yeah, I hadn't thought of it that way. A quarter of the region, a quarter of DACA loss members being under military. Well, yeah, that's a very stark kind of figure and visual. Stephanie Niger was a major recipient, or possibly still is a major recipient of American France and other European security assistance. How do you assess the US Niger relationship and the shares placed in the so called Global War on Terror?

**Stephanie Savell 14:04**

Hi, Alex. Yeah, thank you for having me here. Yes. So the US began assisting Nigeria with counterterrorism assistance starting in 2002. This was part of what George W. Bush at the time, called the global war on terror. And the idea was to that the US was going to wage pre emptive war. So really getting to the, you know, root out the source of potential terrorist attacks before they could emerge. And that was the justification for beginning operations in the Sahel region, which at the time had a very low incidence of violent militant attacks. That you mentioned 500 million. That's the figure that's kind of circulating in the media. That's only since 2012 that the US has spent 500 million training and arming Nigerian Armed Forces So it's much more than that since, since the beginning of the war on terror in 2001. The US spent 100 mil over 100 million alone to construct the airbase in Agadez, which I visited in January, it's in the north of the country. It's and the US spends about 20 to $30 million annually to maintain that drone base. The US also has servicemembers and equipment, trainers going in and out at at least two to three other Nigerian military bases in different parts of the country, and worked really closely with the special forces. So we've set we've seen some news reports about general

Babu, who was the leader, the head of the Nigerian Special Forces, he's someone who worked really closely with the US over the years. And, and, you know, kind of worked hand in hand with this US strategy of special forces operating through 127 Echo programs, which are, you know, technically trained in assist programs by the US government for other countries, military forces. That's the kind of language that's used. In practice, it's much, you know, it looks a lot more like, you know, the US kind of accompanying and oftentimes directing very closely, the, you know, rains on militant compounds, and things like that. So that's what we saw happening in 2017, when for US service members were killed and you share. The, over the past five years, I was looking this up recently, US government and companies have earned over $150 million in ARM sales to Niger. So arm sales are a big part of the picture. And you know, Blinken, Secretary of State Lincoln had visited Niger in March, he, you know, that he was positioning the US was positioning Niger as this important staple. You know, Blinken calls it a model of democracy and uh, you know, model resilience, I think there was a really active overlooking of some of the

more authoritarian trends in Niger and and the kind of instability and, you know, deep tensions and rivalries that marked local politics, because the US wanted so much to kind of put its eggs in this basket and have Niger be the bulwark against the so called terrorist threat. But notably, the US government was not alone, as you said, the French were very involved, they had been, you know, kind of kicked out of Mali, they were using asiair, as the same stable partner, Germany, Italy, Belgium, there, you know, there are many Western powers who are involved, and non western powers as well. So it's a place where a lot of countries I think, liked to talk about new share as a success story for their own military aid. And, you know, and of course, positioning it framing it as a as a story about them, rather than seeing it as a story about, you know, news, they're using different kinds of allies support for their own purposes, and being very strategic about that, which they think is just so often overlooked. And all of this talk about, you know, that we're seeing in us, very cold war situation, right, where, you know, there's a very active overlooking of the fact that the Nigerian government had its own goals and its own rivalries and its own tensions, and it was, you know, was very strategic and pulling on different allies and assistance where it wanted to.

**Alex Thurston 18:48**

Great, great, yeah, this ties in actually to the to the next question that I was gonna ask for, for Hannah. But before that, I wanted to, I mean, to highlight some points you made. I mean, I hadn't I hadn't you always hear that figure about the cost of the drum bass and Agadez, but I hadn't thought about the maintenance cost. And that was that's really important that you that you highlighted that. And then yeah, there's some other the training issues when I want to come back to first though, so to Hannah. So you've written extensively about outside actors in the Sahel. And, you know, as Stephanie was saying, I mean, there's been a lot of talk in the media about this idea of of a new Cold War and about Russian influence in the Sahel. There's been the idea that that the coup, and each era is an opening for Russia. How would you assess Russia's role there? And then And then, actually, let's just stick on that for now that I might have one follow up. Yeah. What What would you say about Russia's potential prospects for influence there?

**Hannah Rae Armstrong 19:37**

So it's interesting. I mean, what we've seen over the past couple of years is that Russia is starting to take the Sahel as a very serious very seriously in terms of geopolitics. So the sort of, because of the sequence of events that has unfolded in in Mali and Burkina Faso, which in both cases, consisted of sort of one coup d'etat followed by another coup d'etat. In Mali a pretty quick turn away from France, towards Russia, as its main security partner, and in Burkina Faso, a little bit more ambiguity, where the leader, you know, has recently gone to this summits, the Russia Africa summit, but hasn't cut ties to the same extent that Molly has. So there's there's sort of a playbook at this point for the recent spate of salagou data, and everybody's eyes kind of immediately ricochet over to Russia. As this happens, it's also kind of ironic that wrote coincidence that it happened, you know, during during the precise moment of the Russia Africa summit, with Niger being one of the only countries that didn't send a senior leader to attend. Having said that, I mean, I don't, there's really no evidence to suggest that Russia played any role in the coup itself. And there's, there's a bit of evidence to suggest that Russia really doesn't find this to be particularly convenient, at least at least in terms of the Russian state. I think that, you know, it highlights the divergence, and sometimes, to some extent, perhaps the tensions between how Russia operates and how Wagner operates on the continent. So the statements that the Russian Foreign Ministry, you know, the Russian Foreign Ministry has been consistently, you know, calling for a return to constitutional order, whereas the leader of our configuration, you know, came out with a sort of excited declaration about decolonization. So I think we will see, you know, I mean, there's some, there's some focus on the Russian flags in the crowds of protesters who have come out in support of the coop. It's certainly true that populations in the Sahel are increasingly seeing Russia as a sort of alternative to the Western mode of support, which has been really sort of catastrophic, and has coincided with a lot of increasing insecurity. So I think, you know, to some extent, there is there is some disinformation and some, you know, sort of flag flag distribution campaigns happening, no doubt, there's also certainly an element of sort of, let's try something else, because what we've been doing, you know, isn't isn't really working. But But ultimately, you know, to the, to the question of, does this coup serve Russia's interests on the continent? And is this something that's guaranteed to sort of strengthen their position? I think the answer is not necessarily. Yes. And so it's sort of a distraction to kind of look at these dynamics through the lens of the great power rivalry, because, you know, interestingly, Russia, Russia in the United States, I think both have have a sort of a similar position on what's happening in in Utah right now. And ultimately, and this kind of goes a little bit outside of your question, but it sort of comes back to Algeria, and Algeria is rolling in the region and efforts to sort of stabilize the region, which, you know, it may it may mean, we may see Algeria, playing more of a kind of bridging role between these two, these two actors.

**Alex Thurston 23:22**

Really well said, and actually, I was gonna, I was gonna, that was gonna be my follow up question was whether there were other actors who you wanted to highlight, because I think there's so much talk in the media about, you know, US, France, Russia, and I think, underscoring the Algerian role really makes sense. Definitely, we're gonna come in. Yeah, thanks. I

**Stephanie Savell 23:38**

Also just wanted to underscore Hannah's point, in that, you know, the Wagner group has been in Mali in 2021. And the US has been, you know, funding the Nigerian armed forces and training and equipping since 2002, hundreds of millions versus the Wagner group, which is kind of a mercenary group. And, you know, locally, people talk about it as, you know, a mechanism for these regimes, especially in Mali to secure their own grasp on power, right. So it's, they talk about as the, you know, the elite power holders, using them as mercenaries in that way. So I think it's really overblown to talk about them as a kind of a equivalent to, you know, that the US might pull out and then oh, they're gonna go towards Russia, it's just not at all the same thing. The relationship is not as deep. Wagner has very clearly kind of stoking these kind of anti colonial sentiments, in part because it has a very clear economic interest in the region. And a lot of times it's exchanging, you know, bids on, you know, natural resources in order to provide these kinds of services to to the Malian government and a couple others. And I really see this this tendency To portray this as a, you know, US West versus Russia in the media, as something that lends itself to kind of more of the same, at least the US is concerned in terms of a militarized approach to its relationship with Africa. And I think what this moment really calls us to do it, you know, in the United States, is to see this as a wake up call that a dramatically different kind of an approach is needed. And this, you know, the falling back into these tropes of a new Cold War. It's just really, I think, counterproductive to the paths forward.

**Alex Thurston 25:37**

Yeah. And I think maybe really overstates Russia's capabilities and partners, Wagner's capabilities. In Africa. Yeah. Um, okay, my second question for you is going to be about sort of the domestic Nigerian politics around the intervention. But I think you've already basically covered a lot of this in your in your first answer. I think instead of

**Adekeye Adebajo 25:57**

can I come in on this issue there? Yeah, because there are two points, I think are very important. You're talking about Vagner having an economic interest in the area. But France has been basically established a relationship with a country like Nigeria, where it could basically guarantee some company 96% of the uranium, the first thing it did when it intervened in 2013. In Mali, by the way, was to send troops to Nigeria to guard uranium mines. And France has ripped off economically, many of these countries for the last five decades. So I am kind of a little bit uncomfortable when we talk about whack mouth, commercial interests, which are undoubtedly there. But we don't focus enough attention on Brant. And the one thing we should not underestimate. In this crisis. The anti French sentiment that you see is genuine and deep. France has for five decades, intervened militarily in this country's, you know, toppled democratic regimes, replace them with their own kind of more subservient leaders. And economically, it's also of course, as we know, tied their currencies to the franc, and then the euro. It's had a very sordid relationship of France or freak. And a lot of this resentment is genuine. And I think if we missed that, we're missing a big part of this. So I think it's important not just to portray Batman in negative term, but also to remember that throughout the African continent, the French role has been seen incredibly negatively. And many people on this continent won France to leave Africa.

**Alex Thurston 28:10**

I think that's really well said, and I think there's been a mistake and a lot of media coverage of dismissing the anti French sentiment as just being sort of a a creation of Russian propaganda or something and a dismissal of the idea that people would actually have serious reasons as you just outlined, to, to feel that France was a negative influence over over their former colonies. We're at the halfway mark. So I want to give a chance to to the audience. So there were I mean, this is actually a good segue, because there were there were a lot of there were a couple of questions in the, in the chat in the q&a about uranium. Would anybody like to speak to that Hannah or others? Or any thoughts on the role of uranium and other thoughts on the share of French and French economic relationship and whether that plays a role in the cooler and the general situation? Hello, do you want to take that, and then we'll open it up to others?

**Hannah Rae Armstrong 29:08**

Sure. And maybe just, you know, I mean, I just to kind of round out a little bit of the domestic

context, for the coop, you know, picking up on on advocates, last points on sort of not overlooking anti French sentiment. I mean, I wanted to just kind of point out sort of two two incidents that I think were really, really helped sort of understand why popular sentiment seems to have sort of been in favor of the pitch, instead of sort of in supportive Bazoom, which seems contradictory to the fact that he's just been elected in a what's regarded as a democratic election. And those two those two incidents were, you know, there was a killing done by a French military convoy, crossing over from Burkina Faso into Indonesia, in which three three civilians were killed. Apparently, according to eyewitnesses by French troops, who were coming into the country This was a protest against, you know, French security interventions in the region. And then there was another episode, also along the border with Burkina Faso at a gold goldmine. In Tambo where the Nigerian security forces fired upon a mind that they had sort of warrant, you know, not to operate any longer, but was still being operated by, or miners. It was thought to be serving, you know, jihadist groups in the area. And so the Nigerians went in and sort of bombed, bombed the mind killing, it's not get clear how many how many civilians. But if we look at this sort of civil society, response to these killings, and the way that it was repressed, there's there it starts to sort of shed some light and context on this kind of groundswell of popular opinion, which kind of, which really sort of mixes an anti French sentiment with the sense that, you know, Bazoom was, was really sort of a tool of the French or was too closely allied with the French, and perhaps more accountable to them than then to his own people. So having, having kind of said that, to just to sort of make the domestic response to the coup look a little bit more reasonable, which I think, you know, it does have its reasons rationalities. In terms of the uranium, I mean, you know, my understanding is, you know, and I've been to the uranium mines in our leads. And I've been kind of tracking this issue for a while. And, you know, my understanding is that it's it gets a little bit overplayed the extent to which France is, you know, dependent upon these particular mines for their power supply. At the same time, you know, there's no question that French French officials like to sort of downplay, downplay it. At the same, you know, at the same time, there's, it's unquestionably a very strategic resource. And there's, there's a sense in which the, you know, I mean, if you look at the minds themselves, production has been declining, and they've been, they've been sort of slowly shutting them down and holding on to this the Iranian territory without actually developing any that anything there. And I think part of that is waiting for uranium prices to go back up. And part of that is not wanting those assets to sort of get into the hands of other actors. But at any rate, it certainly hasn't served easier, which could be making a lot more money off of this very strategic resource, you know, in France has has been for decades, artificially, and often illegally manipulating prices and dealing with domestic actors in ways that have contributed to this country remaining, one of the world's ports.

**Alex Thurston 32:49**

I'm going to the chat. Question from Dr. Adam Rubin, who asks, After the African Union has refused to support the military intervention, what is left for ECOWAS to do in order to restore resume? Maybe we could start with that. Okay, on that and then go to others what, what connects us to actually going forward?

**Adekeye Adebajo 33:08**

Thanks, Alex. I mean, I think it's important to see the balance of forces in ECOWAS because they're different groups, it seems to me within Alcoa, first is Nigeria, which I see as a kind of

diminished regional hegemonic is had more capacity in the past. At the moment, it doesn't have the capacity. It has a new inexperienced president, who is more of a domestic politician than a foreign policy expert, and is still trying to establish himself with massive problems, domestically 100 billion dollar debt, removal of the fuel subsidy, which has triggered the cost of living prices. And I think Tinubu and internally, a military that is ill equipped and underfunded and has not been able to provide security, the most basic security to some people. So we have to see that as one group, or another group, I think of hardliners who are pushing for intervention within their core as Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, and then Ghana and Guinea Bissau. Obviously, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, Cote d'Ivoire, the President Ouattara has always been a very influential player within our courts, but he has just got himself an unconstitutional third term Marquis South is demonstrating a lot of very bad governance and clamping down on the opposition dissolving the opposition party Jalen, the main opposition leader, and a lot of these leaders are themselves very scared and concerned that their own militaries could draw an example from these Coffee cat type coos, and then you have a third group of maybe more ambivalent states like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Togo, which may be don't have the capacity for deploying military troops. And the Liberian President George ware was actually quite critical of his fellow heads of states, complaining about civilian coup d'etat in which leaders basically manipulate their constitutions to get his third term. And then the fourth group in ECOWAS, of course, are the poachers. So you have Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and now the military junta in this area, and they are moving in quite the United Way. They have lots of experience of cooperation, especially in Asia, Mali, and Burkina Faso, they know each other extremely well. And I think they would be prepared to kind of line up in unity, whether they have the capacity with places like boxing or Faso and Mali having at least half of their territory, being overrun by jihadists, whether they actually have the capacity to respond to echo is true, is another issue. And then finally, Alex, I think one shouldn't also underestimate the fact that the region does not have the logistics of Finance to be able to undertake this intervention, the AU mission is pulling out of Somalia. And we've seen the way that, you know, it was funded largely by the European Union. And we've seen the way that many regional led peacekeeping missions have struggled with both finance and logistics. So I think it will be very difficult for ECOWAS to be able to deploy without some kind of support. And if they deployed with the support of France and the US, it would basically be seen as a Western Trojan horse intervention.

**Alex Thurston 37:11**

I think that's really well said, and thanks for walking us through the different dynamics. And I mean, one that I want to highlight is the issue of civilian authoritarianism, and the third term bids and so forth, I think there's a really undercut the credibility of particular leaders within ECOWAS, and then also maybe the organization as a whole. And I think it's really important to note that, you know, Macky Sol in Senegal has said now that he won't run for a third term, but that, as you pointed out, there's still all these, you know, signals of authoritarianism coming from him. So even if it's not the third term issue, it can it can be, you know, the jailing of opposition figures and so forth. The question then, for all three panelists, I mean, does this leave us just with with the hunter and power in the chair with is that sort of the upshot of all this? Is the National Council for the safeguarding of the Fatherland, or everyone wants to translate it, is it? Is it here to stay? For 1234 years? No, go ahead.

**Hannah Rae Armstrong 38:11**

I could take I could take a shot. I mean, yeah, I think I think that the intervention to remove them is is I think a pretty, pretty terrible idea, unfortunately, is seems to be falling out of favor,

and to be increasingly unlikely in Niger compared to Mali, and Burkina there is at least the precedent of the last Kuta thought, having been followed by a relatively efficient transition and genuine transition to democratic rule. So that's, that's something that sets Nisha apart. And that suggests that unlike Mali, and Burkina where we can really see the US entrenching themselves and digging in for a long, a nice long time in power, there is there is actually some, some hope that these, these leaders may be induced to move in it in a different direction. Given the trends in the region, that that may not be the case, but at least at least there's the precedent, but you know, the in terms of is it still possible that you'll sort of see people from bazooms cabinet and, you know, especially within the French press, and sort of French figures who are still sort of talking about restoring via zoom? And I think that that's, I think that we've we've moved, we've moved beyond that, and the country, the country has sort of moved beyond that.

**Alex Thurston 39:32**

Question from the chat for Stephanie or other episodes. Definitely. Um, this is from Russell vestry says, how can the US avoid getting tunnel vision on terrorism and countering Russian and Chinese influence when looking at Asia and other countries in the Sahel? What is the more holistic approach? Yeah, thanks.

**Stephanie Savell 39:48**

You know, I think the bottom line is the US approach so far to countering so called terrorism in the region, it just hasn't worked. And there's are really broad this kind of overly militarized response, this narrative that places of primacy on these governments fighting their own wars on terror. And, you know, I think the US government has begun to recognize that that's been a mistake, you can see that explicitly stated in the policy in regards to the coastal West African States have been in Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana red, this is a new kind of target region for the US in terms of preventing these militant groups from infiltrating through these countries down to the, to the coast to the ocean, for, you know, for their economic reasons, and smuggling routes and all that. So we, you know, I think, I think in the United States, it's, it's time to ask the big picture questions that don't get asked, you know, instead of just tweaking US security assistance, to make it kind of slightly different, slightly better, let's be courageous enough to say, you know, what we've done so far hasn't worked. A militarized assistance hasn't, and not only paid lip service to a whole lot more holistic, development oriented approach, but completely, you know, realize that difference in practice, because I think a lot of times, there's what there's a difference between what's said at the level of the US government, and what actually happens on the ground, and really what negotiations happen at the level of, for example, the United States Embassy is the ambassador who's the one who decides on the balance of powers between the three Ds defense, diplomacy and development. And and in practice, I think a lot of times, the defense approach kind of gains the upper hand. But what would happen if we were to kind of dramatically rethink this and change the narrative and say, Actually, the answer, the so called Answer to violent militant attacks, is not a war. It's never been more, it's never been effective, not in Afghanistan or anywhere else. So So let's look at alternatives. Let's, let's support local efforts at negotiations, we saw the, actually the first coup, The First Hunter led government in Burkina Faso, doing some making some important strides in in, you know, negotiations with some of the militant groups that were reducing the violence. Let's recognize that the roots of the conflict are structural in nature, this is about peoples, you know, that this kind of roiling, anti colonial sentiment, right, this kind of the anger at injustice, that the anger at the fact that people are living in extreme poverty, that the you know, there's kind of elite corruption, there's, there's so many claims that people have around, we deserve a better life. This colonialism was, you know, utterly unjust that left us in this place. There's this, you know, there's university students, I spoke with a new chair, who, who were talking about how the militant groups, and they were on the same continuum of kind of frustration with the system as it is, and trying to find, you know, in the case of the militant groups, they're using violence as a tactic. The university students at the time anyway that I spoke to them, were using peaceful protests on the streets of the capital. Right. So so they, but they saw it as one in the same. And so I think there's a real need to address the kind of roots of those grievances that are leading to recruitment to these militant groups and the fact that they're gaining sway.

**Adekeye Adebajo 43:38**

Really? Yeah, I liked I liked that it's really captures it very well in terms of tackling the root causes and adopting a different approach. But for your US audience, I just wanted to add my perspective to US policy, I think we mustn't forget that Barack Obama militarized, and continued the securitization of us Africa policy that Bush had begun, as we heard, quite succinctly, and we must not forget that it was the action during the NATO intervention in 2011, which Obama later described as his largest regret, the heavy weapons that those militants took into Mali and the rest of the for hell did great damage in terms of adding to a lot of this destabilization. And that history, for me, is important to note. And what we're seeing in Asia and other places is also part of that blowback as well. And I'm just very curious to know perhaps, you know, those of you in Washington, DC that follow this more closely. It was Biden that pulled out of Afghanistan after two weeks trillion dollars and 20 years and total wastage. And I think the last thing he would want going into every election battle is a kind of Blackhawk down Somalia type situation, you know, you mentioned the for US troops that were killed in 2019. And many people were shocked at the beginning of the Trump administration, like what's the US military doing in Nigeria? So I'm wondering whether that will actually make the us a bit more cautious. And it's something that I think we need to also think a little bit about.

**Alex Thurston 45:37**

Yeah, well said. I mean, it's really interesting to sort of follow what signals are coming, you know, often from anonymous, US officials quoted in the press about about, you know, their willingness to engage the hunter, right, there seems to be at least one strand of thinking within the US government that would that would preserve, you know, security assistance and make exceptions for Asia, despite provisions in, you know, us regulations that would cut off assistance to, you know, coup makers, some seem to be arguing that Asia is just too important to kind of walk away from on the other hand, that would that would send I think, a really powerful and, you know, to my mind, you know, hypocritical message about about state and US values on democracy. So yeah, it is

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**Adekeye Adebajo 46:19**

But but we know that the US did that in Egypt.

**Alex Thurston 46:22**

Yeah. Now there's precedent, of course, yeah. Yeah, it's true. No, they'll they'll make exceptions for situations they see as critical to US interests as butter, always subjective, of course. There's so many brilliant questions in the chat. And I'm, you know, we're starting to get toward the end of the session. Um, there was, there's one here, I'll direct to Stephanie, because this was something I had meant to ask you anyways. And this is very well praise from from Andrew Bhutan. What role if any, does the US military training play in these coos, as far as I know, these FMC courses, for military training courses, especially for the officer corps, focus on teaching respect for human for civilian role, human rights and democracy, and each time we see a coup, the hunter invariably contains officers who have gone through multiple us training courses, is this just a coincidence, whereas there are causal connections definitely all add to that, that you see sort of, I think, the full range of opinions now and in the debate, you see some people saying, you know, these should be understood as sort of us trained officers, and almost sort of implying that, like, the US, you know, has, you know, has an intense relationship. On the other hand, you see people sometimes dismissing an entirely right and saying, you know, this is this is just, you know, any sort of Colonel or general in the Sahel would have participated in some kind of us training exercise. So this means very little. And then you see, and I guess this is more where I am sort of range, right and saying, Okay, let's look at the specifics of how a particular officer, you know, engaged with the United States what what the extent of the contact was, before we kind of assess what this means. And you had talked about about MusclePharm warrior has become, you know, now sort of infamous in the wake of the coup. In any case, how do you how do you look at the impact of us training and the relationship to cause if any?

**Stephanie Savell 48:02**

Yeah, I mean, I think that there is a lot of truth to the perspective that the US government has trained people out to such a broad scale, that, you know, of course, there's going to be quite a number of the coup leaders who have been trained by the US because the US has trained so many of these military leaders. And I think, you know, there is a structural argument to be made, in the sense that the US has just really heavily funded these militaries. And there's there was a recent UNDP study that showed that countries with a history of military involvement in politics and a very continuing active role of the military in government are more likely to see these ongoing coos. So I think the structural argument is that the military, the US has kind of contributed to this imbalance that we've that we see in some of these countries, the and the military kind of continuing, you know, really local, I mean, these are local traditions. And, you know, this is the fifth coup and in Niger since independence. So you can't overstate this, either. I mean, that's important to recognize, but then, but then the, you know, the hundreds of millions of dollars, what does that do to this already skewed balance of power, where the military has this over active role in determining political outcomes?

**Alex Thurston 49:36**

Right, great, excellent. Um, there's one question I can handle really quickly, which is from Mark rozanski, who says, How many people are attending this webinar? So currently, I think we peaked at 199 a few seconds ago. So and as Mark is saying, This is important to know to have

some idea how much or how little interest there is about new shirts. I'm actually surprised I would have I'm glad that we got into triple digits. I actually didn't expect that.

**Adekeye Adebajo 49:58**

We were at 2:15 Alex at one point.

**Alex Thurston 50:01**

Really? Okay, so I missed that. Okay. So when we picked over 200, which I think as Mark was saying, I think this is interesting about the level of interest, I don't think, well, who knows? I'm not sure when would have gotten, you know, that level of interest for the coup in Kenya, for example, or you know, even for Burkina Faso, I think Niger has gotten to a higher level of attention, maybe because it's so late in the sequence. But also, I think, because of because Niger is seen as having more geopolitical significance than some of the others. I think we have time for a couple more. And if I don't get to your question, folks, I apologize, because there's really a lot of brilliant questions here in the chat. One, I'll direct this to Hannah from from Peter Larson. Can someone examine the nature of quote unquote, democratic rule in Nigeria, where poverty literacy, etcetera, are huge challenges? Is this a matter of squinting to see what you want to see? I'll tack on to that. And can we say how democratic really were Muhammad Bazoom. And his predecessor, Muhammad, we support?

**Hannah Rae Armstrong 51:02**

You know, I think there's this this kind of myth of the model, and it's definitely touched on this earlier. But this is sort of the model of democracy is is almost like the, the, you know, it's, it's, it's, it's like the kiss of death. You know, I remember Mali in 20 2011, was was referred to as a model of democracy. And it and shortly after, it imploded, spectacularly, and everything that was seen as sort of solid institutionally just crumbled. So, you know, to what extent is Niger on was Niger on sort of a solid democratic path, a lot of it was wrapped up in President Bazoom, and the political party and this sort of continuity that he brought to the table, you know, coming after, after YSU. And the fact that he, you know, comes from a minority group within the country, he was a leader who really represented something that I find really kind of particular, to me share, there's a lot of, there's a lot more sort of mixing and inclusivity, in Nisha, compared to sort of Burkina Faso and Mali, at least, I think that's how it sort of Nigerians see themselves that way is sort of less separated by, you know, community differences. And so, you know, Bazoom was really skilled at, you know, sort of politics of inclusivity, and working with a lot of different groups, and there was something democratic in that approach. You know, in terms of institutional democracy. You know, I, there were a lot of failures, in, you know, in terms of how the institutions, the political institutions performed, you know, including the elections, which were not transparent and had irregularities, including the banning of the main opposition candidate, you know, in terms of, you know, his his purge of the army, which was a direct contributing factor to, to the, to this present day coup, in terms of his sort of crackdown on on civil society. You know, he was civil, civil society, critics and dissidents, people who called for corruption, journalists who spoke out against corruption and abuses were harassed and arrested. So, you know, there's this sense in which you can sort of perform democracy, by zoom to his credit, I think, did bring more than just the kind of performance to the table and did have a sort of an inclusive approach and, and a level of diplomacy and skill, which, which really should be sort of commended, and are, have been rare in the region. But at the same time, you know, does it does it qualify as, as you know, we're the institutions supporting democracy? Or was this more about one person, and then, you know, to sort of go against what I've just said, the very fact that bazooms sort of followed on the heels of Easter food was was already sort of evidence of state capture, by by a particular political faction, you know, and arguably, this coup is really just about the mode of alternatives that the country has come to expect.

**Alex Thurston 54:18**

Yeah, this is a really important part of this, right? It's sort of like an abstract theoretical question for political scientists, right to think about, you know, democracy and how to categorize super complex figures like zoom, but then part of I mean, a lot of it really matters, right, especially for sort of what's come up repeatedly in the session, which is kind of the perception of ordinary citizens, right, of how, you know, what these figures represent. And, you know, a figure who is seen as a as a, you know, a Democrat and a skillful diplomat and architect of stability could, you know, in Washington or wherever it could be seen very, very differently in, you know, in the army or in other parts of the country. We're almost out of time. Couple of interesting comments in the chat. So Jim Lowe, who said I'm convinced as well flagging an op ed by Alex de Waal in the New York Times in which the wall argued that it was time to face the fact that the certainly in governments in particular simply lack the resources to tackle all the challenges they face from Japan insurrections to climate change to lack of jobs, economic resources. This is really potentially quite bleak. And I would recommend reading the op ed by the wall as well. But I think that there's a, you know, a serious call to think about the limitations of some of the, you know, the states and the poorest the poorest states in the world, some of them and what they can achieve under heavy, heavy constraints, no matter who's in charge. They are Powell, another colleague, several experts is Fred certainly has economic interest in Asia, but it's interesting to share in uranium has declined tremendously in the past 15 years or so. legacies are certainly poisonous, but current friends interesting news, there are a bunch of hottest about migration, about prestige, and about fears of humiliation and regional geostrategic concerns in any case, and this was a key theme in the chat was people thinking about the current role of France thinking about issues of colonialism and neocolonialism and so forth? We're really almost out of time. So I think maybe we could just do any closing thoughts from from the panelists. Here, why don't we start with you any any takeaways or anything you want to leave the audience with?

**Adekeye Adebajo 56:17**

Well, I think we need to think a bit more deeply, as you have said, and others have said, Alex, about what the root causes of these issues are, we need to think very carefully about governance issues also, within West Africa, because those are the root causes of many of these problems. We know that the soldiers are opportunistic, because we've had 30 years of military governments which have failed spectacularly as politicians to transform the situation. But I think we also need to focus on the fact that when civilian governments even if they're democratically elected, close up the political space and start acting autocratically. The military is the only mechanism to actually change these systems. So these are some of the things we need to think about. And then in terms of the lack of capacity of regional peacekeepers, also, you know, the UN is withdrawing from Mali. The AU, as I said, is withdrawing from Somalia. To think of it division of labor, that's going to make sense, because in some of these cases, peacekeeping will still help stabilize situations while political solutions are being sought. Thanks.

**Alex Thurston 57:43**

Great, Stephanie. Any final thoughts? Yeah,

**Stephanie Savell 57:47**

I think in all this kind of tangled web of complexities, the thing that I always try to ground myself in and come back to, is the fact that this is something all this conflict, it affects civilians, like regular people, the most, over 4.4 million Nigerians are food insecure, hundreds of 1000s are displaced in neighboring Burkina Faso, they're calling it the, you know, the least paid attention to humanitarian disaster in the world right now. So this is really dramatically affecting people, this has long lasting impacts far beyond any violence, this is going to affect, you know, children and their ability to survive and thrive. It's going to, it just is so deep, in terms of its effects on ordinary people, and the fear and the trauma and all of it that that this, you know that this kind of conflict perpetuates. So, you know, I think in terms of thinking about a forward looking solution, that's the top most thing to keep in mind. And whatever the US does, or, you know, any other foreign power for that matter, that that's the main orienting, orienting pole is, you know, how do we kind of alleviate the suffering that this entails?

**Alex Thurston 59:08**

Yeah, I strongly agree, obviously. I mean, I think, looking at sort of the power politics and yummy among the leader, looking at the geopolitics, I think it's easy sometimes to lose sight of ordinary people, but but that's where I think the focus should be as well.

**Hannah Rae Armstrong 59:21**

Last word for Yeah. Well, to close on on a bizarrely sort of optimistic note, I think that we actually, I mean, that we're in an unusual moments right now, where the US for the first time is starting to diverge from French led Western policy in the Sahel region. And I think, you know, there's the all of the anti French sentiment that we've that we've discussed, and all of its consequences really don't apply to the United States. You know, and I think that there is an opportunity, you know, having said that, the US doesn't really be isn't really taking seriously, you know, its responsibilities in Africa, but fact that there hasn't been an ambassador to the chair at a time when these types of wars were going on. And we had this incredibly expensive drone base, you know, where the fact that the post of Sato envoy has been empty for a couple of years now shows that it's clearly not a policy priority for for the US. But I think that I think that it's important up until now, you know, watching Tim has been mostly content to sort of let parents take the lead on societal issues. This hasn't really worked out well for anybody. And as we see some aliens increasingly sort of turn against the French, there is an opportunity for the United States to chart its own path, and try to find more positive ways to sort of support its partners. That's a very steep challenge. But you know, it is it is an opening. So

**Alex Thurston 1:00:53:**

Glimmer, a glimmer of hope amid a very bleak situation. We're over time. So thanks very much to Quincy for hosting. Thanks very much to the panelists for joining us and for sharing all their expertise. Thanks very much to the audience, and especially to all those who contributed questions and comments. Apologies to those of you whose questions we didn't get to all of our panelists you can find online and be their work and benefit continue to benefit from their expertise. So with that, I think we could close so Thanks again, everybody.

**Adekeye Adebajo 1:01:23**

Thank you. Bye bye.

**Hannah Rae Armstrong 1:01:25**

Thanks very much. Thank you, bye bye bye.