

FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN WEST AFRICA'S SECURITY SECTOR

THE WEST, RUSSIA, AND CHINA

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The **FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN WEST AFRICA'S SECURITY SECTOR: THE WEST, RUSSIA AND CHINA** is a publication of Dataphyte.

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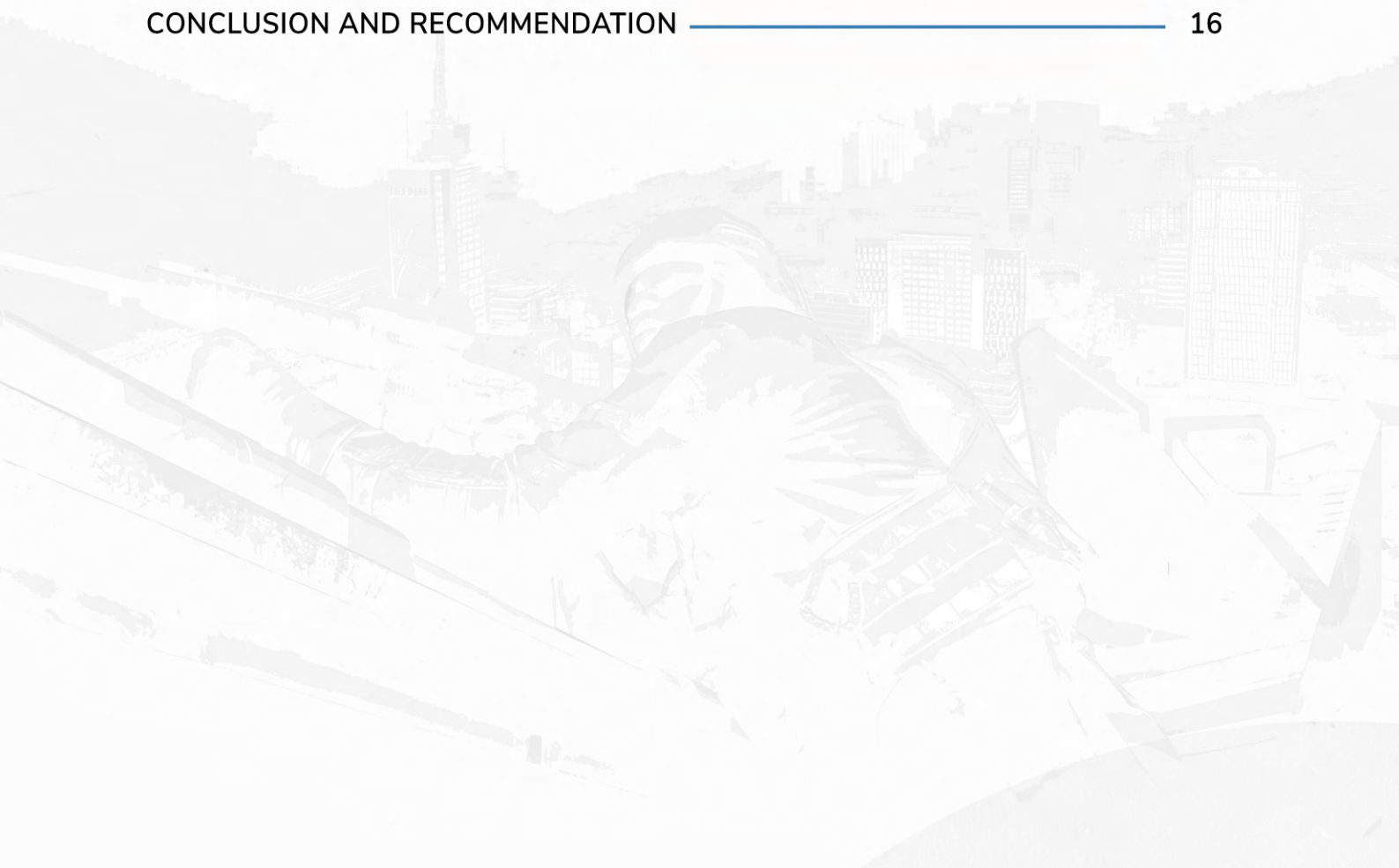
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent coups in the West Africa region have amplified the need to review the state of play among security stakeholders in the region. This is because the increased relationship between states in the international system means that actions in one part of the world affect the other, and efforts as varied as trade and security are closely intertwined.

Historically, the call has been made for exclusively African solutions to African problems. However, and increasingly so, there is a strong case to be made for more consideration for recent powers and their relationships within the region. China has made economic partnership with the region a strong focus in its foreign policy push while also engaging within the ambit of information disorder. Russia has also been flagged for information disorder and the growing incursion of the Wagner mercenary group in the region. Likewise, other powers such as Germany, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States have also become forces to consider when discussing security in the region.

This briefing paper seeks to understand the question of what drives foreign influence in West Africa's security sector. In doing so, it addresses the aforementioned considerations in reviewing what has informed or driven this influence in the region from established external powers and what this will or might lead to. Most recent analyses focus on the economic and trade dimensions of many geopolitical activities, and with good reason. Yet, the increasing presence of non-state actors in the region has led to a rise in security investment and collaboration. Regime security has long been the motivation for most state governments, and that has led to a renewed set of alliances in addressing the several prevalent non-state actors in the region.

This paper further unpacks the historical and ongoing role that state actors play and seeks to see if there is a path forward in effectively leveraging foreign interest and investment in security in West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In response to demands from Nigerien coup leaders, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a decision¹ to withdraw the remaining stationed French troops from the country by December 2023. This announcement marked another shift in relations between the former colonial power and a region it had extensive influence over. This also marked another milestone in the ongoing Nigerien leadership crisis and perhaps put a death knell on the ambitions of Mohamed Bazoum, the deposed leader, returning to power.

Before the coup on 26 July 2023, which saw Abdourahamane Tchiani, head of the presidential guard, assume power, Niger was a bulwark in the fight against insecurity in the region and was a reliable ally of several Western powers. Bazoum had come to power after contentious but ultimately recognised elections that marked the first democratic transition² of power in the country. The resulting goodwill from the West was predicated on the strong relationship that his predecessor, Mahamadou Issoufou, had cultivated with donors and security partners. As Issoufou's hand-picked successor and a key part of his government, Bazoum³ was expected to be a similar friend in this battle for regional security.

As a result, when the coup took place, France refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the coup leaders, refusing to withdraw its

ambassador, even when the country had asked him to leave. Macron was adamant that the only authority he recognised was that of the deposed Bazoum, whom he claimed to speak to every day and whose decision he would respect. France's dogged support for his administration was comparable only to that of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which had even gone as far as threatening the use of force⁴ to restore democracy in a member state.

An adequate understanding of France's support for Bazoum requires a deeper delve into the background of foreign influence in the security sector in the region. This has historically been through the role that former colonial powers, largely France and the United Kingdom, have played in the affairs of their former colonies.

In some cases, these relationships were carried on with defence pacts such as the Anglo-Nigerian pact and the recently rescinded France-Mali pact which led to increased involvement by these former powers in the domestic affairs of the region.

It has often resulted in some of the vitriol from citizens, in the aftermath of coups, being directed towards these powers because of their complacency and complicity in propping up somewhat unpopular governments.

¹ Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/24/france-to-withdraw-ambassador-troops-from-niger-after-coup-macron>

² France24: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210402-niger-inaugurates-new-president-in-its-first-democratic-transfer-of-power>

³ Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/world/french-president-macron-i-talk-every-day-nigers-ousted-president-bazoum-2023-09-01/>

⁴ DW: <https://www.dw.com/en/ecowas-threatens-use-of-force-against-niger-junta/a-66398008>

However, and increasingly so, there is a strong case to be made for more recent powers and their relationships within the region. China has made economic partnership with the region a strong focus in its foreign policy push while also engaging within the ambit of information disorder⁵. Russia has also been flagged for information disorder and the growing incursion of the Wagner mercenary group in the region⁶. Likewise, other powers such as Germany, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States have also become forces to consider when discussing security in the region.

It also requires understanding the state of play concerning different actors, state and non-state, that continue to exert significant influence on the region's insecurity. This includes the recent wave of jihadist extremism, including the oft-cited presence of Boko Haram terrorists and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the region. These relationships and influences are also tied to issues around religion and culture and how a very heterogeneous landscape is ample fodder for such clashes and instances.

This briefing paper seeks to understand the question of what drives foreign influence in West Africa's security sector. In doing so, it addresses the aforementioned considerations in reviewing what has informed or driven this influence in the region from established external powers and what this will or might lead to.

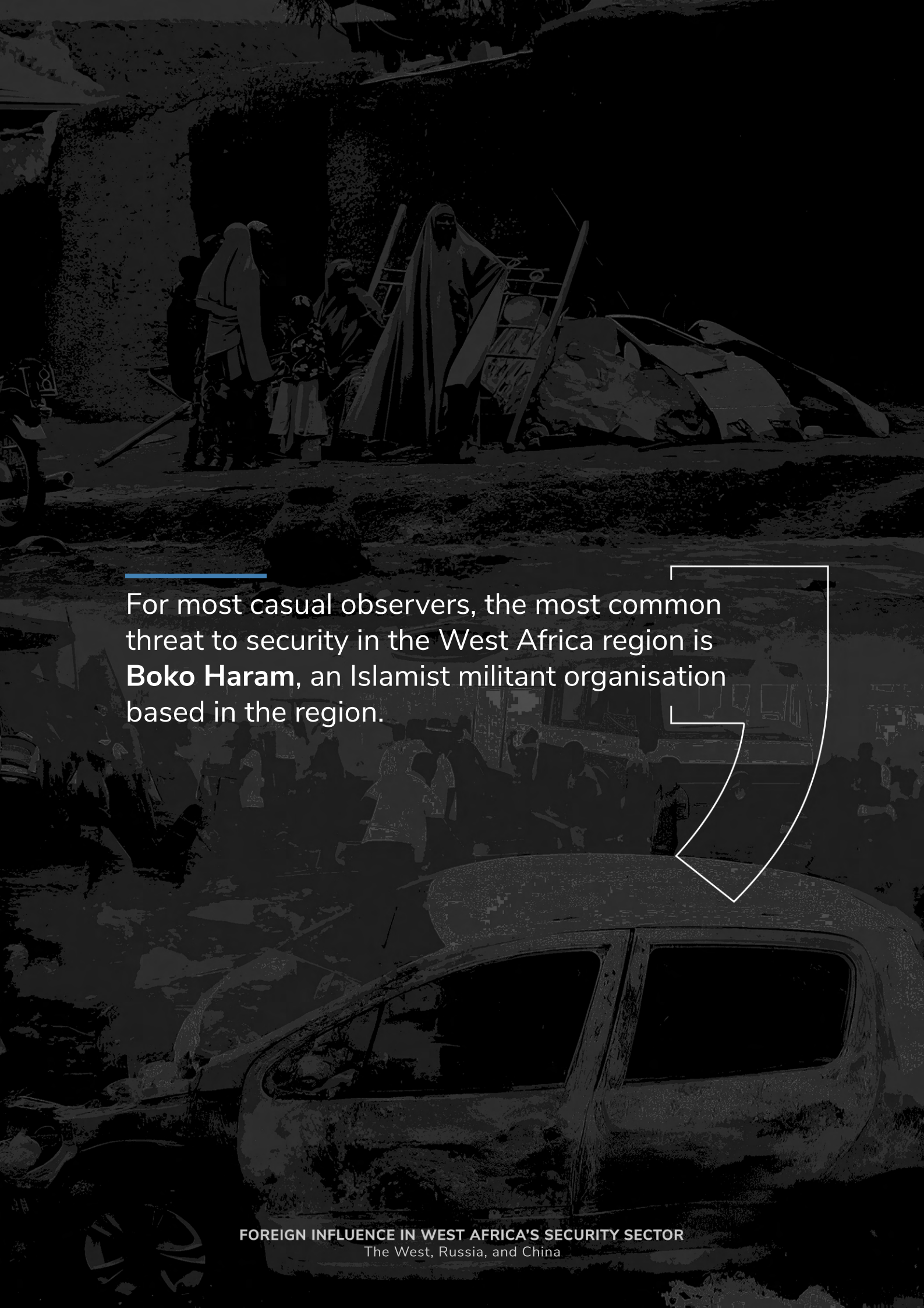
NON-STATE ACTORS

Historically, interactions between African states were driven strictly with the intention of preserving sovereignty that still felt dynamic even if decades after there have been a handful of redrawn maps. This was especially the case when most states were led by military leaders who did not assume office with as much experience or expertise in fiscal and monetary management. In West Africa, from 1975 to 1999, there were at least four military governments – with the number rising to nine between 1982 and 1984.

This background of the people occupying leadership roles led to two major changes. First, security assumed a more pre-eminent role because this was the area that most military leaders had experience in and because of the need to preserve their regimes from hostile actors and dissidents. Second, there was the formation of regional trade blocs, such as ECOWAS, because of potential sanctions and cessation of relations from Western powers seeking to entrench democracy. This is why the regional blocs in West and Central Africa the two zones accounting for most of the coups recorded on the continent were named and formed to prioritise economic partnership and trade. However, while the focus was on trade, the need for security partnerships and alliances to preserve these ties soon arose. In some cases, these security deals helped states to ensure

⁵ CDD West Africa: <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/reports/illiberal-influence-fuels-disinformation-in-west-africa/>

⁶ Ibid



For most casual observers, the most common threat to security in the West Africa region is **Boko Haram**, an Islamist militant organisation based in the region.

ensure amenable partners were behind the decision-making in several countries. This has been cited as a reason behind the extensive record of French involvement in the leadership transitions in their former colonies.

Most recent analyses focus on the economic and trade dimensions of many geopolitical activities, and with good reason. Yet, the increasing presence of non-state actors in the region has led to a rise in security investment and collaboration. Regime security has long been the motivation for most state governments, and that has led to a renewed set of alliances in addressing the several prevalent non-state actors in the region.

Boko Haram

For most casual observers, the most common threat to security in the West Africa region is Boko Haram, an Islamist militant organisation based in the region. Its name translates to 'Western Education is forbidden', and its followers have largely sought to counter the growing influence of secularism and Western ideals in the region. Since it was founded in 2002, the organisation has since undergone radical evolutions from a more religious and culturally based approach and taken on a more violent position. According to the Global Terrorism Index, it was the world's deadliest terror group in 2015⁷.

Chad region, with Chad, Niger and Cameroon also recording scores of victims. Yet Nigeria has been the epicentre of its activities, with several states in its North-East geopolitical zone still reeling from the crisis in different forms. Nigeria's military received significant allocations in the budget, but these funds were not directed effectively⁸ and were often redirected to private hands. Successive attacks in religious centres, offices, the resident United Nations office⁹, and schools, most notably the kidnapping of children from Chibok¹⁰, led to increased concerns about security in the country. From 2013, prominent donor countries designated the group as a terrorist organisation, which helped with allocating funds and supporting the training of local troops. In 2014, China provided data reconnaissance support to the army, while France, the United Kingdom and the United States also sent trainers to support the effort in combating the terrorist group¹¹.

A major factor in the interaction of foreign powers with Boko Haram was the relationship with the Goodluck Jonathan government (2010 – 2015), largely associated with corruption and distrust between the Nigerian and American armies. This led to the refusal of the Obama Administration to sell Cobra helicopters, for fear of poor management and human rights concerns, and the Nigerian government terminating a joint

⁷ Institute for Economics and Peace: <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>

⁸ Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-military-insight-idUSBREA4809220140509>

⁹ NYT: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/world/africa/29nigeria.html>

¹⁰ The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/19/88-nigerian-schoolgirls-abducted-by-islamic-extremists-still-missing>

¹¹ SCMP: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1507498/china-pledges-help-nigerias-hunt-boko-haram-militants>

training session in 2014¹². There was a renewed approach to engagement between the two governments when Jonathan lost re-election in 2015 to retired General Muhammadu Buhari, who was largely elected on the premise of anti-corruption reputation and his military experience. While the jury is still out on how effective the Buhari government (2015 – 2023) was in handling the crisis before handing over to the incumbent administration, the considerable goodwill it received upon assumption led to increased foreign investment and support in the crisis.

The prevailing challenge is the splintering¹³ and diffusion of Boko Haram forces and the increased clashes between these sects and security forces. One of these groups, the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), has relied on considerable financial, security and advice-based support from ISIS headquarters. This clash between the groups has led to increased displacement and necessitated re-evaluating strategies to target both groups.

Jihadist Movements

Less conventionally covered, but more pertinent today, extreme jihadist movements in the Sahel have become an avenue for increased engagement and partnership with foreign powers, such as the United States, China, Germany and the European Union. This has also

been precipitated by several established terrorist sects based in other areas now establishing regional bases in West Africa.

Virtually every state in the region is embroiled in one clash or the other, with jihadist groups moving southward in a bid to reach more coastal states. Jihadist movements have established bases in northern Mali and eastern Burkina Faso and have largely taken up territory in forests along neighbouring Benin, Ghana, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire¹⁴. The terrain and weather patterns have helped belligerent forces in their activities and led to quicker wins over established forces. Recent coups have also not helped because of the re-deployment of military officers to other areas to establish control and the space for jihadists to utilise pockets of anti-coup sentiments to strike and gain support.

French involvement in these states has been seen through different lenses. On one hand, there is the argument that French military operations have played a considerable role in pushing back jihadist advancement and stemming the tide against other areas being overrun¹⁵. However, there is also the narrative that French intervention in checking jihadist insurgents in urban areas after a 2012 battle in northern Mali led to increased numbers of rural citizens rising against anti-imperialist sentiment and fighting back¹⁶. In any case, impressions that foreign

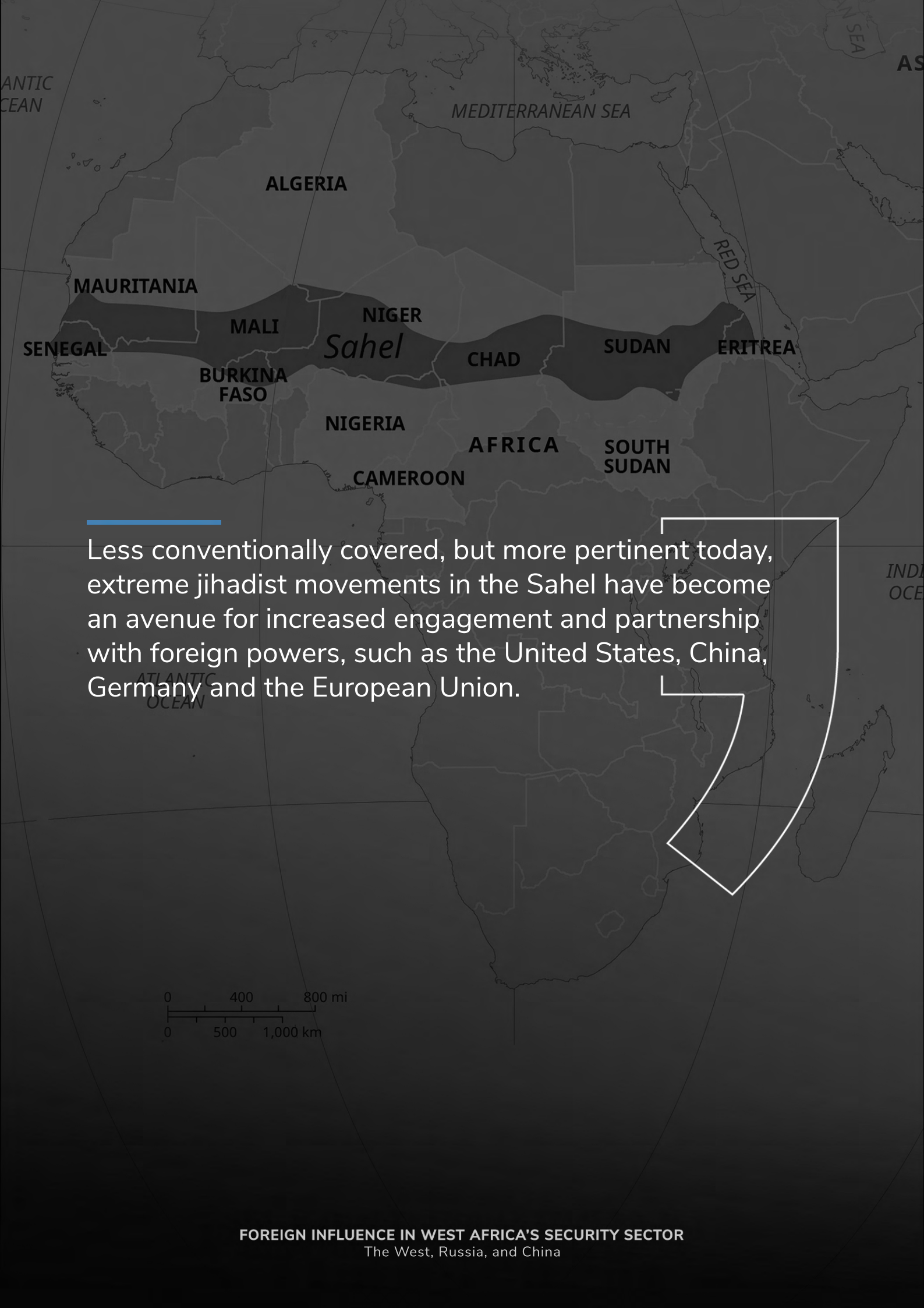
¹² Navy Times: <https://archive.today/20141201234012/http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2014/12/01/nigeria-ends-us-mission-counter-boko-haram/19743581/>

¹³ Crisis Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/fighting-among-boko-haram-splinters-rages>

¹⁴ Crisis Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire>

¹⁵ Crisis Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural>

¹⁶ Jihadology: <http://jihadology.net/2018/03/17/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimins-ya%E1%B8%A5ya-abu-al-hamam-and-with-patience-you-win/>



Less conventionally covered, but more pertinent today, extreme jihadist movements in the Sahel have become an avenue for increased engagement and partnership with foreign powers, such as the United States, China, Germany and the European Union.

governments are seeking to subjugate local populations continue to help with recruitment and push fears of engaging with foreign governments. In the aftermath of coups in the region, most new regimes have been welcomed by citizens, often as a result of anti-French statements and actions.

STATE-RECOGNISED ACTORS

Competition for local resources plays a major role in shaping the outcome of these conflicts. Some governments have sought to leverage resources by offering imbalanced arrangements with foreign powers in exchange for military and security support. As a result, opposition parties and military regimes, have used this point to criticise governments, which has often led to resentment and anti-government support¹⁷. As a result, foreign influence has undergone a lot more scrutiny in recent years.

Regional – ECOWAS & Alliance of Sahel States

An important point to note in the wake of the more concerted security- and politically-based interventions that ECOWAS has had to deal with, is that the institution was not originally created to preserve peace and democracy in the region. Like most regional economic communities on the continent, its original purpose was to handle economic integration. However, a desire for protection against sanctions from Western governments, owing to unconstitutional military

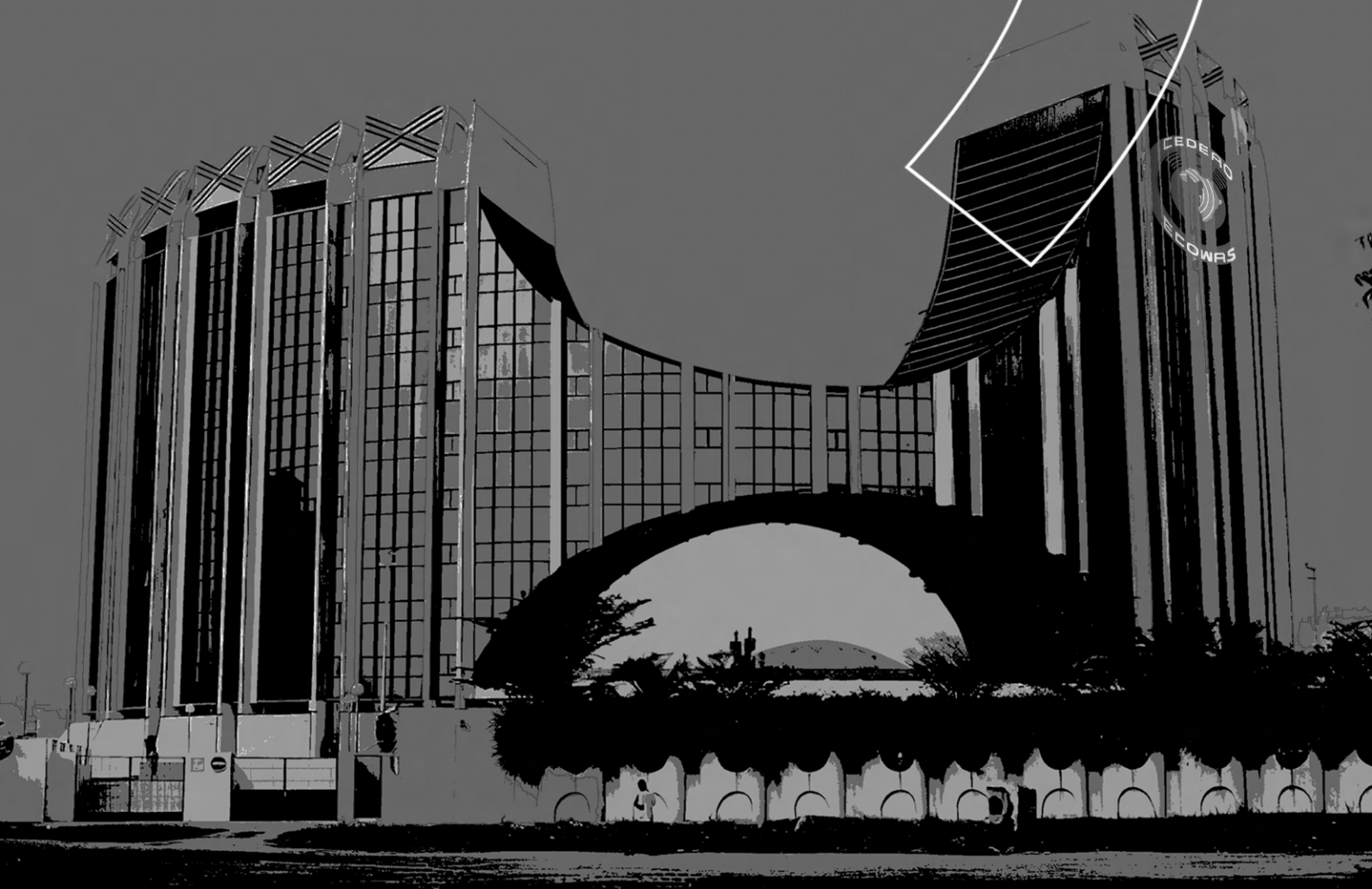
takeovers, and neighbouring states supporting potential civil wars, led to a necessary pivot by the bloc. A series of successive conflicts, driven internally and by external mercenaries, led to the establishment of non-aggression pacts in 1978 and 1981, and a 1990s push towards the relationship between security and good governance¹⁸. As a result, ECOWAS has now become a more active player in addressing these issues and in convening responses to security challenges in the region. The formation of different ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) deployments, for instance, has elevated the bloc from simply dealing with economic integration and focusing on political development.

ECOWAS has particularly thrived in managing the response to recent coups in West Africa. Between 2016 and 2019, there were no military governments in the region and there was optimism of considerable consolidation of democratic gains. After all, it was the first such stretch in ECOWAS's history. However, since 2020, there has been a coup wave. Mali (August 2020), Guinea (September 2021), Burkina Faso (January and September 2022) and Niger (July 2023) have seen military regimes assume control, and redirected ECOWAS's focus. The impact of coups in foreign security can't be understated, especially with each succeeding occurrence. Niger's was a particular blow, not only to French ambitions in the region but, to other Western powers such as Germany, U.S., U.K., and the European Union. As stated earlier, Bazoum was a strong ally and his removal has

¹⁷ World Bank: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/4c36fca6-c7e0-5927-b171-468b0b236b59>

¹⁸ Chambas foreword in West Africa's Security Challenges: https://www.riennet.com/title/West_Africa_s_Security_Challenges_Building_Peace_in_a_Troubled_Region

Regional – ECOWAS and Alliance of Sahel States
An important point to note in the wake of the more concerted security and politically-based interventions that ECOWAS has had to deal with based in the region.



put an end to several initiatives to curb the aggression of many non-state actors and also limit illegal immigration to Europe. Most foreign groups preferred to work through ECOWAS's leadership, supporting the bloc's announcement to intervene militarily if there was no return to democracy and largely ceding ownership of the situation. The bloc, led by Nigeria, itself was also under considerable pressure by domestic prominent groups, such as the Senate¹⁹ and northern leaders²⁰, that pushed back against the president's threat to militarily intervene. Furthermore, coup response fatigue might have also played a part in blunting the reactionary impulses of a bloc that had suspended a fifth of its membership (the number rising to four when the bloc finally acknowledged the junta as the government of Niger in December 2023)²¹. As a result, the bloc has been largely limited to engaging on diplomatic engagement and coordinating military options, and not actively working on more on-the-ground security collaboration.

This is why, of late, ECOWAS has struggled to effectively utilise its convening power in dealing with security threats. It has not been helped by the fact that four of its 15 members have been suspended for recently experiencing military coups. This means that most of the institution's efforts in this area have been focused on deterring other countries from experiencing the same and in trying to bring coup-led states back

into the fold. This has meant that it has not been as effective in establishing itself as a partner in security activities, where most arrangements are carried out bilaterally and through direct channels within countries or smaller groupings such as the G5 Sahel and Lake Chad Basin Commission. A recent formation is the Alliance of Sahel States, a mutual defence pact created between military-led Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in September 2023²². This union was done partly in direct response to the threat of a potential intervention levelled by ECOWAS against Niger following the coup. The alliance is also expected to help address the ongoing challenges in the Liptako-Gourma region that all three countries border and to pool resources together following the cut-off from military aid from Western countries.

ECOWAS remains a key factor in addressing the challenge of security in the region, but its composition and focus has allowed an opportunity for foreign powers to drive their own engagements in the region. We examine some of them below.

¹⁹ The Africa Report: <https://www.theafricareport.com/318122/nigerias-senate-rejects-military-intervention-in-niger-as-ultimatum-to-coup-leaders-expires/>

²⁰ The Sun Newspaper: <https://sunnewsonline.com/coup-52-northern-groups-condemn-tinubus-planned-war-with-niger/>

²¹ Premium Times Nigeria: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/651760-ecowas-finally-suspends-niger-republic.html>

²² Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16/>

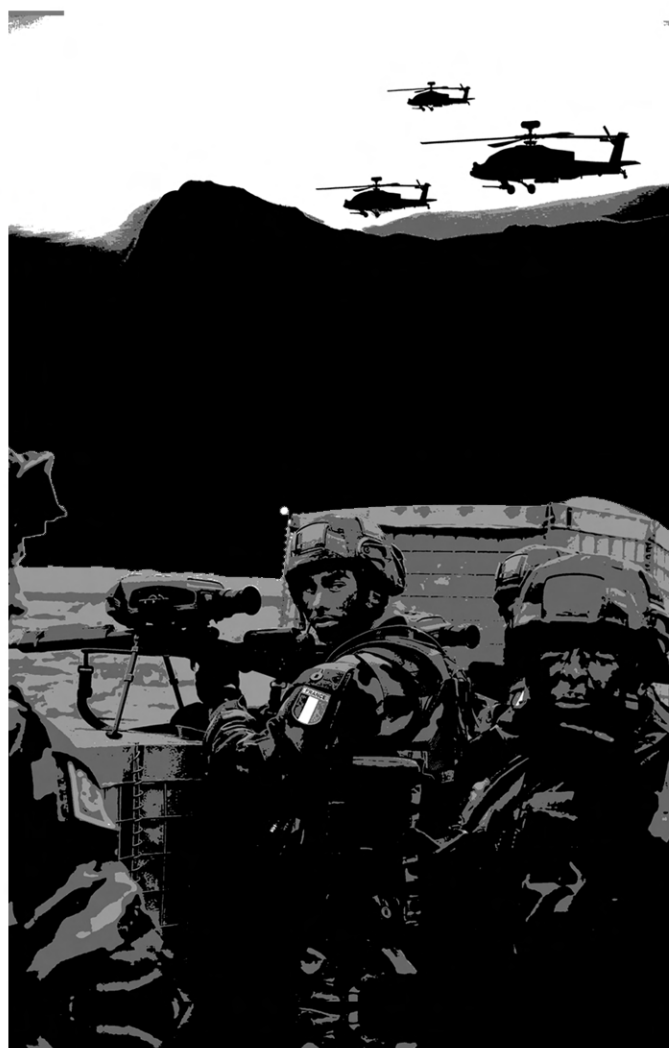
ECOWAS STATES



France

By far the most significant foreign actor in the region's history, recent events have diminished the influence of this former regional hegemon. All four recent coups in West Africa, and the most recent in Gabon, have all been in former French colonies. This is the latest in a considerable degradation of France' stature in the region, which has led to questions as to whether its approach to supporting security efforts in the region is worth emulating or steering clear of.

Most French security investment in the region has come with considerable deployment of troops. As of 2021, there were an estimated 5,400 French troops²³ on the continent fighting terror groups until Macron's decision to reduce this number. A notable element was Operation Barkhane²⁴, which worked in consonance with the G5 Sahel and saw the 2014 deployment of 3,000 soldiers in the G5 member states (Burkina Faso, Chad,



Mali, Mauritania and Niger). Yet, French ties in the region have since been considerably reduced with successive coups for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the perception of continued and undue influence in domestic affairs after independence has given the sense that France has been tied with the elite that have been displaced in the aftermath of these coups. As a result, there has been little push back when coups have succeeded, and even mass outpourings of support – as seen in Burkina Faso²⁵ after the September 2022 coup; Niger's decision to expel

²³ Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-announce-troop-reduction-sahel-operations-sources-2021-06-10/>

²⁴ National Interest: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/welcome-frances-new-war-terror-africa-operation-barkhane-11029>

²⁵ Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-announce-troop-reduction-sahel-operations-sources-2021-06-10/>

the French Ambassador²⁶, and Mali's decision to end its defence pacts with France²⁷ in 2022.

Where next for France in the region? It still maintains strong ties with Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, although elections in the former might see a pivot to a different relationship and Ouattara in the latter has become increasingly viewed the same way other dictators were. Togo²⁸ has featured on a list of potential coup-able countries, and Benin²⁹ reportedly foiled an attempt just three years ago. Macron might also decide to pivot to a different relationship with the region, one that he has admittedly pushed since assuming office³⁰. There could be a better relationship with ECOWAS, as Nigeria's new president has shown a growing affinity for France³¹, one that might signal a revised relationship with the regional giant.

The rest of the 'West' – the US, the UK, Germany and the E.U

Lumping the UK, a former colonial power with considerable influence in its former colonies in Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, with other countries might seem like a stretch after looking at France alone.

Yet, it is an acknowledgment that British foreign policy is not seen in the same lens as its other colonial competitor and is unlikely to receive the same treatment in any of its former colonies. Apart from a reported coup scare in Sierra Leone³², Anglophone West Africa has been relatively peaceful and stable, engaging with democratic transitions credibly.

Yet there is a sense that the rest of the West is revising commitments in Anglophone West Africa despite no indication that the situation is under control. U.S policy appears directed towards buttressing efforts in coastal West Africa, under a mandate in its 2019 Global Fragility Act³³, but all of this abandons the landlocked Sahel states that have fallen to coups and are more at risk of jihadist extremism. As of 2021, there were an estimated 6,000 American troops³⁴ on the continent fighting terror groups. This number is expected to reduce as the Biden Administration reconciles working with governments³⁵ with poor records on maintaining human rights, at the risk of allowing the region to become overrun with partnerships with militants and mercenary groups such as the Russian Wagner Group. It is unlikely that U.S forces will

²⁶ Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/nigers-military-rulers-order-police-to-expel-french-ambassador>

²⁷ Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/3/malis-junta-breaks-off-from-defence-accords-with-france>

²⁸ FT: <https://www.ft.com/content/90a13db1-bf7d-4694-807a-b489f8a43ef0>

²⁹ Africa Report: <https://www.theafricareport.com/31841/latest-coup-detat-attempt-in-benin-foiled/>

³⁰ Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/2/macron-says-era-of-french-interference-in-africa-is-over>

³¹ Leadership News: <https://leadership.ng/tinubu-embraces-france-in-early-foreign-policy-shift/>

³² Time Africa Magazine: <https://timeafricamagazine.com/coup-scare-senior-military-officers-arrested-in-sierra-leone-as-political-stand-off-escalates/>

³³ USIP: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/01/global-fragility-act-new-us-approach>

³⁴ LawfareBlog: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/defending-us-military-presence-africa-reasons-beyond-counterterrorism>

³⁵ Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/02/africa-burkina-faso-niger-security/>

be deployed to a fairly unknown region that does not register as prominently in key battleground states, especially with the ongoing Russian-Ukraine crisis. Still, there will be increased efforts to ensure that American influence is not wiped out. Recent coups have also affected American bases – the US has a drone base as well as 1,100 soldiers in Niger, but there has been a suspension of the US' security cooperation³⁶ with the Nigerien military. Other juntas have struggled with managing security in the volatile region, and diplomats and officers continue to reconcile having to engage with a region in flux.

The European Union allocated 29 billion euros to Sub-Saharan African programmes for the period 2021 – 2027³⁷, with an estimated 3 billion devoted to a rapid response to conflicts and humanitarian crises. Similarly, the European Peace Facility, with a ceiling of 5.7 billion euros, will allow the EU to supply military equipment to partners, primarily those in the region. Prior, in response to a request by the African Union, it established the African Peace Facility³⁸, which saw 2.68 billion euros devoted towards peace support operations. While a significant amount was devoted to Somalia, the G5 Sahel Joint Force³⁹ addressing issues in Burkina Faso, Chad,

Mali, Mauritania and Niger has also received increased funding since 2021, alongside the Multi-National Joint Task Force of the Lake Chad Basin Commission⁴⁰. Yet a lot of these commitments have been channelled through programs with regional bases such as the AU, ECOWAS, and Lake Chad Basin Commission and this might provide an alternative template for future engagement with the region.

Russia or Wagner?

More than the threats from other non-state actors, the looming threat of increased consolidation of mercenaries in the region remains a paramount concern. Few groups are as backed and present as the Wagner Group, a Russian based group that has been able to develop links with the various juntas in the region.

The Wagner Group has become well-known on the continent, where its influence can be felt in states as diverse as Sudan and Central Africa Republic⁴¹, with growing incursion into West Africa through a deal signed with Mali⁴² and reported deals with juntas in Burkina Faso and Niger⁴³. Wagner has often been seen as an extension of Russian foreign and security policy, with several groups welcomed with Russian

³⁶ Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/08/01/niger-coup-evacuations/?itid=lk_inline_manual_9

³⁷ Official Journal of the EU: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:209:FULL&from=EN>

³⁸ EU Parliament: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/LSU/?uri=celex:22003D0003\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/LSU/?uri=celex:22003D0003(01))

³⁹ EU Parliament: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652074/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)652074_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652074/EPRS_BRI(2020)652074_EN.pdf)

⁴⁰ Africa-EU Partnership: <https://africa-eu-partnership.org/en/projects/multinational-joint-task-force-mnjtf-against-boko-haram>

⁴¹ Brookings: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influencecommercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>

⁴² Africa Report: <https://www.theafricareport.com/127421/mali-russia-bamako-to-sign-contract-with-wagner-group/>

⁴³ Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/5/nigers-military-rulers-ask-for-help-from-russian-group-wagner>

their services sought when Western powers have often withdrawn support following unconstitutional power grabs. In an April 2023⁴⁴ leak of confidential information, there were considerable concerns about Wagner's influence in the region, and how vast and pervasive it has become. Some of the opportunities provided range from the well-known military roles to more informal political advisory, logistics management, resource extraction and information gathering with countries in all regions on the continent being served. It has proven to be a cheaper alternative and prepared to go beyond established norms and conventions of warfare. In 2021, France removed its forces from Mali⁴⁵ when Wagner forces moved in, and there was a similar 'substitution' when Burkina Faso ordered French troops to leave in February with Wagner expected to step in.

Perhaps more so than other state-recognised actors, Russia has actively sought to increase its influence while diminishing those of its contemporaries. Troll factories and active information disorder campaigns have been carried out to whittle and amplify critical sentiments of France⁴⁶ and reinforce extensive anti-Western propaganda. This approach has been effective, but it has also created a charged and highly sensitised environment. Russia still remains focused on the Ukrainian crisis, but it has maintained its effort in courting African states despite the impact that the war has had on African agriculture and trade. It hosted the

second Russia-Africa summit in 2023, and the meeting saw an opportunity to review the promises of increasing trade, made at the last summit in 2019, and the realisation that trade had actually decreased⁴⁷. Finally, if Russia (or Wagner) is unable to provide the considerable investment needed to address security challenges, the opportunity to stamp influence in the region might be lost forever if there is a pivot to Western allies that have proven capable of doing so.

In the wake of Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, there has been speculation over the future of the mercenary group he founded. Early indications appear to be an effort by Russian military and intelligence structures to incorporate the apparatus into their structure⁴⁸, along with the considerable assets and ties in the region. This might subject Wagner activities to general diplomatic conventions, with opposing states able to sanction or admonish Russia for the group's actions. There could be efforts to rebrand elements of the group, and local commanders might take advantage to carve out bits of the empire for their control. Yet, without the extensive intelligence and support it once received, even this might not provide the alternative some might seek. It might also make it less able to pivot and act quickly, losing a trait that was welcomed by its different clients. As a result, there might be an evolution in the manner of its influence in the region.

⁴⁴ Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/23/wagner-russia-africa-leaked-documents/>

⁴⁵ Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/17/mali-france-troops-withdrawal-macron/?itid=lk_inline_manual_63

⁴⁶ Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa-france-targets-russian-wagner-disinformation-2023-06-21/>

⁴⁷ Fortune: <https://fortune.com/2023/07/24/why-russia-africa-summit-vladimir-putin-yevgeny-prigozhin-wagner-group/>

⁴⁸ NYT: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-africa.html>

China: Preserving Economic Investment through Security

Expectedly, most narratives around China in Africa focus on its economic investment and the scale of its relations with the continent. However, China has increasingly committed more resources to security in the region, not least because of the need to protect its considerable economic investments. Furthermore, for a country with global hegemonic ambitions, there is a need to demonstrate a capacity to deploy support for security where needed. While most countries have several military bases, in some cases across neighbouring countries, China only has two – in Djibouti and its most recent in Equatorial Guinea.

In 2023, Beijing hosted the third China-Africa Peace and Security Forum⁴⁹, which saw actors from the continent work to see where armies could work in tandem with achieving China's

goals for its Global Security Initiative (GSI)⁵⁰. The GSI can be considered as China's attempt to explore more avenues to stamp its authority in security discourse around the world, with Africa being a key aspect of that plan. During the forum, many Chinese officials took time to stress the mutual trust with African officials, and the fact that military aid has often come with no expected requirements or strings attached⁵¹. China's considerable investment has also sought to cover both conventional warfare and preventive intelligence, with investment in hardware and software. It has sought to improve its footprint beyond military participation and even in policing⁵², where it has provided law enforcement training to African governments and students, built training schools, and provided equipment. The level of investment has increased in recent years, with African countries receiving an estimated 3.56 billion dollars in loans for public security⁵³.

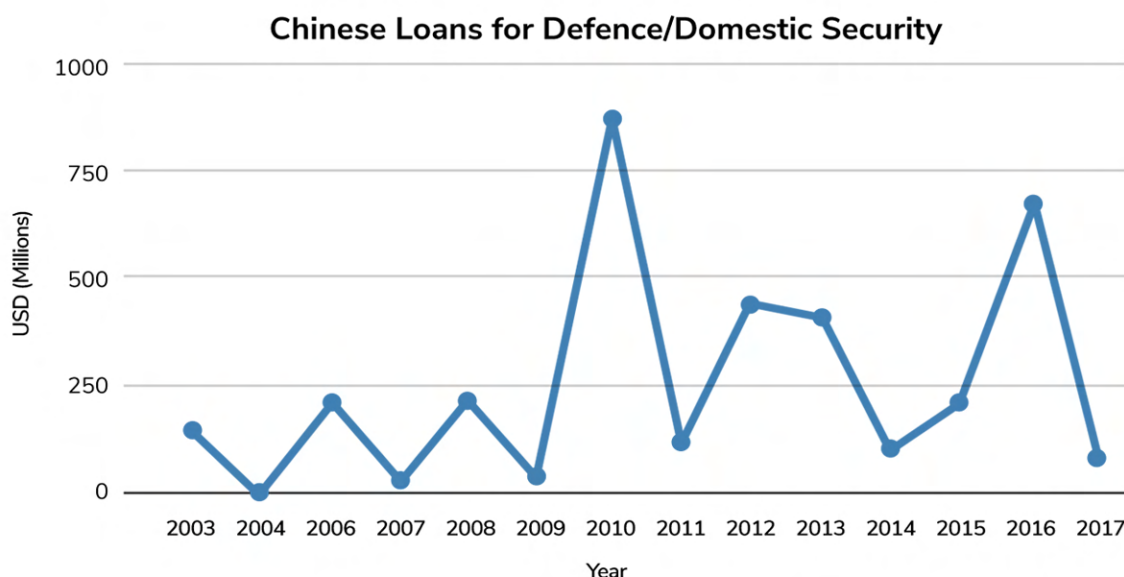


Fig 1- Loans for Defense/Domestic Security Purposes (USD millions). Source: China-Africa Research Initiative

⁴⁹ China Mil Blog: http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16248999.html

⁵⁰ Nikkei Asia: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/China-up-close/Analysis-Xi-floats-global-security-initiative-with-eye-on-Pacific>

⁵¹ ChinaMil Blog: http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16248999.html

⁵² Heritage: <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/BG3476.pdf>

⁵³ ChinaAfrica Real Story: <http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/2019/04/chinese-lending-to-africa-for-military.html>



China's considerable investment has also sought to cover both conventional warfare and preventive intelligence, with investment in hardware and software.

Yet, these perceptions will expectedly take on a different dimension as China seeks to assert itself as a power that can protect its people and considerable economic ventures abroad. Sometimes, this has often required tactical diplomacy when their citizens break norms or rules on the continent. As far back as 2013, Ghana arrested 124 citizens for illegal gold mining⁵⁴ and a 2023 report accused Chinese officials of sponsoring terrorist groups in Nigeria⁵⁵ to get access to mining facilities. In most cases, they have bribed local rulers to ensure passage and access to the sites and, in some cases, liaised with local militia groups to provide armed protection and access. In Ghana, this has also played a role in adversely affecting the economic and environmental landscape of these communities⁵⁶, with concerns about the long-term effects for living conditions in these countries. Despite assurances to Chinese investors from the John Mahama (2012 – 2017) and Nana Akufo-Addo (2017 – date) administrations, there remain considerable tensions towards Chinese immigrants⁵⁷ and this could play a role in how relations evolve in the future.

In Nigeria, this funding stream helps these terrorist groups in holding their ground against

security forces and further clashes. They also undermine federal ministries and departments responsible for overseeing the extractive industry. These instances are not limited to any part of the country the aforementioned example was in Zamfara, in the North-West, but there have been similar occurrences in Osun⁵⁸ and Ondo⁵⁹ states in the South-West. These incidents have also led to growing animosity against the Chinese in these communities, which might be utilised by leaders or politicians in the future.

These instances have often resulted in considerable diplomatic efforts being expended, especially when trying to smooth over relations with these governments. Yet, the status quo is maintained because most citizens have a more negative view of their elected leaders and blame them for not ensuring more mutually beneficial policies with China. This is already changing and leaders are likely to respond to potential support if they push these lines. A 2021 Afrobarometer survey⁶⁰ showed that perceptions of China's positive influence declined in 24 countries, particularly in Sierra Leone (-12%), Niger (-16%) and Mali (-11%).

⁵⁴ The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/ghana-arrest-chinese-illegal-gold-mining>

⁵⁵ The Times: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/chinese-bribed-nigerian-militants-for-access-to-vast-mineral-reserves-wlghq7d2j>

⁵⁶ The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/apr/23/influx-chinese-goldminers-tensions-ghana>

⁵⁷ Dataphyte, 'China-Nigeria relations: Micro-level interactions among Chinese and Nigerian workers in Nigeria', October 26, 2023.

<https://www.dataphyte.com/latest-reports/china-nigeria-relations-micro-level-interactions-among-chinese-and-nigerian-workers-in-nigeria/>

⁵⁸ ICIR: <https://www.icirnigeria.org/investigation-digging-for-death-untold-story-of-osun-artisanal-gold-miners-2/>

⁵⁹ ICIR: <https://www.icirnigeria.org/investigation-osun-ondo-southwest-states-where-illegal-mining-untapped-resources-scoop-nigerias-economy/>

⁶⁰ Afrobarometer: https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ad489-pap3-africans_welcome_chinas_influence_maintain_democratic_aspirations-afrobarometer_dispatch-15nov21.pdf

Perceived Positive Influence of China (2014 - 2021)

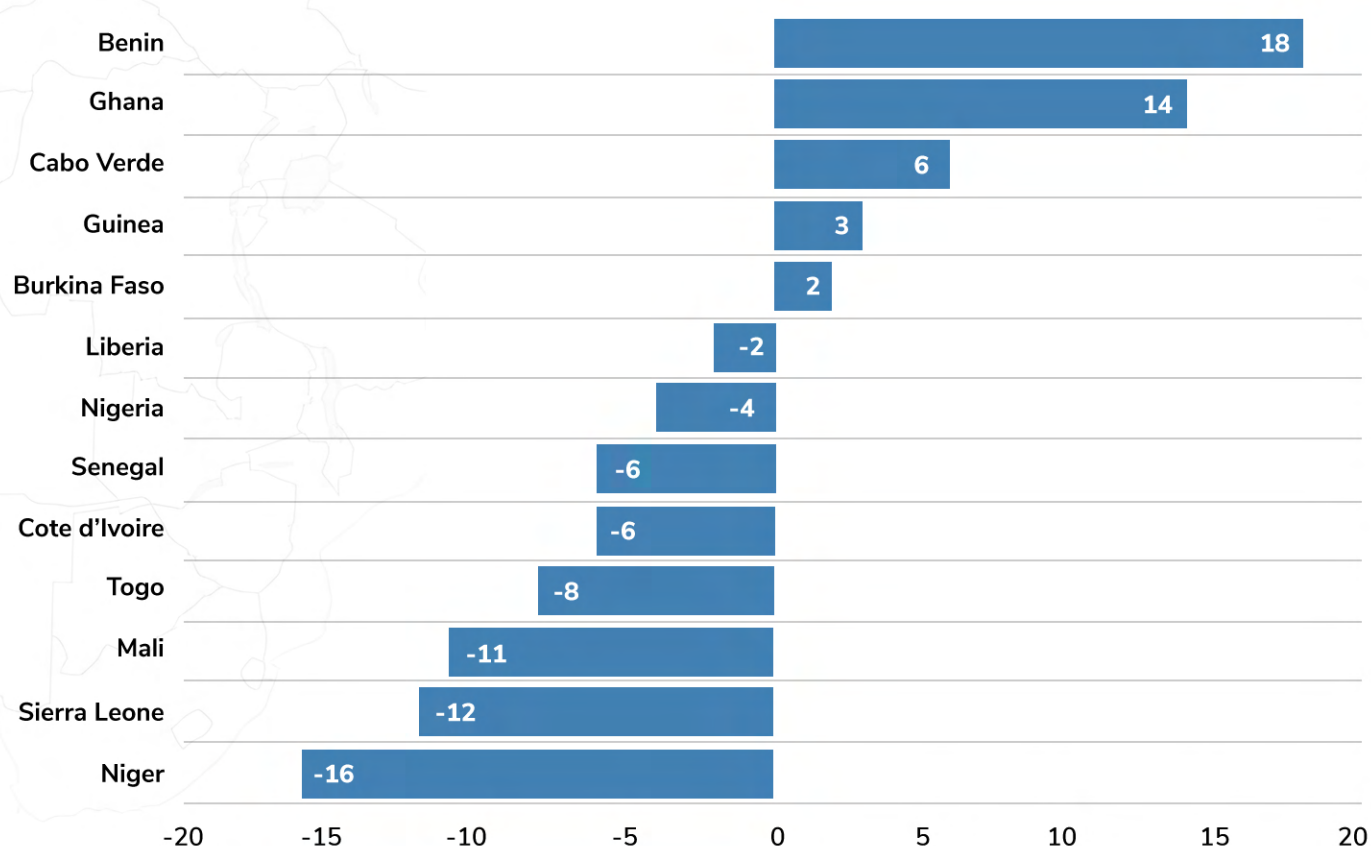


Fig 2- Perceived Positive Influence of China (2014 – 2021)

The same survey also shows that while 47% of Nigerian citizens are aware of loans or development aid from China, 57% believe that too much money has been borrowed. These sentiments are only likely to increase if governments are unable to ensure better engagement at the local level and in trade. Furthermore, an increasing number of independent African scholarship⁶¹ on Africa-China relations has become mostly critical of the nature of engagement because of a direct partnership with state governments and the

perception of it being elite-based. This is compared with most Western development approaches that tend to support a balance of government and civil society activities.

At the heart of this engagement is a state with consistent ambitions to be seen as an alternative to conventional Western positions. As highlighted, there are efforts to be seen as a responsible power, especially through economic investments and deals considered fair to the continent.

⁶¹ SSRC: <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/africa-china-knowledge-networks-state-of-the-field/>

Furthermore, in an aspiration typical of an aspiring global power, this would mean expanding their influence and capacity to enable their citizens move freely across the continent with the protection of the might and support of their nation behind them⁶².

These relations are not always elite-based, but must also be seen through the way citizens still engage with the idea of China in Africa.



⁶² MERICS: <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-growing-peace-and-security-role-africa>



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The interrelated nature of geopolitical concerns tells us that the influence exerted by foreign powers is unlikely to abate. However, there are avenues for win-win engagement between domestic actors and foreign partners.

Firstly, intervention and investment are best when it is split between arresting challenges and offering preventive assistance. By anticipating challenges⁶³ in advance, there is a stronger emphasis on partnership and one that sees an increased perception of active investment from domestic populations. There are also multiple stakeholders to interact with, which helps in ensuring a more robust and proper understanding of the situation on a domestic level.

Secondly, engagement should be similarly split between national and regional organisations. The recurrence of attempted and successful coups reiterates the need for a stronger collaboration beyond the security architecture. This will hopefully lead to improved accountability on projects that can balance significant investments with sustainability.

Thirdly, more successful interventions have paired security and trade investment with more humanitarian and community-based impact. This has helped with managing perceptions and also enabled a more robust approach to interacting with the state and the local citizenry. After a period of relative upheaval, there will still be more challenges for the region. Senegal's Macky

Sall and Ghana's Akufo-Addo are term-limited and will be leaving in 2024, depriving the bloc of seasoned leaders at a time of uncertainty. Nigeria's Bola Tinubu remains untested at this level and early actions appear to show a regional hegemon struggling with the domestic/foreign policy trade-off. Expectedly, in the wake of other domestic considerations and policy pivots, foreign powers are also dealing with how to justify sustained and continued investment and the impact of their work. These nexus points, from geopolitical considerations and citizen support for aid and relief programs, as seen in the interaction with the refugee migration, varies between governments and can often lead to disjointed and inconsistent policy support. As a result, it might take concerted leadership to provide the level of support needed to curb the issues in the region.

A recurring theme is that decisions can now make or mar investments and influence for generations. While things may not be as drastic as that, it is apt to state that the consolidated alliances and structures of the colonial era are only unravelling and being tested decades later. The United Kingdom is far from the most active investor in the region, while France's detached relationship with its former colonies means it is a shadow of its heyday. African states are also building capacity and becoming more active and intentional stakeholders in addressing their issues. The future might be one where present, active foreign powers, aware of the security and engagement nexus and mindful of regional dynamics, are sought out to become valuable partners in development.

⁶³ RAND: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR350.html



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