



RETHINKING U.S. AFRICA POLICY AMID CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES

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Since 2020, Africa has seen more political unrest, violent extremism, and democratic reversals than any other region in the world. A wave of coups has washed across the Sahel and West Africa, leaving authoritarians in power in numerous countries. In addition, the continent has served as a stage for the escalating great-power competition between China, Russia, and the United States. U.S. engagement with Africa has long been deprioritized in Washington, with successive administrations devoting scant attention and resources to advancing democracy and resolving conflicts. Thus far, the Biden administration has maintained this pattern, which reflects the persistent tension between an interests-based and values-based U.S. foreign policy. Nevertheless, there are a few actions the United States can take to reinvigorate democracy and stabilize the region, such as emphasizing development and diplomacy over military responses and stepping up cooperation with allies and partners to reduce the influence of China and Russia.

Ongoing instability in the Sahel — involving worsening insurgent violence, deepening great-power competition, and frequent coups — is exposing weaknesses in U.S. Africa policy.¹ In fact, nearly four years into what U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres called an “epidemic” of coups,² the United States and its closest Western allies and regional partners still lack a coherent and coordinated strategy to defend democracy in Africa without sacrificing security interests and geopolitical influence. Whether and how to engage with post-coup regimes in Africa exemplifies the enduring friction between a values-based and an interests-based U.S. foreign policy.

Widespread democratic backsliding could have long-term and lasting geopolitical and security implications for the region and for the United States and its allies, who are quickly losing their influence on the continent. Historically, strategic priorities elsewhere have drawn Washington’s attention away from Africa, resulting in minimal engagement with the region. As such, U.S. Africa strategy has not received the attention and resources needed to manage deteriorating political and security developments on the continent. America’s current Africa policy is being overtaken

by events and is ill suited to adequately address the coup pandemic. Years of counter-terrorism work on the continent are going by the wayside, along with strategic partnerships and relationships built over decades of evolving engagement, due to the coup pandemic and new state leaders being less willing to host Western counter-terrorism forces.

In this article, we outline what we see as the main challenge for U.S. Africa policy today — which we call the Africa policy trilemma, or the difficulty of simultaneously promoting democracy, combatting violent extremism, and engaging in great-power competition. This trilemma echoes Cold War dilemmas, but with counter-terrorism supplanting combatting local communist forces. We argue that Washington must learn from its mistakes during the Cold War, particularly the tendency to separate democracy promotion from security interests and sacrifice the former in the name of the latter. In an era of great-power competition with authoritarian rivals, the United States should bolster efforts to promote democracy and economic prosperity. Prioritizing more diplomacy and development could help to prevent the growing militarization of U.S. Africa policy seen in recent years.

1 Haleigh Bartos and John Chin, “Biden’s Africa Policy Trilemma,” *The Duck of Minerva* (blog), October 12, 2023, <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2023/10/bidens-africa-policy-trilemma.html>.

2 Michelle Nichols, “An Epidemic’ of Coups, U.N. Chief Laments, Urging Security Council to Act,” *Reuters*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/an-epidemic-coups-un-chief-laments-urging-security-council-act-2021-10-26/>.

This article proceeds in three sections. First, we review recent governance, security, and geopolitical developments across Africa. The second section examines the history of U.S. Africa policy and engagement related to democracy promotion, counter-terrorism, and great-power competition. We conclude with a number of policy recommendations the United States could adopt to reinvigorate Africa policy to better enable democratization in the future.

Democratic Decline in Africa

Africa has suffered more democratic decline than any other region of the world since 2020.

For a time, Africa appeared poised to become a showpiece for freedom's "inevitable" worldwide progression after the Cold War.³ In the first two decades after the Cold War, many African countries caught the third wave of democracy.⁴ From 1975 to 2014, the number of African countries democratizing exceeded those autocratizing, with the peak wave of democratization occurring in the early to mid-1990s.⁵ As a result, the share of African states that are "closed autocracies" (the least democratic regime type, according to the Regimes of the World classification) fell from over 60 percent in 1988 to 11 percent by 2007. By contrast, whereas fewer than 4 percent of African countries could claim to be democracies in 1988, nearly 40 percent could by 2016.⁶

In recent years, however, an autocratic counter-wave has washed over Africa. According to the Sweden-based V-Dem project, democracy has suffered more in Africa than any other world region since 2020. The share of autocratizing countries in Africa rose from less than 5 percent in 2008 to over 30 percent in 2020, while the share of democratizing

countries fell from 20 percent in 2014 to only 7 percent by 2020. Since 2020, there has been a marked decline of electoral democracies and a re-emergence of "closed autocracies," with the latter now ruling one-fifth of African states.⁷ By 2023, half of the continent's population lived under autocratic rule according to Freedom House, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit group, while only 7 percent lived in "free" countries.⁸

Democracy faces challenges across the continent, but the areas that have slid the most toward autocracy in recent years are northern Africa, the Sahel, and, to a lesser extent, western Africa. In 2023, the west and the south were the most democratic regions in Africa, with average electoral democracy scores around 0.5 on a scale of 0 to 1 (with 1 being the most democratic). By contrast, average electoral democracy scores were only 0.34 in central-east Africa, 0.29 in the Sahel, and 0.28 in northern Africa.⁹

Despite the rash of coups, support for democracy among the public remains high but has weakened.

Between 2013 and 2023, electoral democracy scores increased in 17 of Africa's 54 countries but declined in 37 countries. The biggest democratic declines over this decade were in Burkina Faso, which saw its electoral democracy score fall by 0.4, followed by Libya (-0.35), Tunisia (-0.29), Mauritius (-0.27), Niger (-0.24), and Comoros (-0.23). Coups in 2022 caused the declines in Burkina Faso, as did a July 2023 coup for Niger. Libya has been mired in civil war since the Arab Spring. Tunisia, the only democratic success story to emerge from the Arab Spring, saw those gains reversed since President Kais Saied's

3 See the discourse following Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989).

4 During the Cold War, Africa vied with the Middle East as the least democratic region in the world, according to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) electoral democracy index. The mean electoral democracy score in Africa doubled from .2 in 1989 to over .43 by 2018 (on a 0–1 scale). For more on global democracy trends using V-Dem data, see Carl Henrik Knutsen and Svend-Erik Skaaning, "The Ups and Downs of Democracy, 1789–2018," in *Why Democracies Develop and Decline*, ed. Michael Coppedge et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 29–54. Most African states became "electoral autocracies" initially, not democracies. Even where authoritarian regimes survived on the continent, many were forced to make liberalizing concessions, such as shaking up cabinets to incorporate opposition party members. See Josef Woldense and Alex Kroeger, "Elite Change without Regime Change: Authoritarian Persistence in Africa and the End of the Cold War," *American Political Science Review*, 2023, 1–17.

5 For more background on the ERT definitions and data on episodes of democratization and autocratization, see Seraphine F. Maerz et al., "Episodes of Regime Transformation," *Journal of Peace Research* (July 2023): 1–18.

6 For more background on the RoW definitions and data on regime types, see Anna Lüthmann, Marcus Tannenber, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes," *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 1 (2018): 60–77.

7 Part of the explanation for accelerated backsliding since 2020 is that the COVID-19 pandemic gave some African regimes cover to increase repression and target political opposition. Donald Grasse et al., "Opportunistic Repression: Civilian Targeting by the State in Response to COVID-19," *International Security* 46, no. 2 (2021): 130–65.

8 By contrast, Freedom House rates 17 percent of African countries as "free." Why? With a few exceptions such as South Africa and Ghana, many of the most democratic states in the region are microstates such as Cape Verde, Seychelles, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Yana Gorokhovskaia and Cathryn Grothe, "Freedom in the World 2024: Regional Trends and Threats to Freedom," Freedom House, February 29, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/mounting-damage-flawed-elections-and-armed-conflict/regional-trends>.

9 Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Country-Year Dataset V14" (Varieties of Democracy [V-Dem] Project, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.23696/mcwt-fr58>.

takeover in 2021.¹⁰ Flawed elections and corruption have characterized the more gradual democratic backsliding in Mauritius and Comoros.¹¹

The triggers for what Nigerian President Bola Tinubu called “autocratic contagion” in the Sahel and west Africa have been coups, which have made a comeback in Africa since 2020 after years of decline.¹² According to the Colpus dataset, nine successful military coups have struck Africa since 2020.¹³ Of these, three toppled democratic governments — in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). Two coups were designed to ensure the survival of autocratic rule and block democratization — in Chad (2021) and Sudan (2021). Another two coups ousted autocrats — an aspiring autocrat in Guinea (2021) and an established one in Gabon (2023) — only to install new authoritarian regimes. Two more reflected splits among coup factions — in Mali (2021) and Burkina Faso (2022). There have been an additional five coup attempts in the region since 2020, including one in April 2023 that brought Sudan’s rival coup factions to civil war.¹⁴

Since 2020, virtually all coups have taken place within a so-called coup belt across the Sahel and west Africa. The August 2023 coup in Gabon was the lone exception (see figure 1). As *The Economist* recently noted, “You can now walk across nearly the widest part of Africa, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, passing only through countries that have suffered coups in the past three years. But it would be unwise — you might well be kidnapped.”¹⁵

Despite the rash of coups, support for democracy among the public remains high but has weakened.¹⁶ According to Afrobarometer, an independent research network based in Ghana, nearly 70 percent of survey respondents across 34 African countries preferred democracy to any other system of government. Large majorities in most countries also still reject military and one-party rule across the continent — only in Burkina Faso do most respondents favor military rule.¹⁷ Yet support for democracy has dropped in some countries. For example, between 2014–15 and 2021–22, support for democracy fell by 36 percent in Mali, 26 percent in Burkina Faso, 21 percent in South Africa, and 15 percent in Guinea.¹⁸ Meanwhile, perceptions of corruption by elected officials and rising armed conflict have led opposition to military rule to soften in the region,¹⁹ especially among youth. In 2021–22, only 38 percent of Africans said they were satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, down from 46 percent in 2014–15.²⁰

Popular support for transparent elections remains strong across Africa. Three-quarters of respondents to Afrobarometer’s 2021–23 survey believed elections were the best method for choosing state leaders. However, support for elections has fallen in some places over the past decade such as Tunisia and Burkina Faso. At present, only Lesotho lacks a solid majority that supports elections.²¹ National elections occurred in three African countries in the first four months of 2024 and are scheduled to occur in 11

10 Hicham Bou Nassif, “Why the Military Abandoned Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (2022): 27–39.

11 Louis Amédée Darga and Suhaylah Peeraulle, “Can Mauritians Save a Democracy in Trouble?” *Washington Post*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/25/can-mauritians-save-democracy-in-trouble/>; Adam Valavanis, “Authoritarianism in Comoros Is Resurgent,” *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), October 31, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/authoritarianism-comoros-resurgent>.

12 For Tinubu’s remarks, see Nellie Peyton et al., “Reactions to Gabon Military Coup,” *Reuters*, August 31, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/reactions-gabon-army-officers-announcing-coup-2023-08-30/>. On the narrative of the decline and comeback of African coups, see John Frank Clark, “The Decline of the African Military Coup,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 3 (2007): 141–55; Dave Lawler, “Coups Are Becoming a Thing of the Past,” *Axios*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/coups-are-becoming-a-thing-of-the-past-df39d484-cfc2-4eb3-b85f-94e3d15d238c.html>; Dave Lawler, “Coups Are Making a Comeback,” *Axios*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/coup-attempts-countries-around-world-e14f76d2-16b1-43da-8411-6f8fc07cec84.html>.

13 Colpus classifies the military takeover in Myanmar in February 2022 as a self-coup. For more on the conceptualization and measurement of coups (and the distinction with self-coups), see John J. Chin, David B. Carter, and Joseph G. Wright, “The Varieties of Coups D’état: Introducing the Colpus Dataset,” *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2021): 1040–51. For updated Colpus data, see <https://www.johnjchin.com/colpus/>. For narratives of these coups and discussion of coup causes, see John J. Chin, “Coups d’Etat in the Covid-19 Era,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 28 (2021): 161; John J. Chin and Jessica Kirkpatrick, “African Coups D’etat in the Covid-19 Era: A Current History,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 5 (2023): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2023.1077945>.

14 “Country Hub: Sudan,” ACLED, accessed October 17, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/>.

15 “Why Africans Are Losing Faith in Democracy,” *The Economist*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/10/05/why-africans-are-losing-faith-in-democracy>.

16 E. Gyimah-Boadi, Carolyn Logan, and Josephine Sanny, “Africans’ Durable Demand for Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 136–51.

17 “PP85: Africans Want More Democracy, but Their Leaders Still Aren’t Listening,” *Afrobarometer*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp85-africans-want-more-democracy-but-their-leaders-still-arent-listening/>.

18 Josephine Sanny, “Afrobarometer Data Show Worrying Trends for Democracy in Africa, Prof. Gyimah-Boadi Warns,” *Afrobarometer* (blog), June 16, 2023, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/afrobarometer-data-show-worrying-trends-for-democracy-in-africa-prof-gyimah-boadi-warns/>.

19 Daniel Tuki, “What Does the Population in Niger Think about a Military Government?” *Democratization*, 2024, 1–26.

20 “Democracy in Crisis: Africa’s Long-Standing Democracies under Pressure, Afrobarometer CEO Warns,” *Afrobarometer*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/democracy-in-crisis-africas-long-standing-democracies-under-pressure-afrobarometer-ceo-warns/>.

21 Hervé Akinocho, “AD761: As Africans Enter Busy Political Year, Scepticism Marks Weakening Support for Elections,” *Afrobarometer Dispatch* (blog), February 1, 2024, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad761-as-africans-enter-busy-political-year-scepticism-marks-weakening-support-for-elections/>.

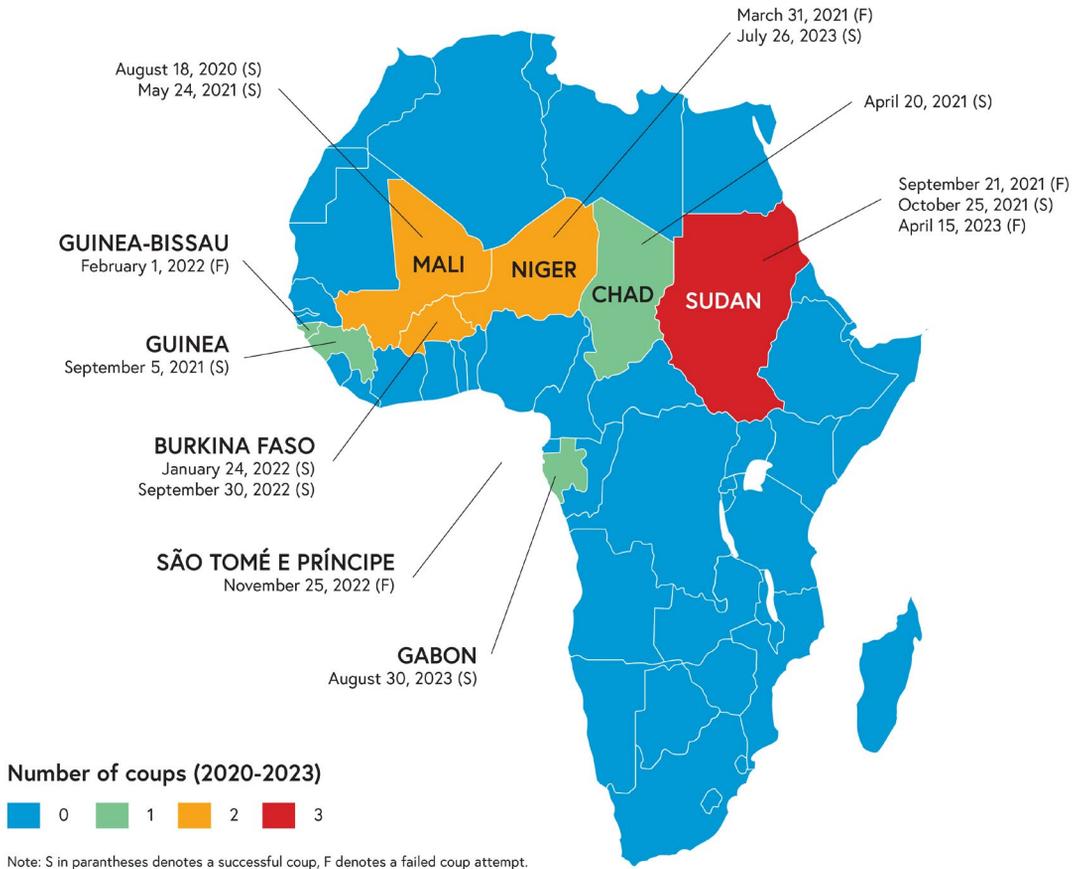


Figure 1: Geographic distribution of coups in Africa in 2020–23

more African countries over the rest of the year.²² Meanwhile, none of Africa’s new military juntas appear willing to relinquish power any time soon. In September 2023, for example, Mali’s junta postponed the transitional presidential election scheduled for February 2024 due to unexplained “technical reasons” and also refused to hold legislative elections.²³ Soon after, Ibrahim Traoré, the junta leader in Burkina Faso, said that holding elections in 2024 was “not a priority” and that they would not be held until the security situation in the country had improved.²⁴ As of May 2024, neither junta has committed to a timeframe for new presidential elections.²⁵ Only in Chad did the

authorities promise elections for 2024, but only after shepherding a new constitution allowing de facto President Mahamat Idriss Déby, who came to power through a military junta, to stand in those elections.²⁶

Rising Violent Extremism and Islamist Terrorism

The 2020s have also witnessed rising violent extremism and Islamist terrorism in Africa. Political instability in the region is contributing to an already poor security situation. Half of all intra-state armed conflicts worldwide took place in Africa (26

22 Elections recently took place in Togo, Senegal, and Comoros. Between May 2024 and December 2024, elections are scheduled in nine sub-Saharan African countries (South Africa, Madagascar, Chad, Guinea Bissau, Rwanda, Mozambique, Namibia, Ghana, South Sudan) and two North African countries (Mauritania, Algeria). "Global Elections Calendar," National Democratic Institute, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.ndi.org/elections-calendar>.

23 News Wires, "Mali Junta Delays February Presidential Election for 'Technical Reasons,'" *France 24*, September 25, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230925-mali-junta-delays-february-presidential-election-for-technical-reasons>.

24 Sofia Christensen, "Burkina Faso Junta Leader Says No Elections until the Country Safe for Voting," *Reuters*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-junta-leader-says-no-elections-until-country-safe-voting-2023-09-29/>.

25 Fadima Kontao, "Mali Political Parties Request Elections after Junta Shuns Transition Promise," *Reuters*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-political-parties-request-elections-after-junta-shuns-transition-promise-2024-04-01/>.

26 Mahamat Ramadane, "Chad to Hold Presidential Election in May-June," *Reuters*, February 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chad-hold-presidential-election-may-june-2024-02-27/>.

of 52) in 2022.²⁷ Two-fifths of the top 50 countries ranked in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data 2024 Conflict Severity Index are in Africa,²⁸ with the Sahel, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo among the top ten conflicts appearing on the associated 2024 “conflict watchlist.”²⁹ Overall, armed conflict violence has greatly increased in Africa since 2020, with fatalities more than quadrupling, from fewer than 25,000 to well over 100,000 across the continent in 2022. Armed conflict deaths in Africa now exceed levels last seen in the late 1990s and early 2000s during the height of the Second Congo War, which was the deadliest civil war since 1945.³⁰

Four of Africa’s five deadliest ongoing armed conflicts — those with over 1,000 fatalities in 2022 — involved insurgencies by Islamist violent extremist organizations, namely the al-Qaeda-aligned Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin in Mali and Burkina Faso, the Islamic State in Nigeria, and al-Shabaab in Somalia.³¹ While most civil wars in Africa in the 1990s involved ethno-linguistic cleavages, the last two decades have seen a rise of religiously framed civil war.³²

The rising African death toll from 2020 to 2022 was due mainly to the outbreak of civil war in Ethiopia in 2020 and, since 2022, to insurgencies in Burkina Faso, Mali, and elsewhere.³³ Armed conflicts involving groups associated with the Islamic State have spread across the region, emerging in Niger (2015), Nigeria (2015), Chad (2017), Burkina Faso (2019), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2019), Mozambique (2019), Mali (2022), and Uganda (2022).³⁴

Instances of organized political violence in Africa have increased the most in recent years in Africa’s

post-2020 “coup belt”: the Sahel. The number of political violence events in this region has risen from only a few hundred a year prior to 2012 to around 2,000 per year from 2013 to 2018, then increased steeply since 2019 to nearly 12,000 in the most recent 12 months to March 2024. Though central/eastern Africa also has seen major increases in political violence since 2012, only the Sahel has continued to see rising violence into 2024, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data conflict index.³⁵ As a result, the epicenter of global terrorism “has now conclusively shifted out of the Middle East and into the Central Sahel region,” according to the Global Terrorism Index. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 47 percent of global terrorism deaths in 2023, more than South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa combined. Five of the 10 countries most affected by terrorism in 2023 are in Africa: Burkina Faso (first place), Mali (third), Somalia (seventh), Nigeria (eighth), and Niger (tenth).³⁶

Although American policymakers had hoped to avoid the same fate as France, in part by "playing nice" and cooperating with the juntas, this strategy appears to have largely failed by this spring.

The three most terrorism-afflicted countries in the Sahel — Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger — have also suffered coups since 2020. In each case, observers

27 Africa accounted for 18 of 41 internal armed conflicts in 2022 that caused at least 1,000 battle deaths, per the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 23.1, at <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#armedconflict>.

28 This index lists Nigeria and Sudan in the top ten with “Extreme” conflict. “High” conflict levels are reported in eight African states (the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and Somalia). “ACLED Conflict Index,” ACLED, January 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/>.

29 “Conflict Watchlist 2024,” ACLED (blog), accessed April 3, 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/>.

30 Some regional armed conflict trends can be visualized at <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/charts/>. For more on “Africa’s World War” in the 1990s and 2000s, see Gérard Prunier, *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

31 The other African civil war involves the Tigray People’s Liberation Front and Gambella Liberation Front in Ethiopia. Summaries on the history of each of these conflicts to 2022 can be found by searching <https://ucdp.uu.se/>.

32 Monica Duffy Toft, “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 9 (2021): 1607–34.

33 Among civil wars on the continent in 2022, only the insurgency by the Islamic State in Nigeria saw fatalities drop in 2022. This conflict de-escalation was a unique situation driven in part by the weakening of Boko Haram after the death of their leader Abubakr Shekau in May 2021, which in turn meant fewer clashes with the Islamic State’s West Africa Province for territorial control. Shawn Davies, Thérèse Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, “Organized Violence 1989–2022, and the Return of Conflict between States,” *Journal of Peace Research* 60, no. 4 (2023): 693–94.

34 Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg, “Organized Violence 1989–2022,” 694, 703–4.

35 Clionadh Raleigh et al., “Introducing ACLED: An Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010): 651–60. Updated ACLED data is available at <https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files/>.

36 Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2024,” Vision of Humanity, 2024, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/>.



have argued that the incumbent government's inability to successfully tame their terrorism problem and safeguard national security was at least a contributing if not a driving factor in each coup.³⁷ In all three countries, the newly installed juntas promised to prioritize restoring domestic security and order. Despite these promises, insurgencies in the Sahel have worsened following coups. Across the central Sahel, conflict fatalities from political violence increased 38 percent in 2023, and civilian fatalities grew 18 percent in 2022. More than 8,000 people were killed in Burkina Faso last year. In Niger, Islamic State Sahel Province forces have stepped up attacks since the coup in July 2023.³⁸ In January 2024, Mali's junta withdrew from a peace agreement with separatists, which has spurred widespread violent attacks on civilians by government forces and Russia's Wagner group.³⁹

The case of Sudan is even more instructive of the vicious cycle of coups, autocratization, and civil war. In 2019, a mass uprising by pro-democracy forces managed to trigger a military coup ousting Sudan's long-time dictator Omar Bashir. Hopes ran high for a democratic transition after continuing protests led the coupmakers to agree to a new constitution and transition timetable.⁴⁰ A military coup in October 2021 blocked the promised transition to a civilian-led government. Subsequent infighting among security force elites for power within the military junta led to a failed coup attempt by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces against the Sudanese Armed Forces last April, which sparked a devastating civil war leading to at least 13,000 fatalities.⁴¹

As Africa has become a more important front in America's so-called global war on terror, governments in the region have sought greater security assistance from external powers. Initially, many turned to the

United Nations, France, and the United States. The United States expanded its military presence and sought cooperative security partnerships in Africa. For example, in 2019, U.S. Air Base 201 in Niger, the drone base in Agadez that the United States built to the tune of \$110 million, and Camp Baledogle, a Soviet-era air base the United States refurbished to support operations against al-Shabaab, both became operational to support regional counter-terrorism operations.⁴²

Recent political developments in the Sahel, enabled by coups and great-power competition, threaten U.S. counter-terrorism interests. Africa's new military juntas have sought to reduce their dependence on Western democracies and have sought counter-insurgency assistance and patronage from non-democratic actors like Russia's Wagner Group, recently rebranded as the Africa Corps, which is now directed by a Russian military intelligence unit.⁴³ The latter has increasingly been relied upon to counter insurgency in Mali as French and U.N. peacekeeping forces have been forced to withdraw from the region.⁴⁴ Although American policymakers had hoped to avoid the same fate as France, in part by "playing nice" and cooperating with the juntas, this strategy appears to have largely failed by this spring. In March 2024, the junta in Niamey publicly revoked the military cooperation agreement with the United States and ordered U.S. troops to leave. After negotiations to stay failed, the Biden administration agreed to the request.⁴⁵ By May 2024, even before U.S. troops had pulled out, Russian troops moved into U.S. Air Base 101 in Niamey.⁴⁶ In April, the United States was also forced to withdraw dozens of troops based in N'Djamena, which had deployed to Chad since 2021 as part of a U.S. special operations task force.⁴⁷ U.S. Africa Command head Gen. Michael Langley warned

37 Chin and Kirkpatrick, "African Coups D'etat in the Covid-19 Era: A Current History."

38 "Conflict Watchlist 2024 | The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-Long Conflict," *ACLEDA* (blog), January 17, 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/>.

39 Héni Nsaibia, "Fact Sheet: Attacks on Civilians Spike in Mali as Security Deteriorates Across the Sahel," *ACLEDA* (blog), September 21, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/09/21/fact-sheet-attacks-on-civilians-spike-in-mali-as-security-deteriorates-across-the-sahel/>.

40 Sharan Grewal, "Why Sudan Succeeded Where Algeria Failed," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 102–14.

41 Andrea Carboni, "Conflict Watchlist 2024 | Sudan: Setting the Stage for a Long War," *ACLEDA* (blog), January 17, 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sudan/>.

42 Kyle Rempfer, "New in 2019: Two New U.S. Air Bases in Africa Nearing Completion," *Air Force Times*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2019/01/03/new-in-2019-two-new-us-airbases-in-africa-nearing-completion/>; Stephen Losey, "This Obscure, Costly Air Base Is the New Front in the Battle against Violent Extremism," *Air Force Times*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2019/11/14/this-obscure-costly-air-base-is-the-new-front-in-the-battle-against-violent-extremism/>.

43 Joshua Hammer, "What Is Wagner Doing in Africa?" *The Atlantic* (blog), May 3, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2024/05/wagner-africa-russia-mercenary/678258/>.

44 Baba Ahmed, "U.N. Peacekeepers in Mali Withdraw from Two Bases in the North as Fighting Intensifies," *AP News*, October 17, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-untied-nations-peacekeepers-kidal-insecurity-tuareg-b9cb52aa5baa87f83d2f76822f7df731>.

45 Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Military to Withdraw Troops From Niger," *New York Times*, April 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/19/us/politics/us-niger-military-withdrawal.html>.

46 Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "Russian Troops Enter Base Housing U.S. Military in Niger, U.S. Official Says," *Reuters*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russian-troops-enter-base-housing-us-military-niger-us-official-says-2024-05-02/>.

47 Natasha Bertrand, "U.S. Withdraws Troops from Base in Chad Following Government Demand," *CNN*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/01/politics/us-withdraws-troops-chad/index.html>.

that the loss of U.S. bases in the region will “degrade our ability to do active watching and warning, including for homeland defense.”⁴⁸

Intensifying Great-Power Competition

Africa has become a major site of great-power competition. U.S. efforts to promote democracy and enhance security in Africa are complicated by rising regional great-power competition with China and Russia.⁴⁹ This global competition pits liberal against authoritarian states with differing visions of international order.⁵⁰ After the Cold War, linkage to and leverage of the democratic West were associated with greater advances for democracy, whereas weak Western leverage opened the door to “competitive authoritarianism” and democratic backsliding across the developing world.⁵¹ Now Africa’s new juntas and would-be strongmen are seeking to rely on autocratic major power patrons for regime security. Russia and China, in turn, have an interest in making the world and region “safe for autocracy.”⁵²

Russia and China have cultivated friends and influence on the continent as part of a broader geopolitical struggle with the United States over power and influence in the developing world.⁵³ Indeed, Africa may be a testing ground for the resilience of the liberal

international order. For example, Gen. Laura Richardson, the commander of U.S. Southern Command, believes that rising competition with Russia and China in Africa may be a harbinger of things to come in the Western Hemisphere in the next five to seven years.⁵⁴

The influence of powerful Western states is now contested or in decline across much of Africa. During the Cold War, France and the United Kingdom had predominant economic and military influence in their former colonies on the continent. However, China’s exploding economic and diplomatic engagement in Africa in recent decades has enabled its influence on the continent to grow rapidly, in many cases now exceeding that of the former European colonial powers or the United States.⁵⁵ For example, China surpassed the United States as Africa’s largest trade partner in 2008. China’s \$300 billion in trade with Africa in 2023 was four times the U.S.-Africa trade. Similarly, French and U.S. outward investment in Africa dwarfed China’s until 2017, but since then China has become the largest source of investment on the African continent.⁵⁶ As a result, China has more leverage to potentially subvert democracy or prop up autocrats in Africa.⁵⁷

The influence of France — America’s closest external partner on the continent in recent decades — in Francophone Africa is now in freefall. France’s condemnation of coups led to diplomatic fallouts

48 Liam Karr, “Africa File Special Edition: Niger Cuts the United States for Russia and Iran,” *Critical Threats* (blog), March 21, 2024, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-special-edition-niger-cuts-the-united-states-for-russia-and-iran>.

49 Marta Kepe et al., *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2023); Joe Bruhl, “America Ignores Africa at Its Own Peril,” *War on the Rocks*, June 14, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/america-ignores-africa-at-its-own-peril/>.

50 Great power competition is a rising theme in recent U.S. national security strategies. John J. Chin, Kiron Skinner, and Clay Yoo, “Understanding National Security Strategies Through Time,” *Texas National Security Review* 6, no. 4 (2023): 103–24.

51 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). After the Cold War, Western democracies could more credibly condition foreign aid to African countries on democratic reform. Thad Dunning, “Conditioning the Effects of Aid: Cold War Politics, Donor Credibility, and Democracy in Africa,” *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 409–23.

52 On autocratic patrons as “black knights,” see Mark Chou, “Have the Black Knights Arisen? China’s and Russia’s Support of Autocratic Regimes,” *Democratization* 24, no. 1 (2017): 175–84. On China and Russia’s interest in autocracy promotion more broadly, see, e.g., “Authoritarian Internationalism,” in John M. Owen IV, *The Ecology of Nations: American Democracy in a Fragile World Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 201–27; Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, “China’s Threat to Global Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 65–79.

53 Dawn C. Murphy, *China’s Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing’s Alternative World Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022); Aaron Friedberg, “A World of Blocs?” *War on the Rocks*, July 25, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/07/a-world-of-blocs/>. Dawn C. Murphy, *China’s Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing’s Alternative World Order* (Stanford University Press, 2022). We focus on Russia and China, though smaller non-democratic powers such as Iran, Venezuela, and the United Arab Emirates also seek to increase their influence in Africa. See Michaela Millender, “IntelBrief: Iran Extends Its Influence in Africa,” *The Soufan Center* (blog), April 1, 2024, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-april-1/>; Scott B. MacDonald, “Venezuela’s Africa Gambit,” *The National Interest*, February 8, 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/venezuela%E2%80%99s-africa-gambit-209207/>; “Gulf Countries Are Becoming Major Players in Africa,” *The Economist*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/03/13/gulf-countries-are-becoming-major-players-in-africa>.

54 Remarks at Carnegie Mellon University, September 28, 2023.

55 See the Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC) index, which aggregates measures of “bandwidth” and “dependence” related to bilateral trade, aid, arms transfers, military alliances, level of diplomatic representation, and international organization memberships. Jonathan D. Moyer et al., “Power and Influence in a Globalized World,” *Atlantic Council*, February 20, 2018, 1, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/power-and-influence-in-a-globalized-world/>; Jonathan D. Moyer et al., “China-U.S. Competition: Measuring Global Influence,” *Atlantic Council* and Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies, 2021. Data available at <https://korbel.du.edu/fbic>. Report available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/China-US-Competition-Report-2021.pdf>.

56 The trade and investment data come from the International Monetary Fund, namely the Direction of Trade Statistics database and the Coordinated Direct Investment Survey. Available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Data>.

57 Some recent literature refers to these anti-democratic policies as “sharp power,” distinct from more benign “soft power.” Glenn Tiffert and Oliver McPherson-Smith, “China’s Sharp Power in Africa: A Handbook for Building National Resilience,” Hoover Institution, March 2022, <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-sharp-power-africa-handbook-building-national-resilience>; Melissa Aten and John K. Glenn, “After Wagner: Russia’s Export of Kleptocracy to Africa,” *Power 3.0: Understanding Modern Authoritarian Influence* (blog), September 5, 2023, <https://www.power3point0.org/2023/09/05/after-wagner-russias-export-of-kleptocracy-to-africa/>.



with the new juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. These three countries created the Alliance of Sahel States, a mutual defense pact, in September 2023.⁵⁸ In August 2022, the last of several thousand French troops withdrew from Mali, marking the end of Operation Barkhane, a decade-long counter-insurgency campaign.⁵⁹ In February 2023, France withdrew its troops from Burkina Faso.⁶⁰ On Sept. 27, 2023, two months after Niger's coup, France agreed to withdraw its ambassador and 1,500 troops.⁶¹ France has been forced to shift the base of its counter-insurgency operations in Africa to Chad.⁶² In December 2023, Mali and Niger revoked tax cooperation treaties with France.⁶³ In April, Burkina Faso expelled French diplomats.⁶⁴

Russia has capitalized on anti-French sentiment and French withdrawals in the Sahel.⁶⁵ The new Sahel alliance — Africa's new “holy alliance” — is poised to become “a vehicle for Russian influence in the heart of Africa.”⁶⁶ Russia's Africa policy has emphasized military engagement, drawing from its historical role as one of the largest arms suppliers to Africa. Since 2018, Russia has also deployed private military contractors to 31 African countries.⁶⁷ The most prominent of these is the Wagner Group, which moved into the Central African Republic in 2018 and expanded its presence across Africa in

subsequent years.⁶⁸ In return for a “regime survival package,” the Wagner Group — recently rebranded the Africa Corps or Expeditionary Corps — is seeking access to strategically important natural resources such as timber, gold, uranium, and lithium.⁶⁹ In May 2023, only months after expelling French troops, Burkina Faso's military leaders hailed Russia as a strategic ally.⁷⁰ Last December, Russia re-opened its embassy in Burkina Faso, which was shuttered in 1992.⁷¹ Moscow also struck a new military cooperation deal with Niger. In April 2024, 100 instructors from the Africa Corps arrived in Niger.⁷² Africa Corps personnel reportedly hope to take over the U.S. base in Agadez, which U.S. troops must now vacate.⁷³

The rise of Russian and Chinese influence and decline of democracy in the region over the last decade are mutually reinforcing.

Unlike Russia, China has focused on economic engagement in Africa — like it has elsewhere — and funding infrastructure development through its Belt and

58 Tiemoko Diallo and Bate Felix, “Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso Sign Sahel Security Pact,” *Reuters*, September 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16/>.

59 Elian Peltier and Ruth Maclean, “French Soldiers Quit Mali After 9 Years, Billions Spent and Many Lives Lost,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/world/africa/mali-france-military-operation.html>.

60 Thiam Ndiaga, “Burkina Faso Marks Official End of French Military Operations on Its Soil,” *Reuters*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-marks-official-end-french-military-operations-its-soil-2023-02-19/>.

61 Abdel-Kader Mazou, Boureima Balima, and Hereward Holland, “French Troops Begin Withdrawal from Niger,” *Reuters*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/french-troops-begin-withdrawal-niger-2023-10-10/>; Chinedu Asadu, “France's Withdrawal from Niger Could Jeopardize Counterterrorism Operations in the Sahel,” *AP News*, September 27, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/niger-sahel-france-us-coup-counterterrorism-ce19912950c6641e0281d8a10741a8de>.

62 AFP, “French Troops to Stay in Chad: Macron Envoy,” *The Defense Post*, March 8, 2024, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2024/03/08/french-troops-stay-chad/>.

63 Tiemoko Diallo and Nellie Peyton, “Mali and Niger Revoke Tax Cooperation Treaties with France,” *Reuters*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-revoke-tax-cooperation-treaties-with-france-2023-12-05/>.

64 Thomas Naadi, “Burkina Faso's pro-Russia Junta Expels French Diplomats,” *BBC News*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68846771>.

65 Raphael Parens, “The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali/>.

66 Michaela Millender, “IntelBrief: A New Treaty Among African Juntas Amid Deteriorating Security,” *The Soufan Center* (blog), September 20, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-september-20/>.

67 Cortney Weinbaum et al., “Mapping Chinese and Russian Military and Security Exports to Africa,” *RAND*, 2022.

68 John Lechner, “To Counter Russia in Africa, America Should Rethink Its Own Role,” *War on the Rocks*, May 20, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/to-counter-russia-in-africa-america-should-rethink-its-own-role/>.

69 Joe Inwood and Jake Tacchi, “Wagner in Africa: How the Russian Mercenary Group Has Rebranded,” *BBC News*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68322230>.

70 Thiam Ndiaga, Alessandra Prentice, and Stephen Coates, “Burkina Faso Interim Leader Hails Russia as a Strategic Ally,” *Reuters*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/burkina-faso-interim-leader-hails-russia-strategic-ally-2023-05-05/>.

71 “Russia Reopens Embassy in Burkina Faso,” *BBC News*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67833215>.

72 Chris Ewoker and Katherine Armstrong, “Russian Troops Arrive in Niger as Military Agreement Begins,” *BBC News*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68796359>.

73 Karr, “Africa File Special Edition.”

Road Initiative. China's investment and aid without attaching conditions such as political and economic reforms — unlike some powerful Western countries — have attracted many African leaders who have come to resent what is perceived as Western meddling in internal affairs.⁷⁴ Beijing may also have greater ambitions for military engagement and security cooperation on the continent.⁷⁵ China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 and seeks another base in west Africa on the Atlantic coast.⁷⁶ China has deployed private security contractors in 15 African states since 2018.⁷⁷ China has been ambivalent toward the coup trend in Africa and has sought to reinforce its existing influence.⁷⁸ In response to the 2017 coup that ousted Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, for example, Chinese President Xi Jinping backed Emmerson Mnangagwa, invited him to Beijing for a state visit in April 2018, and increased investment in Zimbabwe.⁷⁹ China also seeks to promote its norms and values through professional military education in Africa.⁸⁰

The rise of Russian and Chinese influence and decline of democracy in the region over the last decade are mutually reinforcing.⁸¹ The number of disinformation campaigns in the region quadrupled from 2022 to 2023, with foreign state sponsors led by Russia and China responsible for most. Russia alone has sponsored disinformation to undermine

democracy in 19 African states, more often than not with the Wagner Group directly involved. For example, Russian networks “helped prime and promote” the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, whose new military juntas have in turn also become major sponsors of disinformation in west Africa.⁸² China's propaganda in Africa likewise perpetuates anti-U.S. and anti-democratic narratives.⁸³

Assessing the Evolution of U.S. Africa Policy

Historically, American engagement with Africa has been episodic because Africa has never been seen as strategically important.⁸⁴ The U.S. State Department only established a separate regional bureau for Africa in 1958.⁸⁵ During the first half of the Cold War, U.S. Africa policy was one of minimal economic and military engagement aimed at avoiding major commitments in the region.⁸⁶ In the latter Cold War from the mid-1970s, Africa received relatively more attention from U.S. policymakers (but not necessarily more resources) as U.S.-Soviet struggles for political influence intensified across the Global South. North Africa, and Egypt in particular, garnered the highest priority as they were seen as more relevant to the

74 Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijioko Njoku, *United States and Africa Relations, 1400s to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 266–67. See chapter 6 for more background on deepening Sino-African engagement.

75 Ilaria Carrozza and Nicholas J. Marsh, “Great Power Competition and China's Security Assistance to Africa: Arms, Training, and Influence,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7, no. 4 (2022): oga027.

76 Eric A. Miller, “More Chinese Military Bases in Africa: A Question of When, Not If,” *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/16/china-military-bases-africa-navy-pla-geopolitics-strategy/>; David Vergun, “General Says China Is Seeking a Naval Base in West Africa,” *DOD News*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2969935/general-says-china-is-seeking-a-naval-base-in-west-africa/>. Others have reported on Chinese overtures for a base in Namibia. See Craig Singleton, “Mapping the Expansion of China's Global Military Footprint,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 2, 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/plaexpansion/>. Half a dozen ports with Chinese investment in West Africa—including two majority Chinese-owned ports in Nigeria and Cameroon—can physically support a naval base. Zongyuan Zoe Liu, “Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports,” *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), November 6, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/tracker/china-overseas-ports>.

77 Weinbaum et al., “Mapping Chinese and Russian Military and Security Exports to Africa.”

78 Jonathan Holslag, “China and the Coups: Coping with Political Instability in Africa,” *African Affairs* 110, no. 440 (2011): 367–86; Frédéric Lemaire, “China Remains Cautious after Coups in Africa,” *Le Monde*, September 1, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/01/china-remains-cautious-after-coups-in-africa_6119409_4.html; Jevans Nyabiage, “African Coups Make Life Difficult for China's Belt and Road Projects,” *South China Morning Post*, October 1, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3235443/coups-threaten-african-stability-china-struggles-make-headway-belt-and-road-interests>.

79 Falola and Njoku, *United States and Africa Relations*, 270.

80 Paul Nantulya, “Chinese Professional Military Education for Africa: Key Influence and Strategy,” *United States Institute of Peace*, July 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/chinese-professional-military-education-africa-key-influence-and-strategy>.

81 Authoritarian influence and democracy trends in the region are negatively correlated. Half (27) of Africa's 54 states saw rising Russian and Chinese influence (per FBIC index, see footnote 67) and declining democracy (per V-Dem) since 2012. By contrast, only five African states saw Russian/Chinese influence fall and democracy improve.

82 “Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* (blog), March 13, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>.

83 Joshua Eisenman, “China's Media Propaganda in Africa: A Strategic Assessment,” *United States Institute of Peace*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/chinas-media-propaganda-africa-strategic-assessment>; Sarah Cook, “Countering Beijing's Media Manipulation,” in *Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power*, ed. William J. Dobson, Tarek Masoud, and Christopher Walker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023), 167–84.

84 Our historical overview of U.S. Africa policy in this section is by necessity selective. For a chronological history, see Herman J. Cohen, *U.S. Policy Toward Africa: Eight Decades of Realpolitik* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019).

85 Before 1958, the Africa desk was housed in the Near Eastern Affairs bureau. Falola and Njoku, *United States and Africa Relations*, 213–14.

86 After independence, the United States urged post-colonial states to maintain close ties with former European colonial powers. Donald Rothchild, “The U.S. Foreign Policy Trajectory on Africa,” *SAIS Review* 21, no. 1 (2001): 180–81.

more strategically important Middle East.⁸⁷ For example, after the Camp David Accords in 1979, Egypt became a top recipient of U.S. foreign aid. Egypt's special status is also reflected in the fact that it is the only African state included under the U.S. Central Command theater covering the greater Middle East since the 1980s. By contrast, U.S. attention and commitments in sub-Saharan Africa have always lagged behind. Only six U.S. presidents since World War II have ever made official state visits to sub-Saharan Africa, the first being Jimmy Carter in 1978 and the last being Barack Obama in 2015.⁸⁸

Throughout the Cold War, as in other regions, U.S. Africa policy focused on great-power competition — namely, containing Soviet and communist influence. Fear of Soviet encroachment animated American interventions in Africa.⁸⁹ For example, after the Soviets and Cubans backed left-wing forces in the Angolan civil war, Washington backed right-wing National Union for the Total Independence of Angola rebels.⁹⁰ Likewise, after the Soviet Union backed Ethiopia in the Ogaden War in 1977–78, the United States seized the opportunity to gain Somalia as an ally. In exchange for access to military bases, the United States gave aid to President Siad Barre and turned a blind eye to the dictator's human rights abuses.⁹¹ America's security interests in Africa were limited, with Libya's state sponsorship of terrorism a

nuisance. Democracy promotion was never a central U.S. objective in Africa during the Cold War.⁹²

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War great-power competition, the United States pursued constructive but modest efforts at democracy promotion and conflict resolution in Africa, with mixed success in the 1990s. U.S. diplomacy played a supporting role in the peaceful end of apartheid in South Africa.⁹³ Though the Clinton administration created the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives in 1994 with a mission to support peace and democracy in Angola and elsewhere,⁹⁴ a shrinking U.S. foreign aid budget meant only modest investment in democracy aid.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, humanitarian interventions were marked by failure in Somalia and inaction in Rwanda, leading the United States to stand on the sidelines of Africa's civil wars.⁹⁶ In 1998, to signal U.S. commitment, President Bill Clinton became the first U.S. president since Carter to visit sub-Saharan Africa.⁹⁷ Clinton's signature regional economic policy, the African Growth and Opportunity Act, has expanded duty-free access to the United States from Africa since 2000.⁹⁸

After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, U.S. Africa policy increasingly focused on counter-terrorism with Africa a theater of the global war on terror. In 2002, the United States gained its first and only permanent military base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti.

87 This regional prioritization within Africa is reflected organizationally across many U.S. agencies. At the State Department, for example, North Africa policy (e.g., the Egypt desk) is still run out of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, leaving the Bureau of African Affairs to focus on policy toward the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa.

88 Jimmy Carter visited Nigeria and Liberia in April 1978. Each post–Cold War president from George H.W. Bush to Barack Obama visited Africa, but Donald Trump never did. George H.W. Bush visited Somalia in late 1992. Bill Clinton visited nine African countries (Ghana, Uganda, South Africa, Rwanda, Botswana, Senegal, Morocco, Nigeria, and Tanzania) in March–April 1998 and revisited Nigeria and Tanzania in August 2000. George W. Bush visited five African countries in July 2003 (South Africa, Senegal, Botswana, Uganda, and Nigeria) and in February 2008 (Benin, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana, and Liberia). Barack Obama visited Africa four times, more than any prior U.S. president. Obama visited Ghana in February 2008, four African countries in June–July 2013 (Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Senegal), South Africa again in September 2013, and Kenya and Ethiopia in July 2015. Most U.S. presidents from Richard Nixon to Obama have visited Egypt at least once (G.H.W. Bush and Trump being the exceptions). Dwight Eisenhower visited Tunisia and Morocco in December 1959. Clinton (and several former U.S. presidents) visited Morocco in 1999 for King Hussein's funeral. "Travels Abroad of the President," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, accessed October 18, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/travels/president>.

89 Rothchild, "The U.S. Foreign Policy Trajectory on Africa," 181.

90 In 1985, Congress repealed the Clark amendment (Joe Biden gave one of thirty-four dissenting Senate votes), paving the way for the Reagan administration to provide covert aid to UNITA. Jeremy Scahill, "1985: U.S. Support for UNITA Rebels in Angola," *The Intercept*, April 27, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/04/27/biden-unita-rebels-angola/>.

91 Dipo Faloyin, *Africa Is Not a Country: Notes on a Bright Continent* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), 121–24.

92 If anything, the United States was not above covertly backing coups and assassinations of leftist African leaders, including pan-Africanist gadflies such as Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah. Stuart A. Reid, *The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2023); "Four More Ways the CIA Has Meddled in Africa," *BBC News*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36303327>. The United States often tacitly supported white minority rule in Rhodesia and South Africa. For criticism of the Nixon-Kissinger policy of acceptance of apartheid from a former Kissinger aide and Clinton's first Secretary of State, see Anthony Lake, *The Tar Baby Option: American Policy Toward Southern Rhodesia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

93 Princeton N. Lyman, *Partner to History: The U.S. Role in South Africa's Transition to Democracy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2002).

94 Marian L. Lawson, "USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives After 15 Years: Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, May 27, 2009, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R40600.html>.

95 Many aid recipients in Africa also continued to receive aid despite democratic backsliding. Rothchild, "The U.S. Foreign Policy Trajectory on Africa," 194–95, 199–202.

96 In 1993, 18 U.S. troops were killed in an urban assault in Mogadishu, the infamous "Black Hawk Down" event.

97 Clinton avoided visiting democratic laggards of Nigeria, Gabon, and Angola. Chris Alden, "From Neglect to 'Virtual Engagement': The United States and Its New Paradigm for Africa," *African Affairs* 99, no. 396 (2000): 365.

98 "African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)," United States Trade Representative, accessed October 18, 2023, <http://ustr.gov/issue-areas/trade-development/preference-programs/african-growth-and-opportunity-act-agoa>.

In 2007, building on existing regional counter-terror programs,⁹⁹ the United States created Africa Command, the first new geographic combatant command since standing up Central Command in the 1980s.¹⁰⁰ The Bush administration also more than tripled U.S. economic aid to sub-Saharan Africa from \$2.25 billion in 2001 to \$7.6 billion by 2008. Support for aid increases was based in part on the notion that underdevelopment increased the risk of state collapse and the emergence of Islamic extremist groups such as al-Shabaab. Bush also argued that increased humanitarian aid for Africa was a moral imperative.¹⁰¹ Much of the new aid commitments were for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief program and a new Millennium Challenge Account to reward poor countries with good governance.¹⁰² Unlike during the Cold War, when most aid went to North Africa, the biggest foreign aid increases were in sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. Still, largely preoccupied with the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration did little to directly intervene in Africa's conflicts, including in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, instead preferring to let U.N. peacekeepers take the lead.

Many observers hoped the inauguration of America's first black president would signal a new era of U.S.-Africa relations.¹⁰³ However, the Obama years

were characterized by plateaued levels of aid and attention to the region as the administration sought to address fiscal pressures while making Asia a strategic priority for the United States.¹⁰⁴ Despite this, the Bush-era trend of growing U.S. military presence in Africa continued, as reflected in the growing numbers of troops and advisors, status of forces agreements, and temporary bases.¹⁰⁵ Yet little progress was made in countering violent extremism as deepening military engagement in Africa was not matched by investments in diplomacy, development, or democracy promotion.¹⁰⁶

Biden sought to give a new tone to Africa policy, replacing Trump's transactional "America First" diplomacy with the promise of "mutually respectful relations."

In 2017 and 2018, after a period of continuity in Africa policy punctuated by a few diplomatic blunders, great-power competition with China and Russia became more central to the Trump administration's Africa strategy.¹⁰⁷ In December 2018, National Security Advisor John Bolton unveiled "Prosper Africa," a new

99 The Pan Sahel Initiative, a State Department-funded program, sought to combat security and criminal threats across the Sahel. In 2005, such efforts were enhanced by the Pentagon's Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara and the State Department's Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative. Nicolas van de Walle, "U.S. Policy Towards Africa: The Bush Legacy and the Obama Administration," *African Affairs* 109, no. 434 (2010): 7–8.

100 "United States Africa Command," October 17, 2023, <https://www.africom.mil/>.

101 David Greene, Amy Isackson, and Danny Hajek, "George W. Bush Calls Foreign Aid a Moral and Security Imperative," *NPR*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/13/523615019/president-george-w-bush-foreign-aid-in-u-s-national-security-and-moral-interest>.

102 van de Walle, "US Policy Towards Africa," 8. PEPFAR was a major success, saving as many as 25 million lives globally, many in Africa. "The United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief," United States Department of State, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/pepfar/>.

103 Falola and Njoku, *United States and Africa Relations*, chapter 14.

104 Nicolas van de Walle, "Obama and Africa: Lots of Hope, Not Much Change," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (October 2015): 54–61.

105 The Pentagon's annual Base Structure Report omits the new "lily pads" in Africa, as they typically have a smaller U.S. personnel footprint and, at least in theory, the troops deployed there are on temporary rotation. The exact number of these sites is unclear. David Vine identified twenty-seven U.S. base sites in Africa as of 2020. See David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State*, vol. 48 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021). Nick Turse, "Pentagon's Own Map of U.S. Bases in Africa Contradicts Its Claim of 'Light' Footprint," *The Intercept*, February 27, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/27/africa-us-military-bases-afcom/>; Nick Turse, "Pentagon Mised Congress About U.S. Bases in Africa," *The Intercept*, September 8, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/09/08/africa-air-base-us-military/>; Wesley Morgan, "Behind the Secret U.S. War in Africa," *Politico*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/02/secret-war-africa-pentagon-664005>.

106 Elizabeth Shackelford, Ethan Kessler, and Emma Sanderson, "Less Is More: A New Strategy for U.S. Security Assistance to Africa," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, August 21, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/report/less-more-new-strategy-us-security-assistance-africa>.

107 In this period, no assistant secretary of state was confirmed. Many ambassadorships in Africa were vacant. Acting officers continued existing programs. Nicholas Westcott, "The Trump Administration's Africa Policy," *African Affairs* 118, no. 473 (2019): 737–49; John Campbell, "Trump's Africa Policy Is Better Than It Looks," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), April 6, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/trumps-africa-policy-better-it-looks>. President Trump caused a diplomatic firestorm in Africa when in January 2018 he told congressional leaders in a closed session that the United States should be wary of immigration from "shithole countries" such as Haiti and Africa. Trump's signature travel ban, which was extended and expanded in January 2020, also alienated many Africans. Trump proposed cuts to the U.S. foreign aid budget for Africa each year through 2020, but Congress mostly maintained prior levels of funding of about \$7.5 billion for Africa. Robbie Gramer, "African Ambassadors to Convene in Wake of Trump's 'Shithole' Outburst," *Foreign Policy*, January 12, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/12/african-ambassadors-to-meet-in-wake-of-trump-s-shithole-outburst-african-union-immigration-oval-office-controversy-state-department-diplomacy/>; Zachariah Mampilly and Jason Stearns, "A New Direction for U.S. Foreign Policy in Africa," *Dissent* 67, no. 4 (2020): 107–17.



initiative aimed at competing with the perceived growing Chinese and Russian influence in the region.¹⁰⁸ The plan promised to double flagging U.S.-Africa trade and investment and compete with Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investments.¹⁰⁹ In 2019, the U.S. International Development Finance Cooperation was established to drive private investment in the developing world, especially Africa.¹¹⁰ But without adequate funding, the reality never matched the ambitious rhetoric of “Prosper Africa.”¹¹¹ By the end of his term, Trump tried to limit Washington’s footprint on the continent, both economically and militarily. He “pared back efforts to fight jihadis in Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria” and in December 2020 ordered U.S. troops to withdraw from Somalia.¹¹² As a result, by 2021, official U.S. troop levels in Africa — which had peaked at just over 5,000 in 2017 — had fallen to pre-9/11 era levels of closer to 1,200–1,300 troops in 2019 and 2020.

Upon coming to office, the Biden administration did not prioritize Africa, though in a 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article, Biden said that “we need to do more to integrate our friends in Latin America and Africa into the broader network of democracies and to seize opportunities for cooperation in those regions.”¹¹³ Biden sought to give a new tone to Africa policy, replacing Trump’s transactional “America First” diplomacy with the promise of “mutually respectful relations.” To that end, Biden lifted Trump’s Muslim travel ban, which affected many African countries.¹¹⁴ In May 2022, at

the request of the Pentagon, Biden reversed Trump’s December 2020 order and authorized hundreds of special operations forces to redeploy to Somalia.¹¹⁵ In December 2022, Biden convened the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, where he announced more humanitarian aid for the region¹¹⁶ and several new initiatives, including a “21st Partnership for African Security” and “African Democratic and Political Transitions” initiative.¹¹⁷ The summit’s agenda has framed Biden’s Africa policy ever since. Late in 2022, the Biden administration named Ambassador Johnnie Carson as a new special presidential representative for U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit implementation.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, there has been no major increase in overall U.S. foreign aid to Africa in the Biden years.¹¹⁹

The Need for Actionable U.S. Policy

The Biden administration still lacks a coherent and robust strategy for promoting democracy, countering violent extremism, and competing with China and Russia in Africa.

In August 2022, the Biden administration published the “U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa.”¹²⁰ It identified four objectives of U.S. strategy in the region: foster openness and open societies, deliver democratic and security dividends, advance pandemic recovery and economic opportunity, and support conservation, climate adaptation, and energy tran-

108 “Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration’s New Africa Strategy,” The White House, December 13, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>.

109 Bolton presented the Belt and Road Initiative as a predatory grab for natural resources and influence. Francis Owusu and Padraig Carmody, “Trump’s Legacy in Africa and What to Expect from Biden,” *The Conversation*, November 25, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/trumps-legacy-in-africa-and-what-to-expect-from-biden-150293>.

110 Daniel Kliman, “Leverage the New U.S. International Development Finance Corporation to Compete with China,” *The Hill*, November 16, 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/416904-leverage-us-international-development-finance-corporation-compete-with-china/>.

111 Owusu and Carmody, “Trump’s Legacy in Africa and What to Expect from Biden.”

112 Marcus Hicks, Kyle Atwell, and Dan Collini, “Great-Power Competition Is Coming to Africa,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-03-04/great-power-competition-coming-africa>; “Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Somalia,” *BBC News*, December 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55196130>.

113 Biden mentions Africa only twice in this article. In the other reference, Biden claims pride in Obama administration efforts to contain the Ebola pandemic in west Africa. See Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2020): 73.

114 Christian von Soest, “The End of Apathy: The New Africa Policy under Joe Biden,” *GIGA Focus Africa*, no. 2 (2021), <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/the-end-of-apathy-the-new-africa-policy-under-joe-biden>.

115 Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, “Biden Approves Plan to Redeploy Several Hundred Ground Forces Into Somalia,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/us/politics/biden-military-somalia.html>.

116 The White House, “FACT SHEET: U.S.-Africa Partnership to Promote Food Security and Resilient Food Systems,” The White House, December 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/15/fact-sheet-u-s-africa-partnership-to-promote-food-security-and-resilient-food-systems/>.

117 The White House, “FACT SHEET: U.S.-Africa Partnership in Promoting Peace, Security, and Democratic Governance,” The White House, December 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/15/fact-sheet-u-s-africa-partnership-in-promoting-peace-security-and-democratic-governance/>.

118 The White House, “Statement: Special Presidential Representative for U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit Implementation,” The White House, December 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/15/statement-special-presidential-representative-for-u-s-africa-leaders-summit-implementation/>.

119 Alexis Arieff, Lauren Ploch Blanchard, and Nicolas Cook, “U.S. Assistance for Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview,” Congressional Research Service, November 7, 2023.

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

sition. Rhetorically, the strategy calls “continuity” in Africa policy as insufficient. It claims to “reframe the region’s importance to U.S. national security interests.” One reason for Africa’s heightened importance is China and Russia’s use of the region “to challenge the rules-based international order.” In addition, the strategy notes growing economic interests, with the African Continental Free Trade Area set to make Africa one of the largest free trade areas in the world (and make Africa the fifth largest economy in the world). We agree with much of the strategy’s rhetoric. The question, of course, is how to translate such lofty principles into actionable policy.

In a September 2023 speech at the U.N. General Assembly, Biden spoke about the need to defend democracy around the world, especially in west Africa. The United States, Biden said, stands “with the African Union and ECOWAS [the Economic Community of West African States] and other regional bodies to support constitutional rule. We will not retreat from the values that make us strong. We will defend democracy.”¹²¹

This echoed the 2022 *National Security Strategy’s* emphasis on “democratic competition,” or efforts to defend democracy and help democracies demonstrate the superiority of the democratic way of life over autocratic alternatives.¹²²

In practice, the Biden administration’s expressed commitment to democratic values in Africa has been in tension with interests-based foreign policy goals, including countering violent extremism. For example, in September 2023, Washington struck a short-lived deal with Niger’s new military junta — which, last July, toppled Mohamed Bazoum’s democratically elected government¹²³ — to resume operations from the U.S. drone base at Agadez.¹²⁴ Though failure to quickly declare and oppose anti-democratic coups undermines

U.S. credentials as a reliable patron of democracy,¹²⁵ the United States hesitated triggering cuts in military aid and training critical to countering terror in the Sahel, so Washington did not acknowledge a coup had taken place in Niger until October 2023.¹²⁶ The gap between Biden’s rhetoric and initial U.S. reaction to Niger’s coup reflects an enduring perceived trade-off that the United States faces in confronting democratic backsliding in the region. The developments in Niger also indicate that Washington’s current approach is not working. In March 2024, Niamey revoked the status of forces agreement with the United States and ordered American troops to leave, potentially creating a vacuum Russia and China want to fill.

But without a roadmap or clear set of principles, U.S. policymakers are reacting ad hoc to each coup.

Beyond Niger, U.S. Africa policy now faces a trilemma of promoting democracy and combatting terrorism while simultaneously competing with authoritarian rivals for geopolitical influence. Washington aspires to do all three efforts well but can effectively only do two things at any given time. As geopolitical competition intensifies, the United States faces resistance that it last encountered during the Cold War, when it also had an uneven track record of defending democracy. We now see a reinvigorated Cold War-era debate over whether Washington should practice double standards for illiberal regimes in Africa that may share security or geopolitical interests with the United States.¹²⁷ During the Cold War, this meant tolerating right-wing dictatorships whose collapse might empower communists.

121 “Remarks by President Biden Before the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” The White House, September 19, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/19/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-78th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/>.

122 Trump’s national security strategy also centered on great power competition but did not emphasize democracy defense as a way to compete. Chin, Skinner, and Yoo, “Understanding National Security Strategies Through Time.”

123 U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken hailed Bazoum’s government as “a model of resilience, a model of democracy, a model of cooperation” when he visited Niamey in March 2023. Dalatou Mamane and Krista Larson, “U.S. Secretary of State Blinken Visits Niger on Africa Tour,” *AP News*, March 16, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/niger-antony-blinken-us-secretary-state-mohamed-bazoum-jihadis-islamic-extremists-cb35b9b2c-543fae94c093e332b556146>.

124 Al Jazeera and Reuters, “U.S. Military Resumes Drone, Crewed Aircraft Operations in Post-Coup Niger,” *Al Jazeera*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/14/us-military-resumes-drone-crewed-aircraft-operations-in-post-coup-niger>.

125 Austin S. Matthews, “Fixing U.S. Policy Toward Foreign Military Coups,” *Lawfare* (blog), July 23, 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/fixing-u.s.-policy-toward-foreign-military-coups>.

126 Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Declares the Military Takeover in Niger a Coup,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/us/politics/niger-coup-biden-declaration.html>; Jim Garamone, “U.S. Shifting Forces Inside Niger, Pentagon Official Says,” *DOD News*, September 7, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3519412/us-shifting-forces-inside-niger-pentagon-official-says/>.

127 Dalibor Roháč, “Dictatorships and Double Standards Redux,” *American Purpose* (blog), May 10, 2022, <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/dictatorships-and-double-standards-redux/>; Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary Magazine*, November 1, 1979, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/jeane-kirkpatrick/dictatorships-double-standards/>.

At present, the concern is similar, as not tolerating friendly dictatorships might undermine U.S. security interests or empower anti-American forces.

Biden's 2022 Africa strategy says relatively little about how to promote democracy or deter and reverse coups in the region. On the one hand, it says that the United States will condemn coups (historically, it has not) and incorporate human rights abuses by security forces into bilateral talks. The strategy also says the United States will use both positive inducements and punitive measures such as sanctions. But without a roadmap or clear set of principles, U.S. policymakers are reacting ad hoc to each coup. The result is hesitation, paralysis, and inconsistency — the United States has only “called a coup a coup” half of the time since 2009.¹²⁸ For example, although coup leaders from Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea were denied invitations to attend the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022, Mahamat Déby, who seized power in Chad in April 2021, was invited.

Revitalizing and Recalibrating U.S. Policy

U.S. Africa policy needs to be revitalized and recalibrated to respond to the spreading post-2020 coup pandemic head on because doing so makes the region safer for democracy and more stable — regardless of who occupies the Oval Office.

Washington should at long last shed the habit of giving Africa short shrift in terms of attention and resources. Wars in Ukraine and Gaza understandably occupy much policymaker attention. But the United States should not ignore the fate of democracy or security developments in Africa. In a world of transnational security threats, African insecurity also threatens U.S. security interests. Terrorist threats to American citizens have often emanated from Africa, from the time Osama bin Laden set up al-Qaeda's operations in Sudan in 1992 (until 1996)¹²⁹ to the 1998

twin embassy bombings that killed a dozen Americans (and 200 Africans) to today, when al-Qaeda and Islamic State-linked groups are spread throughout the continent and kill or kidnap Americans for ransom.¹³⁰ In 2020, al-Shabaab attacked a Kenyan military base, killing a U.S. servicemember and two U.S. government contractors.¹³¹ Even more alarming is the arrest of an al-Shabaab member taking flight lessons in the Philippines who was, according to the Department of Justice, “conspiring to hijack aircraft in order to conduct a 9/11-style attack in the United States” — illustrating there is a transnational threat from at least one group on the continent.¹³²

The United States also cannot sit idly by while an onslaught of coups in Africa chips away at democratization, generates chaos and instability, and creates new opportunities for unrest that America's rivals have shown they know how to exploit. For example, terrorist attacks rose 30 percent in the aftermath of the 2021 coup in Mali, after the new government turned to Wagner for security assistance and ordered the French and the U.N. to leave the country, greatly limiting Washington's ability to provide support.¹³³ One observer claims that Wagner's presence in Mali “has strengthened and energized jihadi groups, providing them with not only a recruitment tool, but a much more favorable operating environment in Mali.”¹³⁴ This development could happen in other places where Russia's presence and influence are on the rise.

The Biden administration says that Africa is a priority, but its actions suggest otherwise. While the United States has not lost all of its influence in Africa, failing to truly prioritize the region to compete with Russia and China could risk undermining U.S. values and interests. To compete effectively will require sustained engagement, more fiscal resources, and a rebalanced Africa strategy that reduces the yawning gap between rhetorical commitment to democracy and America's tepid response to coups.

There are no easy or quick solutions to the Africa policy trilemma, but hard choices need to be made and priorities set and clarified.¹³⁵ The reality of the last four

128 Matthews, “Fixing U.S. Policy Toward Foreign Military Coups.”

129 “Osama Bin Laden: A Chronology of His Political Life,” *PBS FRONTLINE*, September 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/etc/cron.html>.

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

131 Ryan Browne and Michael Callahan, “Kenya Terror Attack: Three Americans Killed by Al-Shabaab,” *CNN*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/05/politics/us-service-member-civilian-defense-contractors-killed-kenya/index.html>.

132 Office of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of Justice, “Kenyan National Indicted for Conspiring to Hijack Aircraft on Behalf of the Al Qaeda-Affiliated Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab,” December 16, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/kenyan-national-indicted-conspiring-hijack-aircraft-behalf-al-qaeda-affiliated-terrorist>.

133 News Wires, “U.S. Blames Russia's Wagner Group for Worsening Security in Mali,” *France 24*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221027-us-accuses-russia-s-wagner-group-of-worsening-security-situation-in-mali>.

134 Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 11 (December 2022): 21–30.

135 In part, the new Sahel Alliance between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger makes navigating the trilemma in the Sahel easier as they have fore-sworn Western cooperation and cozied up to America's authoritarian competitors.

years suggests a more assertive and deliberate strategy is needed in countries where the United States is still welcome. In short, the United States should find more ways to demonstrate to its African partners, and the African people, that Washington is a dependable democratic advocate and preferred security partner. Here are four policy ideas to that end.

First, prioritize engaging friendly African partners and democracies, especially in the littorals.

The United States should focus on increasing engagement with the littoral countries of Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana as well as Cameroon and Nigeria. Many of the littoral nations in west Africa have seen attacks by Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in their northern regions — with Cote d'Ivoire being the site of a major al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb attack in 2016.¹³⁶ Historically, the United States has had good relationships with these countries, and they are probably open to increased military cooperation. In fact, Washington is presently exploring options for drone basing in the littorals.¹³⁷ At the same time, Russia is trying to deepen its military ties in this region with countries that are still friendly to Washington;¹³⁸ Washington needs to prioritize and expedite engaging with these nations to maintain its relevancy as a security partner and defender of democracy in the region.

Cameroon and Nigeria have been fighting violent extremist organizations for close to two decades. Security cooperation between the United States and Nigeria came to a head in 2014 over concerns about human rights abuses. However, with its huge population, large economy, and plentiful natural

resources, Nigeria's importance on the continent is apparent.¹³⁹ Washington should continue to improve these relationships.¹⁴⁰ Moscow is currently in talks with Abuja about how to deepen bilateral cooperation.¹⁴¹ But all of these countries are still open to U.S. engagement, and Washington can prove to its regional partners that it is still serious about providing security assistance and intensifying engagement. In short, Washington should try to contain democratic backsliding and Russian and Chinese influence from expanding farther beyond the Sahel into the littorals and neighboring countries.

Second, rebalance the “3Ds” of democracy, defense, and diplomacy. Maintain investment in defense cooperation while increasing investment in development and democracy in the region.

While Washington claims to take a comprehensive approach to Africa, balancing development, diplomacy, and defense,¹⁴² the tripod of the “three Ds” is out of balance. America's Africa policy is too passive and lacks sufficient investment in development and diplomacy. There remain clear benefits to continued defense cooperation across Africa,¹⁴³ including supporting diplomatic efforts to deepen Washington's relationships on the ground. Defense cooperation should remain an important part of U.S. strategy on the continent. However, now more than ever, Washington needs to expand diplomatic and development tools of statecraft to better curb the coup pandemic, nudge military juntas to quickly restore democratic rule, improve partnerships, and protect African and U.S. interests. A heightened focus on development, investment,¹⁴⁴ trade, education, strengthening democratic institutions, and supporting free and fair

136 Steven Bernard and Aanu Adeoye, "The Islamist Insurgents Threatening West Africa," *Financial Times*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f9c0ca66-8c32-4906-9e22-f2d3fc0e8c67>; "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire," International Crisis Group, August 11, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire>.

137 Michael M. Phillips, "U.S. Seeks Drone Bases in Coastal West Africa to Stem Islamist Advance," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/u-s-seeks-drone-bases-in-coastal-west-africa-to-stem-islamist-advance-21282861>.

138 Liam Karr, "Africa File, February 29, 2024: Russia Eyes Gulf of Guinea, JNIM Massacres Civilians in Burkina Faso," *Critical Threats* (blog), February 29, 2024, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-february-29-2024-russia-eyes-gulf-of-guinea-jnim-massacres-civilians-in-burkina-faso>; John Campbell, "Nigeria and Russia Sign Military Cooperation Agreement," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), August 31, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigeria-and-russia-sign-military-cooperation-agreement>.

139 Sani Tukur, "Nigeria Cancels U.S. Military Training as Relations between Both Nations Worsen," *Premium Times*, December 1, 2014, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/172178-nigeria-cancels-u-s-military-training-relations-nations-worsen.html>.

140 Rachel Yeboah Boakye, Chris Kwaja, and Matthew Edds-Reitman, "To Help Stabilize West Africa, Bolster a Key Partner: Nigeria," *United States Institute of Peace* (blog), April 15, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/04/help-stabilize-west-africa-bolster-key-partner-nigeria>.

141 Kester Kenn Klomegh, "Russia and Nigeria: Turning a New Page in Their Relationship?" *Modern Diplomacy* (blog), March 9, 2024, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/03/09/russia-and-nigeria-turning-a-new-page-in-their-relationship/>.

142 David Vergun, "U.S. Uses Holistic Approach in Africa Relations, General Says," *DOD News*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3316721/us-uses-holistic-approach-in-africa-relations-general-says/>.

143 Increasing domestic military capabilities enables recipient countries to manage internal security, deploy in support of external military operations that address regional instability, and contribute to UN peacekeeping operations. For example, Kenya recently offered to lead a peacekeeping mission to Haiti—a mission that previously had no takers. Haleigh Bartos, John Chin, and Tyler Ashner, "Haiti: A Best-Case Scenario," *War on the Rocks*, April 30, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/haiti-a-best-case-scenario/>.

144 Zainab Usman, "How America Can Foster an African Boom," *Foreign Affairs*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/how-america-can-foster-african-boom>.

elections should accompany existing military engagement. Where to focus these efforts? Start in countries under threat by violent extremist organizations — which have yet to turn to Russia for support.

On the diplomatic front, one sensible place to start would be for the U.S. president to visit Africa — as Biden promised but failed to do in 2023.¹⁴⁵ The bare minimum next step should be to fill remaining vacancies in the State Department's key ambassadorial posts. Biden's nominee for ambassador to the African Union, Stephanie S. Sullivan, has not been confirmed despite being nominated nearly two years ago.¹⁴⁶ The special envoy for the Sahel position is also vacant, and filling it should be a priority. The United States has recently named Tom Perriello as a new special envoy for Sudan.¹⁴⁷ Yet Washington still lacks a high-level regional point person for strengthening democratic institutions.¹⁴⁸ Without a coordinated regional diplomatic effort being run out of the State Department with the full public support of the White House, America's anti-coup diplomacy has been hampered. A higher-level special envoy focused on rolling back recent coups and preventing future coups by strengthening democracy and weakening the tolerance for coups is needed. The envoy should be empowered to engage in regional shuttle diplomacy and give the United States a more central role coordinating regional anti-coup diplomacy with regional partners, embassies, and regional international organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union.

While these are worthy aid initiatives, they should be better funded to seriously compete with Russia and China.

Regarding economic statecraft, growing fiscal constraints and polarization in the U.S. Congress make a large-scale development initiative for Africa akin to the Marshall Plan politically if not fiscally infeasible in the near term.¹⁴⁹ Biden's 2024 budget included about \$8 billion for Africa, roughly the same as over the past decade.¹⁵⁰ What could be politically possible are more moderate increases in aid given more strategically to promote democratic development and counter Russian and Chinese influence, both multilaterally with select partners and bilaterally by scaling up funding for the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the State Department's Human Rights Democracy Fund for Africa.¹⁵¹ In August 2023, as part of the supplemental appropriations request for Ukraine aid, the Biden administration asked for \$200 million for a "Countering Russian Malign Actors in Africa Fund" to bolster aid in countries vulnerable to Russian influence. Just this spring, that request was pared back to only \$25 million in Biden's fiscal year 2025 budget proposal. Biden's request also includes \$400 million for a "Countering the People's Republic of China Influence Fund" and funds for a Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, echoing Trump's "Prosper Africa" to compete with China's

145 Whitney Schneidman and Gracelin Baskaran, "Will Biden Visit Africa This Year?" *Brookings* (blog), September 22, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/will-biden-visit-africa-this-year/>.

146 As of May 3, 2024, five ambassadorial posts were still vacant, including those for the African Union, Eswatini, Libya, Mauritania, and Sudan. On May 2, 2024, seven ambassadorial nominees (to Burkina Faso, Burundi, Djibouti, Liberia, Nigeria, Somalia, and Zimbabwe) were confirmed after long delays. "Tracker: Current U.S. Ambassadors," American Foreign Service Association, May 3, 2024, <https://afsa.org/list-ambassadorial-appointments>.

147 Daphne Psaledakis, "U.S. Names New Special Envoy to Sudan in Push to End War," *Reuters*, February 26, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-names-new-special-envoy-sudan-push-end-war-2024-02-26/>.

148 "Office of the Special Envoy for the Sahel Region of Africa," United States Department of State, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-political-affairs/bureau-of-african-affairs/office-of-the-special-envoy-for-the-sahel-region-of-africa/>; "Michael Hammer: Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed October 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/biographies/michael-hammer/>.

149 Ilhan Omar, "We Need a Marshall Plan for Africa," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/21/we-need-a-marshall-plan-for-africa>.

150 Adva Saldinger, "Biden's \$6.8T Budget Proposal Would Boost U.S. Foreign Aid. Here's How," *Devex* (blog), March 10, 2023, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/biden-s-6-8t-budget-proposal-would-boost-us-foreign-aid-here-s-how-105081>; Adva Saldinger, "Budget Constraints Limit Foreign Affairs Funding in Biden Proposal," *Devex* (blog), March 12, 2024, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/budget-constraints-limit-foreign-affairs-funding-in-biden-proposal-107228>.

151 Several prominent scholarly reviews suggest that U.S. democracy aid may have a modest positive effect on democratization in recipients, even while other types of foreign aid do not. Steven E. Finkel, Anibal Pérez-Liñán, and Mitchell A. Seligson, "The Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building, 1990–2003," *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 404–39; James M. Scott and Carie A. Steele, "Sponsoring Democracy: The United States and Democracy Aid to the Developing World, 1988–2001," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2011): 47–69. Critical for promoting democracy is democratic conditionality. This might be imposed ex-post or ex-ante, as is the case with MCC compacts. Unlike traditional USAID or State Department funding, MCC uses objective scorecards to direct aid to governments with minimum democratic credentials. It can also terminate or suspend compacts after coups, as in Madagascar in 2009, Mali in 2012, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in September 2023. "Where We Work," Millennium Challenge Corporation, accessed October 21, 2023, <https://www.mcc.gov/where-we-work>.

Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁵² While these are worthy aid initiatives, they should be better funded to seriously compete with Russia and China.

Third, develop a playbook for consistently navigating coup responses.

The primary tools used to counter recent coups — limited Economic Community of West African States sanctions and suspended African Union memberships — are not working.¹⁵³ In January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger all announced they were leaving the Economic Community of West African States.¹⁵⁴ With the recent decline of anti-coup norms,¹⁵⁵ coup plotters today recognize “the West is no longer the only game in town.”¹⁵⁶ They see a more permissive environment to make coups stick. Given the presence of other external patrons, U.S. sanctions alone probably will not work. The only way to change coup makers’ cost-benefit calculus short of military intervention is to invest in more active diplomacy and economic assistance tied to democratic progress.

A new U.S. approach should focus on creating positive incentives for military juntas to quickly return to democratic rule. In the immediate wake of a coup, the United States needs to quickly declare it, not ignore it. Prior research has shown that the credible threat of strong international responses can make coups rarer and pressure post-coup military juntas to restore civilian rule quickly.¹⁵⁷ Greater flexibility in response is needed to reduce incentives for rhetorical hedging by U.S. policymakers. A more flexible coup response policy would, depending on facts on the ground, proscribe some but not all forms of aid and

cooperation (such as democracy aid).¹⁵⁸

In the medium term, credible offers of greater economic or military aid for restoring democratic rule quickly could help incentivize coup leaders to establish transitional governments sooner. Democratic donors must coordinate so that such aid offers that are conditional on democratic progress are still attractive despite competing offers of aid from Russia and China. To ensure the United States and its allies are not training the next generation of coup leaders,¹⁵⁹ military engagement must shift “away from the delivery of tactical weapons and towards a ‘governance-first’ policy that leads with support for institution building aimed at fostering civilian control and responsible use.”¹⁶⁰

Long term, America’s goal should be to offer credible commitments to carrots for democratization, which at the same time do not drive coup regimes to seek support from Russia or China. Rather than just a strategy of containment, Washington should consider a Kennedy-style “alliance for progress.” After the Cuban revolution, the United States sought to neutralize the appeal of communist revolution by bolstering non-communist states with more development aid.¹⁶¹ We propose a similar non-militarized strategy to counter autocracy in Africa today.

Fourth, coordinate more closely with Western allies and regional partners.

Washington should do more with its close Western partners on the continent, including coordinating funding aid and investment packages to counter Russia and China. Since 2013, Washington has worked closely with Paris in the Sahel to provide

152 “The President’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 Budget Request,” U.S. Agency for International Development, March 25, 2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/cj>; “FACT SHEET: The President’s Budget Confronts Global Challenges and Defends Democracy,” The White House, March 11, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2024/03/11/fact-sheet-the-presidents-budget-confronts-global-challenges-and-defends-democracy/>.

153 Bate Felix and Anait Miridzhanian, “What Sanctions Have Been Imposed on Niger since the Coup?” *Reuters*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/what-sanctions-have-been-imposed-niger-since-coup-2023-08-08/>; AfricaNews and AFP, “African Union Reaffirms Suspension of Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Sudan,” *Africanews*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/02/20/african-union-reaffirms-suspension-of-burkina-faso-mali-guinea-and-sudan/>.

154 Nnamdi Obasi, “What Turmoil in ECOWAS Means for Nigeria and Regional Stability,” International Crisis Group, March 29, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria-sahel/what-turmoil-ecowas-means-nigeria-and-regional-stability>.

155 Oisín Tansey, “The Fading of the Anti-Coup Norm,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 144–56.

156 Howard LaFranchi, “In African ‘Coup Belt,’ Western Values Must Now Compete,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2023/0901/In-African-coup-belt-Western-values-must-now-compete>.

157 Nikolay Marinov and Hein Goemans, “Coups and Democracy,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2014): 799–825; Clayton Thyne et al., “Even Generals Need Friends: How Domestic and International Reactions to Coups Influence Regime Survival,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (2018): 1406–32.

158 Comfort Ero and Murithi Mutiga, “The Crisis of African Democracy: Coups Are a Symptom—Not the Cause—of Political Dysfunction,” *Foreign Affairs* 103 (2024): 120–34.

159 Lorne Cook, “EU Grapples with Its African Army Training Dilemma as Another Coup Rocks the Continent,” *AP International*, August 31, 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-international/ap-eu-examines-its-training-of-african-armies-as-another-coup-rocks-the-continent/>; Matthew Kroenig and Emma Ashford, “Does U.S. Military Training Embolden Coup Plotters in Africa?” *Foreign Policy* (blog), August 4, 2023, <https://foreign-policy.com/2023/08/04/niger-coup-military-training-africa/>.

160 Alexander Noyes, “The Case for a Governance-First U.S. Security Policy in the Sahel,” *The RAND Blog* (blog), June 8, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/06/the-case-for-a-governance-first-us-security-policy.html>.

161 Jeffrey Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

transport, aerial refueling, and intelligence.¹⁶² Washington should coordinate more with France so future agreements enable continued work toward shared geopolitical and security objectives — at least in the countries that have not rejected France and could benefit from additional assistance like the littorals, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Washington should also seek to cooperate with the United Kingdom and other close Western allies who share an interest in regional stability and countering authoritarian regimes and could be cajoled to take a deeper interest in the continent. For example, Britain has slashed aid to Africa in recent years.¹⁶³ The United States should advocate such cuts be reversed as part of a concerted effort to restore Western linkage and leverage. Washington can work with European allies to bypass hostile juntas and support African civil society.¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

Amidst the ongoing coup pandemic and shifting geopolitical landscape, U.S. Africa policy needs a paradigm shift to center democratic competition and more consistently and better support democracies. The United States should find new ways of demonstrating to its African partners, and the African people, that Washington is a dependable and preferred partner. Rather than sacrifice democracy in the name of other strategic interests, as the United States was prone to do during the Cold War, Washington now needs to commit to the defense of democracy as the default means of competing with authoritarian major power rivals across the Global South and Africa. 

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Image: USAFRICOM (CC BY 2.0 DEED)¹⁶⁵

162 Brian Finucane, "Still at War: The United States in the Sahel," *Just Security* (blog), April 7, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/81028/still-at-war-the-united-states-in-the-sahel/>.

163 Zainab Usman and Jonathan Glennie, "Sign of the Times: How the United Kingdom's Integrated Review Affects Relations with Africa," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (blog), February 22, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/02/sign-of-the-times-how-the-united-kingdoms-integrated-review-affects-relations-with-africa?lang=en>; James Landale, "UK Foreign Aid Cuts: Thousands Will Die as a Result, Says Report," *BBC News*, August 2, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-66378364>.

164 Malte Lierl, "Siding with Societies: How Europe Can Reposition Itself in the Sahel," *GIGA Focus Africa*, no. 5 (November 2023), <https://doi.org/10.57671/gfaf-23052>.

165 For the image, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flintlock_2018_opens_in_Agadez,_Niger_\(40511366645\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flintlock_2018_opens_in_Agadez,_Niger_(40511366645).jpg). For the license see, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>.

