



THE FUTURE OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE SAHEL REGION

Placing Partnership First

Laura Rajosefa, Maj, USAF

A historical black and white photograph of the Wright Flyer biplane in flight over a rural landscape. The plane is a two-winged aircraft with a propeller and landing gear. In the background, there are several small buildings and a line of trees under a clear sky.

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**The Future of
Strategic Competition
in The Sahel Region**
Placing Partnership First

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Foreword

It is my great pleasure to present another issue of the Wright Flyer Papers. Through this series, Air Command and Staff College presents a sampling of exemplary research produced by our resident and distance-learning students. This series has long showcased the kind of visionary thinking that drove the aspirations and activities of the earliest aviation pioneers. This year's selection of essays admirably extends that tradition. As the series title indicates, these papers aim to present cutting-edge, actionable knowledge—research that addresses some of the most complex security and defense challenges facing us today.

Recently, the Wright Flyer Papers transitioned to an exclusively electronic publication format. It is our hope that our migration from print editions to an electronic-only format will foster even greater intellectual debate among Airmen and fellow members of the profession of arms as the series reaches a growing global audience. By publishing these papers via the Air University Press website, ACSC hopes not only to reach more readers, but also to support Air Force-wide efforts to conserve resources.

Thank you for supporting the Wright Flyer Papers and our efforts to disseminate outstanding ACSC student research for the benefit of our Air Force and warfighters everywhere. We trust that what follows will stimulate thinking, invite debate, and further encourage today's air, space, and cyber warfighters in their continuing search for innovative and improved ways to defend our nation and way of life.



LEE G. GENTILE, JR.
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Abstract

Exploring the future of strategic competition in the Sahel region, the present research formulates hypotheses regarding Chinese and Russian agendas in the subregion.

Consistent with Belt and Road Initiative projects developed in Central Asia, China seeks to establish multimodal transport corridors connecting the Gulf of Aden to the Gulf of Guinea and the Mediterranean coast to the Gulf of Guinea. To do so, China will align its state-financed loans and construction efforts with the African Union's flagship Program Infrastructure Development for Africa (PIDA). Developing transportation will support the exploitation of untapped resources—such as oil, uranium, and lithium. Beijing will gradually expand its military footprint in the sub-region to protect its nationals, project the image of a responsible Great Power, and gain combat experience. A Chinese naval base in the Gulf of Guinea will also offer Beijing a strategic location on the Atlantic façade.

Destabilization efforts in the Sahel region target Mali and, to a lesser extent, Chad. They follow a pattern like the one observed in the Central African Republic. Actors carrying out these nefarious activities belong to Yevgeny Prigozhin's nexus (e.g., the Wagner Group, its parent mining holding M-Invest, and influence operatives). Wagner's presence in Mali provides Russia with access to major human trafficking routes, giving Moscow political leverage against democracies on the Southern flank of NATO—a hybrid coercion strategy coined as cross-engineered migration (Greenhill, 2020). Thus, it is a continuation of Vladimir Putin's efforts to create rifts within the alliance and undermine NATO's unified stance on the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Acknowledgments

Primarily, I would like to thank Dr. Christopher Stamper who was instrumental in fostering fruitful connections with the Joint Staff and US Africa Command. Dr. Stamper crafted a unique research environment that enabled his students to wrestle with African security issues realistically. Without his dedication, patience, and trust, this project would simply not have existed.

Addressing strategic competition in Africa can prove overwhelming. Major Brandon Scott's assistance in narrowing the research scope proved greatly valuable.

This research was primarily conducted to provide the Joint Staff with a complementary take on Chinese and Russian activities in the Sahel region. As J5/Africa head, Brig Gen Duke Pirak gave foundational guidance. Brigadier General Pirak and Brig Gen Peter Bailey attended a preliminary briefing exposing key research findings and offered ad hoc critical feedback. While this academic paper does not represent official views and bears inherent limitations, it has benefited from a senior outlook on a complex and challenging subject.

Finally, I am grateful to my Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) classmates Maj Franklin Kipsang Bett and Maj James Johnson for their continued support. The lively and insightful discussions we shared throughout our respective research periods significantly added to my perspective. All mistakes herein remain solely mine.

Introduction

I kind of look at Russia as the hurricane. It comes in fast and hard. China, on the other hand, is climate change: long, slow, pervasive.

—Rob Joyce

In 2020, a Ghana-based polling institute called Afrobarometer measured popular opinion of Chinese involvement in eighteen African states. According to researchers Soule and Selormey's analysis of this study, "perceptions of China have changed for the better in some countries in the Sahel region."¹ Both China and Russia engaged in deepening defense cooperation with Sahelian states. For instance, Russia and Mali signed an official defense cooperation agreement in 2019. Malian Armed Forces public statements suggest that China possibly followed in Russia's footsteps on July 23, 2021.²

Strategic competition is unfolding in the Sahel region—a vast geographical area comprised of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina-Faso, and Chad. How can the United States incorporate this nascent reality in a security context still characterized by endogenous terrorist threats linked to Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State? Should counterterrorism operations be halted to pursue strategic competition instead? In order to answer those questions, we must decode the Chinese and Russian approaches and derive hypotheses and plausible scenarios.

As Army Brig Gen Gregory Hadfield hinted, "it is important to remember that outside of selling arms for their own economic benefit, China and Russia are not doing much to help counter extremist groups seeking to rob Africans of their future."³ Fighting terrorism and maintaining a check on China and Russia are not mutually exclusive. Because counterterrorism (CT) remains a critical partner which neither Russia nor China intend to sincerely address, it remains one of the western comparative advantages in the Sahel and a foundation upon which building enduring diplomatic, economic, and informational strategies rest.

Decoding the Chinese Approach

China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) regularly makes the headlines as a staple of the country's growing economic ambitions. Yet, limiting the BRI's scope to the sole economic field proves a misconception of the extent of this pivotal element of Beijing's grand strategy—which shifted from a regional to a global focus under Xi Jinping's guidance.

A Tailored Variation of the Belt Road Initiative—the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

Launched and funded by Beijing in 2000, the FOCAC initiative is a comprehensive platform structuring the Chinese efforts on the African continent. While FOCAC predated the formal branding of China’s “going-global” strategy under the blanket Belt and Road Initiative unveiled in 2013,⁴ Chinese officials indirectly corroborated that FOCAC should serve as a platform to integrate its nexus of BRI bilateral agreements. Since its inception, the forum has met every three years—alternatively taking place in Beijing and African capitals. Its latest edition took place in Dakar (Senegal) November 29–30, 2021.

Scholar Srikanth Kondapalli underlines that “compared to other such international forums such as Europe-Africa Summit, France-Africa Summit, Tokyo International Conference on African Development, and India-Africa Summit, the FOCAC has steadily expanded in terms of membership and influence.”⁵ In 2021, the eighth edition included 53 out of 54 African nations. Incidentally, the FOCAC 2021 also saw the participation of the African Union Committee (AUC), which endorses a leading role in developing pan-African infrastructures.

Mapping BRI efforts in the Sahel thus appears of paramount importance to fully grasp the extent of China’s growing economic and military ambitions in the region.

Hypotheses Regarding the Chinese Infrastructure Maneuver in the Sahel Region

While high-visibility infrastructure projects in Eastern Africa have garnered significant attention, expansion of Chinese presence in the Sahel goes relatively unnoticed. The Sahel, a region comprised of Burkina-Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, forms an aggregate of mostly landlocked countries. At first glance, they do not fit the typical profile of coastal African countries targeted by the Maritime Silk Road strategy—which noticeably includes the ports of Djibouti, Mombasa (Kenya), and Port Sudan.

However, their central geographic location and potential in raw mineral resources prove increasingly strategic in China’s African roadmap. Combining open-source documents, this section will map known Chinese initiatives with planned infrastructure projects to derive hypotheses regarding China’s 2030–2035 maneuver—which could connect the Gulf of Aden to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Guinea.

Connecting maritime façades—the corridor theory. In 2018, the Germany-based Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) established a global reference map of the BRI (see fig 1).

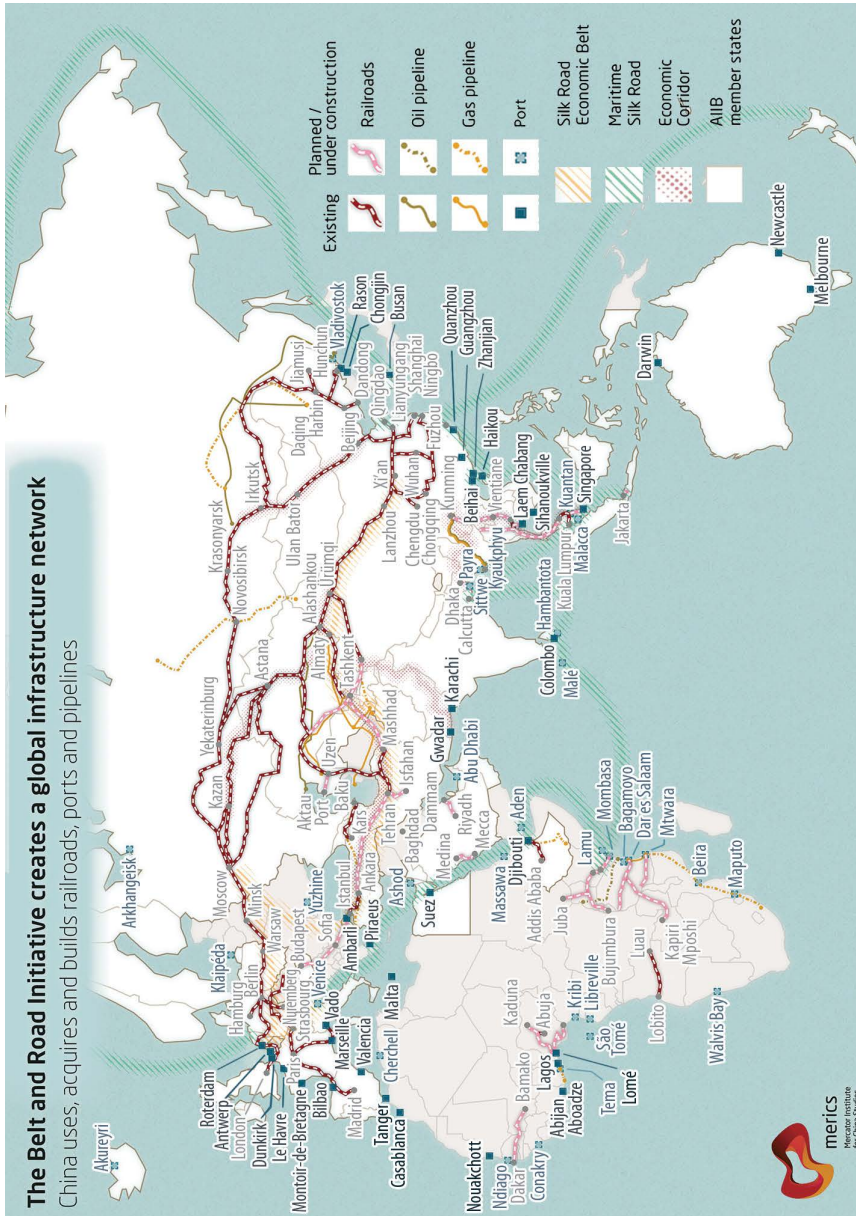


Figure 1. 2018 map of the Belt and Road Initiative (Source: MERICS)⁶

In figure 2, several details emerge while zooming in on the Sahel region. At first glance, this map appears consistent with the classically accepted Chinese trade model, based on the extraction of raw resources destined to be shipped then processed in mainland China. However, it does not account for BRI-type engagements geared towards the Sahelian inland, such as the Diffa-N’Guigmi-Chad highway renovation project connecting Niger to the Chadian border.⁷

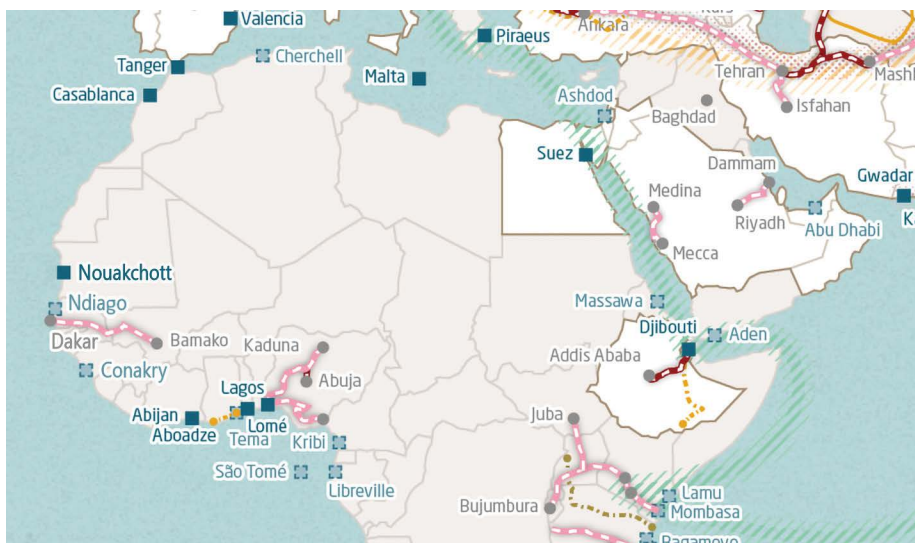


Figure 2. Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) Belt Road Initiative map, zoom on North-Western Africa

To elaborate on MERICS open-source cartography, a complementary look at the African Union infrastructure projects database proves helpful (see fig 3).⁸

According to journalist Njumbe Smith, Amani Abou-Zeid, African Union (AU) Commissioner for Infrastructure and Energy, “revealed in an August 2021 interview that the Commission would put forward a proposal to establish a China-Africa infrastructure cooperation plan that would align with AU’s Program for Infrastructure Development-Priority Action Plan (PIDA-PAP 2) at this year’s FOCAC forum.”⁹ PIDA-PAP 2 (a 2030 strategic roadmap delineated in 69 projects) promotes the idea of “infrastructure corridors,”¹⁰ a concept compatible with the BRI structure. Moreover, PIDA transport projects partially overlay the 1970s’ Trans-African Highway (TAH) network (see fig 4).

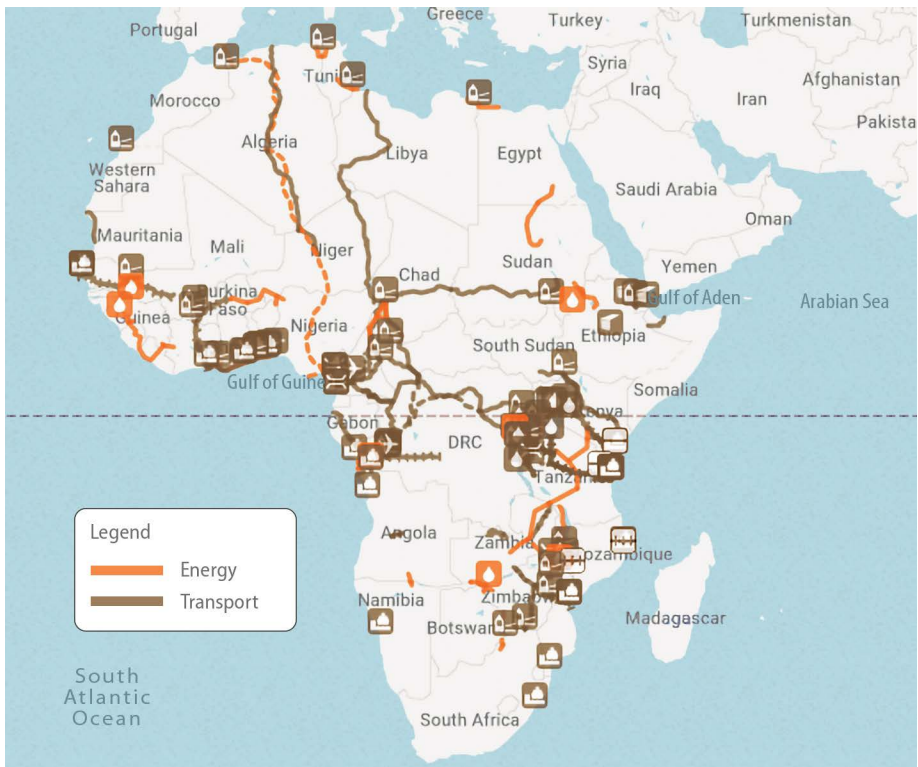


Figure 3. Program for Infrastructure Development-Prior Action infrastructure projects (Source: AU infrastructure database)

Cobus von Staden, a South-African researcher, details in a 2018 article—“Can China Realize Africa’s Dream of an East-West Transport Link?”—most of TAH 5 linking Dakar (Senegal) to N’Djamena (Chad) already exists—though pavement remains patchy.¹¹ Railways could complement unfinished road sections. In 2017, two Chinese companies launched feasibility studies to implement standard gauge tracks linking Port Sudan to N’Djamena—thus potentially superseding the missing TAH 6 section linking the two countries.¹² Similarly, China has invested in trans-Saharan railway projects linking Algeria to Nigeria and recently completed a critical section of the Algerian TAH 2 highway.¹³

To achieve connectivity between relevant maritime façade—Mediterranean coastline, Gulf of Guinea, Atlantic, Gulf of Aden—control of landlines going through the Sahel proves crucial. Consequently, Beijing could shape two multimodal transport corridors by upgrading and complementing preex-

isting TAH sections and leveraging the PIDA-PAP 2 projects portfolio. While this enterprise remains highly complex and costly, it could prove feasible in the long run—especially considering the unique state-controlled Chinese loan model.



Figure 4. Trans African Highway network (Source: OECD iLibrary)

Subsequently, the Sahel region appears located at the crossroads of East-West and North-South corridors connecting strategic maritime facades—the Mediterranean Sea, Gulf of Guinea, Atlantic Ocean, and the Gulf of Aden.

Leveraging the resource potential of the Sahel. In addition to its geographical position, the Sahel houses an untapped potential of natural resources—including oil, uranium, natural gas, and lithium. Chinese State-Owned Enterprises operate several facilities and prospect mining concessions across the region.

Furthermore, in Niger and Chad, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) exploited the Agadem and Koudalwa oil fields. Because of various disputes with the Chadian government and spill incidents, operations in Koudalwa have experienced some interruptions over the years.¹⁴ In contrast, Agadem’s production gradually reached full capacity and became “a structural feature of China’s presence in Niger.”¹⁵ However, Chinese attempts at exploiting the northern Nigerien uranium depot of Azelik have been halted due to profitability and security concerns—yet China retains its concession rights.¹⁶

Lithium proves even more strategic to China. The country dominates the global supply chain for ore and intends on maintaining a quasi-monopolistic position. The rise in lithium prices caused by increased demand for electric vehicles will likely spur competition. Jeremy Cliffe, British journalist, articulates “the geopolitical effects of the ‘lithium race’ are already being felt. It is a reason for China’s growing presence in Africa, including its funding for infrastructure projects that support the extraction of mineral resources.”¹⁷ In this context, top Chinese company Ganfeng Lithium invested \$130 million in the Malian Goulamina project.¹⁸ Geologists believe this site to be one of the largest lithium reserves in the world.¹⁹ If those estimations prove correct, China’s incentives in the Sahel region could drastically increase, steering the need for a more enduring military presence.

Security and Defense Implications

From the Chinese perspective, participating in Sahel peacekeeping and counterterrorism operations serves several purposes: securing Chinese investments and nationals, strengthening its political influence, and contributing to the PLA’s modernization effort by providing much-needed combat experience.

An increased military footprint to secure Chinese assets and citizens. In the Sahel, China’s infrastructure and resource extraction activities partially overlap violent extremist organizations (VEO) areas of operation. Chinese nationals are at increased risk of facing hostilities, for example, the July 2021 abduction of three construction workers in northern Mali.²⁰ While the scope of those attacks remains limited in regards to the overall Chinese presence on

the continent, analyst Tom Bayes points to their resonance within Chinese domestic audiences.²¹ For Beijing, defending expatriates “has become a foreign policy priority, reflected in the FOCAC 2018 action plan’s calls for better protection of Chinese nationals in Africa.”²² Bayes further elaborates that “beyond reassuring Chinese of their protection in Africa, impressing domestic opinion with evidence of China’s rise is an important dimension of Beijing’s push for an African security role.”²³

Moreover, securing trade passing through Sahelian transport corridors entails protecting sea lines of communication in the Gulf of Guinea. In order to do so, the Chinese navy could replicate a pattern similar to the 2017 opening of its Djibouti base and seek to secure deepwater facilities on the Atlantic facade.²⁴ US Africa Command’s head, Gen Stephen Townsend, warned in May 2021 that “China [had] approached countries stretching from Mauritania to south of Namibia, intent on establishing a naval facility.”²⁵ Assessing interpersonal relationships between Chinese navy officers and their African counterparts, researcher Marielle Harris noted that Beijing “courts counterparts in coastal countries in the Gulf of Guinea.”²⁶ Citing intelligence sources, the *Wall Street Journal* further contended in December 2021 that the port of Bata in Equatorial Guinea could be the latest location targeted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).²⁷

Consequently, as Chinese infrastructure and mining projects expand, the PLA should likely step up its footprint in the region. States wary of jihadism bleeding across their borders may welcome such a move. Opening the 2021 FOCAC edition, Senegal’s Foreign Minister—H. E. Aïssata Tall Sall—declared she “hoped China would become a ‘strong voice’ in combatting terrorism in the vast Sahel region.”²⁸ An increased military presence in the Sahel would contribute to China’s overall political influence. China may indeed reinforce its capacity to garner United Nation (UN) votes among African nations by presenting the image of a reliable ally and responsible great power.

Researcher Ilaria Carrozza notes that the Sino-African cooperation dialogue increasingly focused on security issues from 2011, in phase “with the start of Xi Jinping’s term and his emphasis on military modernization.”²⁹ Aside from its soft-power dimension, could an increased involvement in the Sahel serve Beijing’s military modernization agenda?

Sahel peacekeeping operations as a combat experience opportunity for the People’s Liberation Army. Addressing the CCP leadership in 2017, Xi Jinping stressed the importance of combat in modernizing the People’s Liberation Army (PLA): “A military is built to fight. Our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when called upon. We will take solid steps to ensure military preparedness

for all strategic directions, and make progress in combat readiness in both traditional and new security fields.”³⁰

However, training in the Indo-Pacific may pose a dilemma to the CCP. In South-East Asia, scholar Philip C. Saunders points out, “the need to preserve a peaceful regional environment for economic development . . . is in tension with the desire to use China’s power.”³¹ In that regard, West Africa and the Sahel region present the opportunity to develop combat-proven armaments and increase the PLA’s experience without overtly upsetting Beijing’s Asian neighbors—and incidentally hasten a US-coordinated response. As Tom Bayes writes: crucially, many Chinese weapons systems are largely untested in actual combat. With expanding defense budgets and militaries engaged in active combat, West Africa offers promising markets for China’s arms exporters and the chance to hone their products through combat testing—as researcher and former diplomat Wang Hongyi notes, ‘overseas practical combat testing can help Chinese military enterprises to obtain customer feedback, improving the performance and quality of weapons in a targeted manner.’ Meanwhile, the PLA has not seen major engagement since China’s unsuccessful invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and according to its official newspaper it has been infected by ‘peace disease,’ eroding its war-fighting abilities. Deployment in Africa—including anti-piracy patrols, NEOs, HADR, UNPKOs, and joint exercises—allows the PLA to alleviate this peace disease and hone its capabilities with active experience in hostile environments.

In hindsight, the deployment of Chinese infantry in Mali supports this proposition. While limited in scope (the PLA committed a force protection company of 170 troops), this move presented a rupture in Beijing’s policy.³² Few economic incentives could have explained China’s rationale—exports consisted mainly of cotton and shea butter.³³ Instead, it matched Xi’s impulse for a more active role on the global stage. Scholar Jean-Pierre Cabestan notes that the Chinese forces leveraged their proximity to other peacekeepers and French Operation Barkhane’s soldiers to “[learn] to operate in a hostile and terror-ridden environment” and thus “improve their operational capabilities.”³⁴

As far as employing modern equipment in real-life combat goes, it is worth noting that “Chinese arms manufacturers have started to sell more advanced technologies, including the CH-3 and CH-4 unmanned aerial vehicles . . . to support Nigerian operations against Boko Haram.”³⁵ Could Mali at some point be offered more advanced equipment? In a July 2021 social media post, the Malian Armed Forces soberly mentioned the signature of a Sino-Malian agreement accompanied by equipment donations.³⁶ While a parallel with the Nigerian case remains highly speculative, the fact that the Chinese media kept quiet about this exchange should, at least, draw closer scrutiny. The meeting

happened a few days after the abduction of three Chinese construction workers, whom the Malian military eventually liberated on November 1. An observer, Andrew Lebovich, suggests the possibility of a ransom.³⁷ The July 23, 2021 meeting could also relate to those specific circumstances.

Potential Outcomes

By aggregating infrastructure project maps and potential naval bases locations, China's maneuver in the Sahel region could be sketched as the hypothesis in figure 5.

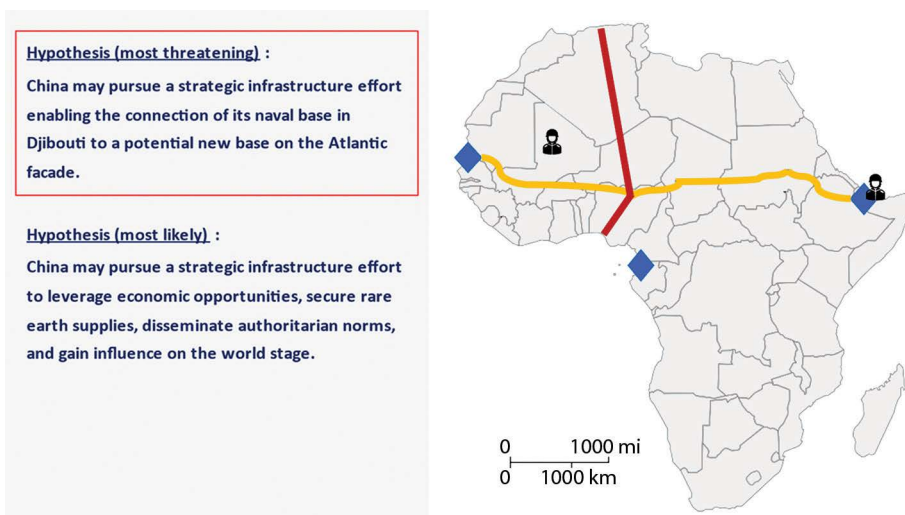


Figure 5. Infrastructure project map

The most threatening hypothesis could allow China to contest US freedom of action in simultaneous chokepoints and maritime façades (with a Chinese presence in the Pacific, the Gulf of Aden, and the Atlantic). In the long run, this could impede US power projection potential and the ability to intervene globally—a current strength of the United States military. Moreover, China will have the ability to shift the deterrence paradigm: with a sustained submarine presence in both the Pacific and the Atlantic, Beijing will pose a renewed threat to US vital interests. Moreover, an increased security footprint in the subregion will strengthen Chinese expeditionary capabilities, as analyst Tom Bayes indicates.³⁸

The most likely hypothesis could allow China to redefine the global world order. By securing access to critical mineral resources presently untapped in the Sahel region, Beijing will not only be dominant in the economic field but

also will impose its vision and standards through economic coercion. Democratic backsliding in Africa—home to the fastest demographic growth on the planet—will also empower Beijing’s authoritarian voice within international forums: the continent represents 54 UN votes.

Failure to contest Chinese engagement in Africa, and specifically in the Sahel region, could lead to nefarious consequences in the long-run. In shorter terms, Russia poses an immediate challenge that is also worth analyzing.

Decoding the Russian Approach

In reaction to western sanctions imposed after Crimea’s annexation, Moscow reconsidered its foreign policy and initiated a pivot towards the African continent. Contrasting with Beijing’s economic might, “Russia cannot afford to be a major source of infrastructure projects.”³⁹ Therefore, the Kremlin preys on frail states afflicted by rebellions and internal conflicts to strike security deals. “Despite providing less than one percent of Africa’s foreign direct investment,”⁴⁰ Moscow succeeded in expanding its outreach to the Sahel region, with Mali as a spearhead. Understanding Putin’s asymmetric strategy proves crucial to contain Russian ambitions in neighboring Burkina-Faso, Niger, and Chad.

Indirect Approach and Hybrid Warfare Actors

The Guardian accessed leaked documents describing Yevgeny Prigozhin’s alleged business plans in Africa.⁴¹ According to journalists Harding and Burke, Prigozhin’s Wagner Group identified Mali as a prospect as early as 2018.⁴² *Jeune Afrique’s* contributor Mathieu Olivier claims that Wagner emissaries were spotted in Mali at the end of 2019.⁴³ Wagner’s project likely matured: *Reuters* revealed in September 2021 that the Malian government actively sought to secure a deal with the private military company (PMC).⁴⁴ Bamako would grant Wagner mining concessions (possibly complemented by a \$10 million monthly fee) in exchange for security services. This pattern appears consistent with Wagner’s *modus operandi* in the Central African Republic, a country where Russian mercenaries stand accused of atrocities towards the Fulani minority—a brutal behavior that some Malians may, unfortunately, consider favorably. European and American signaling intensified to hamper Moscow’s agenda. The US Department of State declared European Union (EU) sanctions on December 15. They were “alarmed by a potential deployment of Russia-backed Wagner Group forces in Mali.”⁴⁵ Concomitantly, in an article dated December 14, French journalists Elise Vincent reported that a

technician and senior executive of M-Invest—one of Wagner’s parent companies—were spotted in Mali. She revealed that prospecting efforts target the gold production area of Menankoto in the southern part of the country.⁴⁶ As of December 20, Maxim Shugaley,⁴⁷ an influence specialist linked to the Prigozhin nexus, announced his alleged arrival in Bamako—a signal that Wagner is committed to its Malian endeavor.⁴⁸

In hindsight, information operations may have paved the way for Prigozhin’s mercenaries and miners’ arrival in Mali. Messages supporting an increased Russian implication in Mali’s security emerged in 2017—noticeably through demonstrations organized by the Mali Patriots Group.⁴⁹ Leveraging social media platforms, the Kremlin gradually increased the scope and outreach of its disinformation campaigns. Discussing public demonstrations in support of Russia following the August 2020 coup in Mali, Joseph Siegle’s analysis found that:

While seemingly incongruent, the pro-Russian sentiments were consistent with a line of messaging that began in Bamako a year earlier following the signing of a fuzzy security cooperation agreement between Mali and Russia. Social media sites blamed the former colonial power, France, for Mali’s militant Islamist insurgency in the north and called for France to pull out the 5,000 troops it had deployed to help combat the jihadists. These themes were subsequently picked up in protests organized by opposition groups in the months leading to the coup.⁵⁰

Using open-source intelligence techniques, researchers Kevin Limonier and Marlene Laruelle mapped the extent of Prigozhin’s operations (see fig 6). As the researchers demonstrate, the Centrafrican example proves that “activities in the fields of security and mining are correlated with digital initiatives of unclear origin, as several websites openly supporting the Russian presence in the country have been detected for years.”⁵¹ By analogy, social media posts echoing anti-French narratives in Mali—such as the ones depicted by Siegle—may have been part of an integrated campaign designed to lay the ground for the subsequent August 2020 coup, which benefited the Kremlin’s overarching goals in the region.

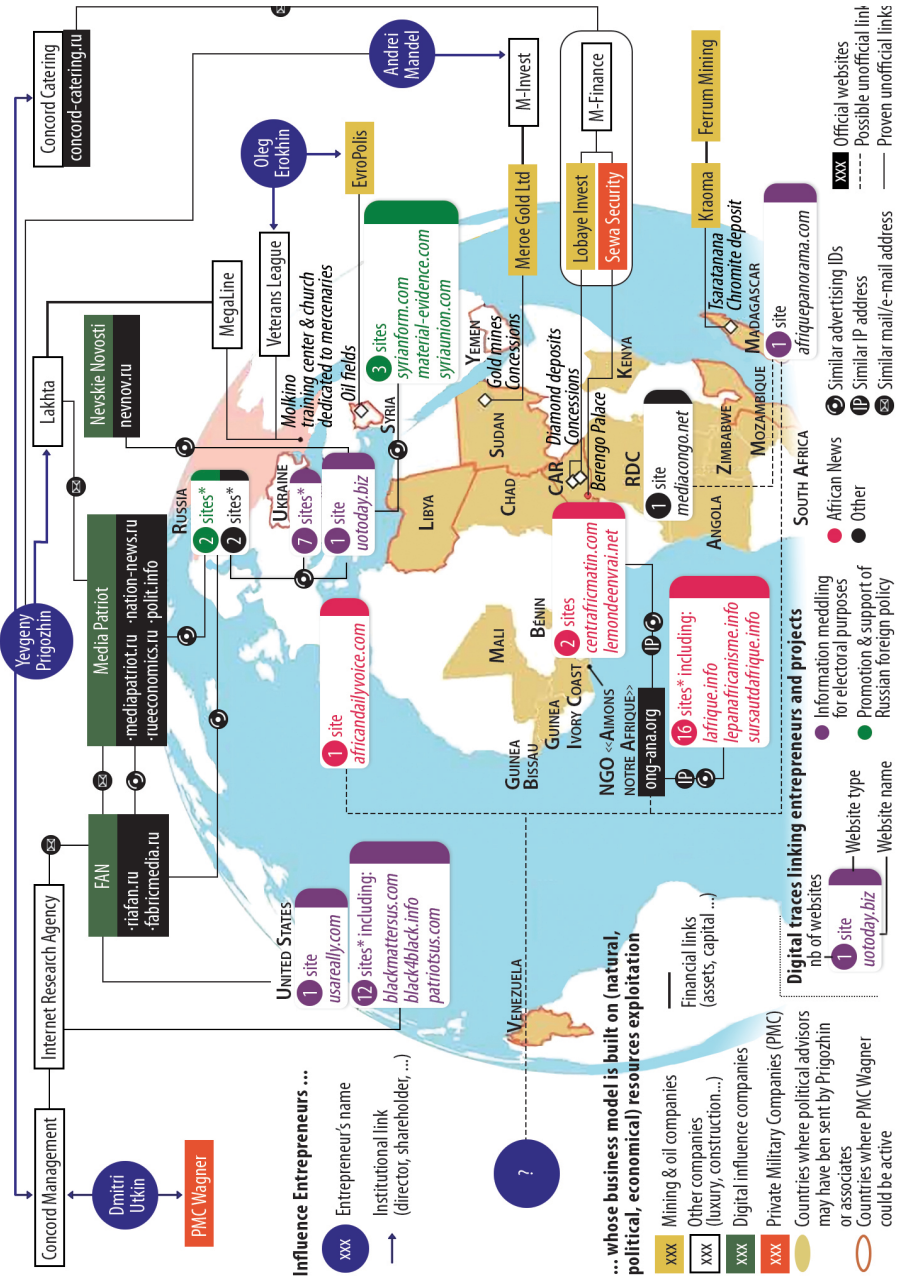


Figure 6. Yevgeny Prigozhin's Galaxy influence assets (Source: Beyond "hybrid warfare," vol 37, 4, by Kevin Limonier and Marlène Laruelle.)

Chaos as An End Goal

Mali's political situation appears volatile. In August 2020, a mutiny deposed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Following the coup, the junta appointed a civilian-led government (headed by President Bah N'Daw) in an apparent effort to initiate a transition process. Interestingly, one of the first diplomats received by the coup leaders was the Russian ambassador. As *Jeune Afrique* notes, junta leaders Malick Diaw, Sadio Camara, and Assimi Goïta partially trained in Russia.⁵² This proximity may have put the interim administration under strain. In an interview for *Deutsche Welle*, Malian analyst Etienne Fakaba Sissoko contends that Camara's attempts at negotiating conventions with Moscow prompted his demise from Bah N'Daw's transitional government.⁵³ In return, Camara's dismissal triggered the overthrowing of President N'Daw in May 2021, which was dubbed by several observers "a coup within a coup."⁵⁴

Researcher Samuel Ramani phrases it, "although there is insufficient evidence to make a conclusive determination about the Kremlin's role in the coup, Russia is a potential geopolitical beneficiary from Mali's political transition."⁵⁵ Observers also believe that the Wagner Group leveraged its facilities in Libya to train rebel factions involved in the death of Chad's President, Idriss Deby—who succumbed to battle injuries in April 2021. These actions could reflect an attempt at initiating a regime change more favorable to Russian interests.⁵⁶

Overall, turmoil in the Sahel benefits a cunning Russia. As Joseph Siegle believes, "the primary exports that Russia has to offer Africa—mercenaries, arms, and disinformation—are inherently destabilizing."⁵⁷ Besides this economic incentive, exploiting chaotic situations in the Sahel offers Russia a lever on the southern flank of NATO. Per Siegle, "Russian influence in Libya and the Sahel provides Russia access to key nodes of African migration and human trafficking routes. Russia can provoke humanitarian and political crises for Europe while challenging spheres of historically European (primarily French) influence in Africa."⁵⁸

Weaponizing illegal immigration in Sahel appears a possible adversarial course of action, consistent with a form of asymmetric warfare author Kelly Greenhill coined as coercive engineered migration.⁵⁹ Stressing that authoritarian adversaries tend to "think out of the box" defined by the five traditional military domains (air, land, sea, cyber, and space), Greenhill urges us to consider this form of "societal warfare."⁶⁰ Russian Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov indeed publicly identified the strategic potential of society-centric maneuvers:

Of course, it would be easiest of all to say that the events of the “Arab Spring” are not war, and so there are no lessons for us—military men—to learn. But maybe the opposite is true—that precisely these events are typical of warfare in the twenty-first century. In terms of the scale of the casualties and destruction, the catastrophic social, economic, and political consequences, such new-type conflicts are comparable with the consequences of any real war. The very “rules of war” have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.⁶¹

On December 23, 2021, fifteen European countries denounced the ongoing deployment of Wagner in Mali in a joint statement.⁶² Understanding the mechanisms used in the Malian case, and monitoring its repercussions, should help anticipate the group’s expansion in the Sahel—with Chad, where Russian political advisers’ presence was suspected, being a possible target.

In the Sahel, China expands its global reach and plays the long game, while Russia seizes opportunities to destabilize NATO on its southern flank. Those two actors may have conflicting interests in the region. However, as recent rapprochement efforts have shown, Beijing and Moscow will likely find a temporary *modus vivendi*. Responding to the challenges posed by strategic competition will thus require relying on the cumulative strength of the United States and its allies, addressing potential weaknesses, analyzing common threats, and exploiting opportunities.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

Strengths

Superior western military capabilities. Tactical victories such as the neutralization of Abu Adnan Al-Sahrawi, the Islamic State in Greater Sahara leader, and senior AQ leaders Abdelmalek Droukdel and Djamel Okacha represent the epitome of intelligence and dynamic targeting. Those tangible successes are made possible by the combination of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, combat drones, and special operations—all fields of US and French expertise. Paradoxically, CT feats did not prevent the propagation of militants to central Mali to face increased criticism. While CT cannot replace peace processes secured by the MINUSMA nor the return of Malian state officials in the north of the country, it offered windows of opportunities to peacemakers and local authorities. To a large extent, solely attributing the

degradation of the security situation to shortcomings of CT operations reveals bias: for instance, dereliction of the Malian state in central parts of the country fueled Dogon self-defense militias and incentivized stigmatized Fulani to join jihadist groups. Chinese and Russian competitors are aware of those intricate ethnic and political issues and do not intend to constructively intervene. Noticeably, Wagner's alleged deployment in southern Mali contradicts narratives presenting the PMC's involvement as a substitute for France's operation Barkhane.

As Mali-oriented CT operations may be jeopardized by Wagner's presence, containing the expansion of terrorism in the Sahel and West Africa will remain a critical military task. Aside from American and French bases in Niger, western democracies can count on a robust basing network in the subregion. France is indeed granted the authorization to base forces in Chad, Senegal, and Gabon—within reach of the main CT areas of operations. Moreover, as a recent French paratrooper exercise demonstrated, forces can swiftly be projected in western Africa from Europe. China does not intend to reach this level of projectability in the foreseeable future, and appear as a credible CT alternative to West Africans. Tom Bayes states:

Chinese leaders and analysts criticize “Western interventionism” in Africa as an attempt to maintain Western hegemony that undermines “African solutions to African problems.” West African interviewees not unjustifiably see little prospect of Chinese intervention of the type undertaken by France in Mali in 2012–2013 or the UK in Sierra Leone in 2000 (both with UN endorsement and intended to protect existing governments). For a number of West African interviewees, though extra-regional intervention is not a first preference, this severely limits China's role as a security actor. As a Nigerian security specialist observed, “China is risk averse on security . . . its inability to deploy troops [to the region] limits how seriously it can be taken.” The result, as a Malian military officer commented, is that “one doesn't necessarily think of China” when responding to a security crisis. This is already seen on CT and counterinsurgency, the subregion's principal security concerns. Here, an African diplomat judged, “China offers nothing better than France, [or] the US.” While it is true that disillusion with France's Operation Barkhane is growing, interviewees in Mali and Burkina-Faso pointed rather to Russia as an alternative, in light of its adventurism in Syria and the Central African Republic, suggesting the reported concerns of some in the US strategic community that its mooted West Africa troop drawdown will allow China “to fill the gap” on CT are misplaced.⁶³

Superior economic frameworks. The United States model of development remains the most favorably seen on the African continent.⁶⁴ In a critical commentary, Camara and Tughadt contend that “arguably, [a] myopic focus on countering China’s economic engagements has blinded the United States to its own unique strengths.” The authors defend the idea that the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)—a trade framework giving vetted countries tariff-free access to US markets—boosted Africa’s industrialization in sectors where exports to China were not possible. Similarly, West African observers’ high expectations regarding the Power Africa Initiative prove that the US has a card to play in this field. Finally, initiatives such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation leverage aid to build infrastructure projects—with successful realizations in Niger and Burkina-Faso.

Weaknesses

Sahelian governance challenges may hamper cooperation efforts. Following the coup in Mali, the Biden administration announced the country’s removal from the AGOA framework. While this decision appears consistent with the defense of democratic standards, it highlights the challenges of the subregion. Without promoting free and transparent trade standards, prosperity will likely be hampered, and corruption will persist. In those environments, unscrupulous actors such as China and Russia thrive. For that very reason, Tughadt and Camara stress that the United States “punitive approach” is based on sanctions present limitations.⁶⁵ However difficult, governance-focused approaches can bear fruits in the long run. The recent resignation of Burkina-Faso’s government following the Inata gendarmerie attack shows that political accountability exists in the region.⁶⁶ Despite mixed outcomes in Niger, investigations regarding arms deals malpractices are pursued independently.⁶⁷ Retrenching totally from those regions may hinder democratic signs of progress currently underway.

Opportunities

China’s Belt and Road Initiative risks overstretching and faces criticism in Africa. According to several observers, FOCAC 2021 marks an inflection point for Chinese aid and investment programs. As researcher Paul Nantulya highlights, Beijing’s attempts at restructuring African debt—either via “resource-for-infrastructure financing or debt-equity swaps”⁶⁸—may ultimately antagonize public opinions. Therefore, “negotiating increased infrastructure financing will be complicated as China’s infrastructure lending and

[foreign direct investment] in Africa may slow over the mid-term due to the growing number of borrowers unable to repay their debts.⁶⁹

In addition to those financial considerations, poor Chinese environmental standards may alienate local populations, whose livelihood depends on traditional forms of agriculture and living-off-the-land practices. Tom Bayes notes that “in interviews from Nigeria to Mauritania, discussion of a Chinese presence in the Gulf of Guinea most frequently raised the issue of large scale, illegal overfishing by Chinese trawlers, a major source of discontent in the region with a significant impact on local livelihoods and thus security.”⁷⁰

Potential for a more integrated western effort in the region exists. Stanford professor Russel Berman notes, “despite the differences between them, which Washington has been unable to leverage, Beijing and Moscow pose a *de facto* combined challenge to western leadership in Africa”—an emerging theater for strategic competition.⁷¹

Combined, the EU and America’s investment and aid far exceeds China’s; yet Xi Jinping has imposed his narrative, depicting Beijing as Africa’s first economic partner. While aligning strategies involving pure business interests remains challenging, the EU and the United States should coordinate when engaging the African Union on infrastructure, development, and governance matters. To that extent, G7 declarations could be the starting point of a better alignment between the American Build Back Better World initiative and EU’s Global Gateway framework.

Knowledge sharing with European-focused institutions reveals a path worth exploring regarding fighting Russian disinformation—which involves the same hybrid actors in Mali and Ukraine. Expanding relationships with the US multidomain task force based in Germany, NATO’s strategic communication’s Center of Excellency, or the Finland-based Hybrid Center of Excellency could be interesting.

Threats

Russia will further weaponize Sahelian perceptions. From a Russian perspective, Mali represents a critical step in pursuing a greater disinformation effort in the Sahel. Messages falsely accusing France of financing and arming terrorists groups originated in Mali and propagated to Burkina-Faso and Niger, culminating in violent protests at a logistic convoy passing through those countries.⁷² Analyst Andrew Lebovich points out that the movement that staged the demonstrations in Burkina-Faso, Coalition of African Patriots of Burkina Faso (COPA-BF), is close to the Malian pro-Russian movement Yerewolo.⁷³ In parallel, Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign affairs minister, delivered pub-

lic remarks accusing NATO's intervention in Libya of having caused the Sahelian situation—selectively ignoring decades-long conflicts between Northern Mali's Tuareg minorities and the central power in Bamako. Rejection of western states could spread to countries where the United States and France currently operate military bases.

China may further disseminate its authoritarian models. In opposition to Russia's short-term goals, China seeks to remodel the international order. Beijing favors stability—achieved through social control and repression of freedom of speech. In Africa, China has invested in building computer and media networks. As the African continent gets more urbanized, information technology (IT) infrastructure allows social control mechanisms to be implemented on a larger scale. This Chinese authoritarian model could appeal to African strongmen who fear losing control—either over an election, a coup, or a rebellion. Given the Sahel's political instability, this region could prove favorable for democratic backsliding.

Moreover, as China maintains steady military exchanges with conflict-ridden nations, undemocratic standards could also be disseminated via the military. Paul Nantulya warns that “as China deepens its ties to African militaries, including through training and education initiatives, Beijing brings its perspective on party-army relations.”⁷⁴ In the CCP's view, a military subordinated to the ruling party strengthens its grip on the society. In the Sahel region, insecurity may serve as a pretense for juntas—noticeably in Mali—to keep the military at their sole disposal.

Moving Past the Counterterrorism Versus Strategic Competition Dilemma

Matthew Levitt argues that “global competition with the likes of Russia and China will demand that the United States take into consideration not only its own set of interests but the needs and threat perceptions of its local partners.”⁷⁵ In the Sahel region and West Africa, terrorism remains a major security concern. Wary of a possible western disengagement, several Sahelian and West African leaders may seek to secure counterterrorism cooperation deals with either China or Russia.

Consistent with those realities, US AFRICOM is pursuing a strategic campaign to maintain US prime access in the area. Per Levitt, “US counterterrorism activities in Africa . . . account for about 0.3 percent of Defense Department personnel and budgetary resources.”⁷⁶ General Townsend testified before Congress, “bottom line: [US AFRICOM] relationships and . . . counter-VEO efforts build US influence over strategic competitors” at a modest cost.

China has likely taken notice of those efforts and propagates narratives accusing the United States of manipulating African countries like mere pawns, an attitude flagged as reminiscent of the Cold War era. Aside from traditional military cooperation, a sustained emphasis should be placed on strategic communication, people-to-people interactions, and counterpropaganda.

A Renewed Focus on Messaging

Analysts Michael Shurkin and Aneliese Bernard contend that “the United States should work with African governments on counterterrorism issues for its own sake, not in order to compete with China or Russia.”⁷⁷ They argue that, paradoxically, explicitly calling-out Beijing’s agenda “may not play well” with African audiences who—without being naïve—positively view China’s involvement on the continent.⁷⁸ Their remarks echo similar critiques formulated by former Malian minister Kamissa Camara and senior analyst Henry Tugenhardt. They stress the sharp contrast between the level of US whole-of-government approach and the depth of Sino-African people-to-people cooperation (“a senior official at the Zimbabwean Ministry of Agriculture said that the majority of their staff had already been to China for training, such that many were already going for their second round.”)⁷⁹

Consequently, a renewed focus on messaging should consider three key dimensions: consideration for African partners, commitment to counterterrorism operations, and counterpropaganda efforts.

Consideration. Despite security challenges, China tends to perceive West Africa and the Sahel region as lands of opportunities, which contrasts with the aid-oriented western paradigm. Considering African countries as equal, partnership matters to local leaders and populations. Reacting to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken’s tour in Africa—which occurred a week prior to FOCAC 2021—Senegalese scholar Ibrahima Aidara further elaborates:

The United States wants to change the way it engages with Africa, but we have little indication of the tools that can be created (or revamped) to meet this resurgence of influence, especially on the economic and democratic fronts. For example, what is the future of trade or infrastructure cooperation, and how far is Washington willing to go? What will happen to the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Power Africa, Prosper Africa, and other frameworks?

Instead of a direct attack and critique of U.S. competitors (namely China and Russia), Secretary Blinken emphasized the need to engage African governments based on shared U.S.-African interests—instead

of simply competing with other big powers. The big lesson is that if the “race” is to be won, Africa must be treated with respect.⁸⁰

Uduak Amimo, Kenyan journalist, underlines the role perceived consideration plays in the ongoing strategic competition: Africa moved on with other strategic relationships with partners who offered both resources and respect. While we in Africa often feel burdened by poor leadership, we’ve managed to organize ourselves into the world’s largest free-trade zone through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA); we remain the world’s fastest-growing, youngest continent.⁸¹

Recognizing both shortcomings and the potential of the continent entails sustaining relationships and showing commitment.

Commitment. Public debates surrounding US Global Posture Review (GPR) focused on the need to redeploy efforts to the Indo-Pacific, in line with former Obama and Trump administrations’ willingness to operate a “pivot to Asia.” While the GPR maintained the current amount of military assets committed to the African continent, the overall conversation on the Indo-Pacific and the end of the “war on terror” era could spark a “fear of abandonment” among local partners.⁸² Additionally, the possible arrival of the Wagner private military company in Mali could trigger the departure of several international partners and impede transnational CT arrangements between Mali, Niger, and Burkina-Faso. To provide evidence of the United States’s enduring commitment, communication efforts should focus on tangible diversity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives, such as those successfully conducted with Niger (C-130 donation, International Military Education and Training [IMET] program involving a female C-130 pilot). Marielle Harris also notes that local media outreach should be improved. She highlights the example of Exercise Flintlock 2020, where AFRICOM invited Mauritanian journalists “but apparently did not invite reporters from the 10 other African countries that participated.”⁸³

Counterpropaganda. A significant part of the ongoing strategic competition lies in the information domain. China and Russia are indeed engaged in shaping perceptions to undermine democratic standards and US leadership. Judd Devermont contends:

The most effective brakes on violent extremism, democratic backsliding, and negative Chinese and Russian influence are strong local institutions, robust media, and community activism . . . US financial and technical support—albeit not advertised as countering violent extremism or strategic competition programming—has the potential to bolster these actors, enabling

them to shine a light on vulnerabilities and abuses, as well as press their governments to adjust policies.⁸⁴

Enabling critical thinking in local communities proves challenging. Unfolding its FOCAC action plan, China trains journalists and builds television and internet infrastructures across the continent, including in French-speaking western Africa. Consequently, counterpropaganda cannot be envisioned solely from a military standpoint: it remains a whole-of-government effort. Aside from reevaluating the missions of the interagency Global Engagement Center, Joseph Siegle, for instance, pleads for a “stronger outreach to social media firms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to elevate their efforts . . . in Africa.”

Agile and Integrated Cooperation

Flexibility and scalability. Because of internal societal drivers and political dissensions, the situation in the Sahel region remains fluid. Periods of stability and sudden change succeed one another, entailing sporadic episodes of violence. They remain complex and sovereign by nature; these issues cannot solely be addressed by military operations and require long-term political mediation. Shurkin and Bernard formulate a pessimistic—yet sobering—statement: the fact of the matter is that slow-burning civil conflicts are likely to offer no decision at all, or certainly not a battlefield decision. Winning might turn out to be nothing more glorious than managing a crisis the way one might manage a chronic, but incurable, disease. Often, the best one realistically can hope for is to be able to reduce a host nation’s reliance on foreign assistance.⁸⁵

Therefore, a realistic counterterrorism mandate should combine the support of partner forces (including using Special Forces, air assets, intelligence, or medical units) with deployable crisis response capabilities. This line of effort appears consistent with US AFRICOM’s current juniper framework. The complexity, however, lies in transitioning from the current “assist and advise” approach to fostering conditions of a more robust and independent involvement of African partners in their security. Training and education, therefore, remain critical.

Regionalization and integration. Stressing that several European training frameworks already exist in the region, Shurkin and Bernard argue that “Washington needs to complement and reinforce what others are doing and not simply add to the mix.”⁸⁶ On a similar note, senior analyst Judd Devermont advocates for greater civilian involvement: to most effectively pursue its counterextremism, prodemocracy, and strategic competition objectives in

coastal West Africa and the Sahel, the United States should concentrate on policies and programs that have the greatest impact on all three objectives. Specifically, the United States government should increase investment in formal and traditional justice and rule of law programming; elevate anticorruption efforts in, but not limited to, the mining and energy sectors; and prioritize security sector accountability.⁸⁷

In addition, enhancing field cooperation between the Department of State and the Department of Defense could prove beneficial, especially when aid projects enter their execution phases. A 2020 Department of State's Office of Inspector General (OIG) audit of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) indeed noted that:

Despite the high-level coordination of TSCTP that occurs within the Department and with partner agencies, several officials told OIG that coordination was lacking for the execution of TSCTP projects in-country. For example, a senior US Air Force official told OIG that AF officials did not formally contact US Air Force personnel to coordinate the construction of the Niger C-130 aircraft hangar at a base they share with the Nigerian military. Another US Air Force official told OIG that he occasionally visited the project but kept his distance to avoid the appearance that he had formal monitoring and oversight responsibilities. Reliant contractors shared similar views; their monthly reports to AF officials repeatedly noted coordination with US Air Force personnel as an area of concern.⁸⁸

Palliative measures may not suffice to address systemic issues encountered by TSCTP. Political scientist Alex Thurston, for instance, advocates for a radical option consisting of abandoning TSCTP and creating new governance-oriented programs. Among other things, he argues that “closer and more meaningful relationships with African military officers can be forged by bringing them to the United States to pursue degree programs, rather than through ineffective, ‘episodic’ engagements.”⁸⁹ While debatable, Thurston's argument somewhat echoes similar recommendations on messaging and people-to-people interactions.

Counterterrorism needs to be addressed from a regional perspective to keep China in check while avoiding the “endless war” syndrome. Offering limited—yet critical—support to African-led initiatives offers a viable position in the post-Afghanistan landscape. The G5 Sahel Joint Force, backed by France, represents the primary tool to address trans-border terrorism. The Malian political imbroglio could prevent further US engagement in this multi-lateral framework. Consequently, the Economic Community of West African

States—which led the 2013 initial stabilization efforts in Mali before transferring its mandate to the United Nations—may offer a complementary alternative.

Monitoring and Further Analysis

China and Russia operate covertly in the Sahel Region. Belt and Road Initiative deals are shrouded in a veil of secrecy enabling graft. Russian PMCs retain the know-how of intelligence services to which they are allegedly loosely connected. In this context, open-source research presents inherent limitations. Connecting the dots and providing a prospective insight entails forming hypotheses based on educated guesses. As a final recommendation, critical readers should pursue monitoring of the following topics to test the validity and proposition this research:

- Completion of Chinese-led road or railway projects connecting Sudan to Chad, which represent the missing section of the east-west Sahelian transport corridor.
- Formal declarations of the African Union regarding an alignment between PIDA projects and Chinese involvement.
- Increase coverage in Russian state-owned media (*Russia Today* and *Sputnik News*) on migration issues impacting southern NATO member-states, or narratives presenting migration issues as the result of NATO countries' interventionism (either in Libya or Mali).

Conclusion

The real logic of great power competition requires an American strategy in the Sahel. The priority of countering China is not simply a question of the South China Sea, just as the Russian challenge is not merely a threat on the eastern front of NATO. Both adversaries pursue a global agenda, and each is active across Africa, especially in the Sahel.

—Russell A. Berman

A significant part of the US military literature related to strategic competition focuses either on the Indo-Pacific or emerging war-fighting domains (cyberspace, space). In contrast, China's efforts to expand its Belt and Road Initiative to the Sahel region remain under the academic radar. On the same note, several armed forces' publications address Russian activities through the paradigm of hybrid warfare applied to the eastern-European context.

However, the pivot to Africa operated by the Wagner nexus remains relatively undocumented.

Strategic competition in the Sahel regions takes several forms. China's long-term goal appears to be the development of economic corridors that will sustain Beijing's appetite for critical resources—such as lithium, oil, and uranium. China will try to secure its investments and nationals and appear as a responsible international actor, allowing it to increase its military footprint in the region. Alongside, Beijing will actively promote its social control model and authoritarian standards—in an attempt to redefine an international order in line with its interests. In contrast with China, Russia adopts a disruptive stance and focuses on creating rifts among NATO allies. By maintaining instability on NATO's southern flank, Moscow will try to divert the attention of the alliance, which has to face several threats and somewhat conflicting priorities—with migration and terrorism being prime concerns in several South European countries.

To counter those actors, a sustained engagement in the region appears necessary. While counterterrorism will remain a primary lever to maintain strong partnerships with Sahelian governments, the United States should rely on its unique economic and diplomatic strengths to complement a well-developed security approach. Failure to do so could leave a booming continent at the mercy of authoritarian powers, thus modifying the global order in the long run.

Notes

(Notes appear primarily in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

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Abbreviations

ACSC	Air Command and Staff College
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AFRICOM	Africa Command
AGOA	African Growth and Opportunity Act
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Committee
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAR	Central African Republic
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CT	counterterrorism
EU	European Union
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
GPR	Global Posture Review
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OIG	Office of Inspector General
PIDA-PAP	Program for Infrastructure Development-Priority Action Plan
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PMC	private military company
TAH	Trans-African Highway
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership
UN	United Nation
VEO	violent extremist organization

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