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This article critically examines the limitations of U.S. policies in the Sahel, a region beset by extremism, political instability, and humanitarian crises. The current U.S. strategy, which relies heavily on former colonial powers and lacks direct engagement with individual Sahelian nations, has proven inadequate. The growing influence of Russia and China further complicates the geopolitical landscape, challenging U.S. interests. To address these issues, the article proposes a revised U.S. approach that includes utilizing the Section 7008 waiver to maintain assistance post-coup, fostering direct bilateral relations, investing in sustainable development and good governance, enhancing regional cooperation, and expanding non-military support. This new strategy aims to build resilient communities and governance structures, ultimately promoting long-term stability and prosperity in the Sahel. By aligning U.S. efforts with the specific needs of Sahelian countries, the proposed approach seeks to counter the influence of other global powers and support regional security and development.

Introduction

The Sahel region, encompassing Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sudan, and Nigeria, has emerged as a focal point of geopolitical significance due to its strategic location, natural resources, and ongoing security challenges. U.S. policy in the region has come under scrutiny against the backdrop of jihadi-Salafist terrorist insurgency, political instability, and economic vulnerability. This paper finds that increased U.S. engagement in Niger and the Sahel region positively correlates with improvements in security, governance, and regional stability. By examining empirical data and case studies, the paper evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of current U.S. policy in Niger and the Sahel and offers constructive recommendations for its enhancement.

The Sahel region faces a complex and interrelated set of challenges that threaten stability and security. These challenges include jihadi-Salafist terrorist insurgency, political instability, economic vulnerability, and the erosion of democratic governance. U.S. policy in the Sahel has traditionally emphasized stability through diplomatic engagement, capacity-building efforts, and support for regional initiatives. The reliance on former colonial powers such as France has been ineffective in addressing the complex and evolving security challenges in the Sahel. The withdrawal of U.S. and French forces, coupled with recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has created a security vacuum that jihadist groups have rapidly exploited.

The expansion of jihadist groups in the Sahel is well-documented. Groups like Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM, an al-Qaeda affiliate, and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have capitalized on weakened state governance and the lack of effective counterterrorism operations to increase their territorial control and influence.1 The Soufan Center reports that JNIM now controls approximately 40% of Burkina Faso's territory, and their influence continues to spread into neighboring regions, threatening broader West African stability.2

The withdrawal of international forces and the subsequent rise in jihadist activities have
broader implications for regional and global security. The instability in the Sahel has not only led to a humanitarian crisis but also posed a significant threat to international security. The U.S. Institute of Peace emphasizes that the spread of violent extremism from the Sahel into coastal West African states such as Benin and Togo illustrates the potential for a wider regional conflict. The involvement of other global powers, notably Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), complicates the geopolitical landscape.

The current U.S. foreign policy towards Niger and the Sahel predominantly relies on diplomatic initiatives and limited support for regional security efforts. However, this approach has proven insufficient to counter the growing threats of terrorism and state fragility. The United States has traditionally relied on French influence to shape its strategy in the Sahel, but as French influence wanes, the United States must adjust to a new reality. Despite the rollout of the new U.S.-Africa initiative, U.S. policy remains regional rather than state-focused.

To address these shortcomings, the United States should invoke the Section 7008 waiver for Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, leveraging the amendment from September 2022. This action is crucial to safeguard American national security interests and overcome the current limitations in policy. Applying section 7008 will represent a significant effort at addressing the root causes of instability in Niger and the Sahel, promote democratic governance, and safeguard American interests in the region.

The Crisis in The Sahel

The Sahel region faces a web of interconnected issues that endanger regional stability and security. The challenges of a jihadi-Salafist terrorist insurgency, political instability, economic vulnerability, and the erosion of democratic governance have triggered a humanitarian crisis, resulting in an increasing number of displaced individuals and those needing aid. The

Humanitarian Crisis

The London School of Economics and Political Science reports that over twenty-four million people in the Sahel region require some kind of assistance. This group includes 4.9 million displaced persons, 870,000 refugees, and 6.5 million young people and women needing gender-related support. In 2023, over 20,000 people in the border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger experienced catastrophic levels of food insecurity. Approximately 19.1 million people are food insecure, representing a 77 percent increase since 2019, the highest in a decade. These statistics are not just numbers; they provide a clear picture of the magnitude of the crisis, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive and targeted humanitarian interventions, making the Sahel crisis one of the fastest-growing crises in the world. It also underscores the broader implications for regional stability and international security, making a compelling case for increased global attention and support.

Jihadi Terrorist Insurgencies and Violence

The situation in the Sahel has significantly deteriorated, as the once dormant Tuareg rebellion has once again been rekindled. The Tuareg people, organized under the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), have always sought an autonomous state and have aligned themselves with multiple Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine to push Malian government forces out of the north. The jihadi-Salafist terrorist group Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal
Muslimeen (JNIM) was formed by a merger of several al-Qaeda splinter groups. The emergence of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) has greatly intensified violence in the Sahel. Both JNIM and ISGS have pushed south into the Liptako-Gourma region, threatening the security of West Africa’s once relatively stable coastal states. JNIM has recently gained control over territory in northern and central Mali, while ISGS has been confined to the north of Burkina Faso and western Niger due to intermecine clashes with JNIM that began back in 2020.9

Islamic State affiliates and al-Qaeda operatives have exploited weak governance structures, porous borders, and socio-economic grievances to expand their influence, perpetrate violence, and destabilize governments. Extremist organizations such as JNIM, ISGS, Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP), and others are exploiting such weaknesses and are continuing to launch indiscriminate attacks on government forces and civilians.10 According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), more than 12,000 people were killed by terrorists in 2023, the majority of whom were civilians.

For more than five years, armed Islamist groups across the Central Sahel have systematically used sieges, threats, kidnapping, improvised explosive devices, and landmines as war tactics to control supply routes and expand their influence.11 In Burkina Faso, more than 1 million people live in areas fully or partially besieged by armed groups and face daily violence. According to Amnesty International, groups such as al-Qaeda affiliate Ansaroul Islam are besieging at least 46 localities and committing war crimes.12 These groups also impose “zakat” (forced taxation) and have been responsible for the destruction and looting of civilian infrastructure, including places of worship, health centers, food reserves, water services, and bridges. They have also frequently targeted humanitarian workers. Violence between rival ethnic militias and community-based self-defense groups has resulted in reprisal attacks and numerous human rights abuses.13

Educational and Infrastructure Challenges

Children in the Sahel have fared particularly poorly. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has issued a child alert because children were caught in the conflict.14 In Burkina Faso, three times more children were killed by jihadist-Salafists during the first nine months of 2022 than during the same period in 2021. Most of the children died from gunshot wounds during attacks on their villages or because of improvised explosive devices.15 Armed groups across the Sahel block access to villages and towns, sabotage water supplies, and contribute to severe conditions.16

Armed groups that oppose state-administered education systematically burn and loot schools and threaten, abduct, or kill teachers. In Burkina Faso, 2,500 schools and 135 health centers have been closed,17 while more than 8,300 schools in total have shut down across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger because they were directly targeted.18 Teachers have fled because parents were displaced or too frightened to send their children to school, and as a result, more than one in five schools in Burkina Faso have closed. In contrast, 30 percent of schools in Niger’s Tillaberi region are no longer functional due to the conflict.19

Democratic Erosion and External Influences

Moreover, the erosion of democracy in the Sahel exacerbates its security. Corruption, authoritarianism, and electoral fraud undermine governance and exacerbate...
societal grievances, providing fertile ground for extremist recruitment and activity.

Finally, the possibility of losing The Sahel to Russia and China is genuine. Despite disbanding the Wagner Group, Russia has heavily re-engaged in the Sahel through its new Africa Corp. Russia’s new expeditionary force boasts more than five thousand troops in Africa, with more than 4600 of those in Sub-Saharan Africa.\(^{20}\) It maintains three major airbases and plans to expand this force to more than 20,000 troops.\(^{21}\) Conversely, China is now Africa’s biggest trading partner, with Chinese trade with Africa topping $200 billion annually. Over 10,000 Chinese firms are operating throughout the African continent, and China’s economic presence in Africa is four times that of the United States.\(^{22}\) In contrast to the United States’ restriction on arms and training, Beijing provides arms to African nations and offers professional military education.\(^{23}\)

**The United States Foreign Policy Posture in the Region**

The current U.S. Administration’s foreign policy towards Niger and the Sahel advocates for diplomatic initiatives and support for regional security efforts like the G5 Sahel Joint Force. While these endeavors aim to address security challenges and bolster stability, security efforts have proven insufficient to counter the growing threats of terrorism and state fragility.

Over the last two decades, the United States has spent 3.3 billion dollars on security assistance in the Sahel. This assistance has included tactical training, equipping partner militaries and elite special counterterrorism units, and engaging these militaries in large-scale military-to-military exercises and smaller-scale advise-and-assist missions.\(^{24}\)

Following the recent spate of coups in the region, the United States has responded to these armed takeovers by suspending security assistance in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea since 2021.\(^{25}\) However, in Chad, a long-standing U.S. security partner, the U.S. has refrained from labeling the regime change as a coup and has not imposed or suspended assistance.\(^{26}\)

U.S. engagement in the continent has primarily been facilitated through previous colonial powers such as France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Portugal. This approach is based on the belief that these partner nations have a better understanding of the intricacies of their former colonies.\(^{27}\) In the Sahel, the United States has traditionally relied on French influence.\(^{28}\) However, as French influence in the Sahel wanes, the United States can no longer rely on France’s assistance to conduct its foreign policy. Although the United States is more popular than France in West Africa, it is also adjusting to a new reality. The United States is searching for an alternate base in the region now that it must leave Niger.\(^{29}\) The Pentagon has reportedly been in preliminary talks with the governments of Benin, Ghana, and Côte d’Ivoire about opening a drone base in one of these countries, likely in preparation for the closure of the U.S. drone base in Niger.\(^{30}\)

Additionally, U.S. policy thus far has favored short-term stability over the democratic interest of the African population. During the Cold War, the U.S. supported unpopular and undemocratic rulers. Notable examples include U.S. support for the regimes in Chad, Gabon, and Cameroon. Two long-standing leaders are no longer in power. Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon was deposed by a military coup, while Idriss Déby from Chad was replaced by his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby, after meeting a premature death on the battlefield. Cameroon’s leader, Paul Biya, is facing mass domestic unrest.
The door has been opened for the PRC, which has taken a comparatively lighter, more hands-off approach. In response, most recently, the United States has attempted to lay out a strategy to stabilize the region. In 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken unveiled a new U.S. engagement strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa revolving around four strategic objectives. The U.S.-Africa Strategy calls for the promotion of fair and open societies, advancing democratic efforts and tackling security challenges, supporting a robust pandemic recovery, and encouraging climate adaption and green energy transitions.

The U.S. aims to achieve these goals through “more consultative dialogue between the U.S. and African states, broadening senior-level engagements, strengthening civil societies, deepening relations with the African Union and regional bodies, and encouraging U.S. private sector engagement in Africa.” As part of the new engagement strategy, the U.S. plans to increase embassy staffing and ramp up funding since staffing at key African diplomatic embassy posts and special envoy posts have been notoriously vacant in the last few years, and many diplomatic missions are chronically underfunded.

The new engagement strategy also aims to “support sustainable development efforts that build resiliency across the spectrum from food security to gender equality.” Although this strategy will not introduce new initiatives, it seeks to reinvigorate existing ones. Secretary of State Blinken emphasized that “the United States will not dictate Africa’s choices, and neither should anyone else.”

The security policies that Secretary of State Blinken introduced in his speech on the new U.S. engagement strategy have proven ineffective so far. In July 2023, President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted in a military coup. It was not until October 2023 that the Biden Administration formally acknowledged the military takeover as a coup, which, under Congressional mandates, required the suspension of cooperation of military and economic aid to the country. The suspension resulted in the withholding of $200 million in aid and another $442 million allocated for trade and agricultural assistance.

In March 2024, a high-level U.S. diplomatic delegation visited Niger to engage with key political and military leaders. Led by Marine Corps Gen. Michael Langley, commander of U.S. Africa Command; Mary Catherine Phee, Assistant Secretary of State for African affairs; and Celeste Wallander, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ASDISA), the delegation met with Nigerien Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine, several cabinet members, as well as the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, Niger’s ruling military junta. The meeting focused on expressing concerns over Niger’s potential relationships with Russia and Iran and discussed the status of U.S. troops in the country.

After the meeting, Colonel-Major Amadou Abdramane, a junta spokesperson, announced U.S. flights over Nigerien territory were now illegal. Insa Garba Saidou, a local activist who assists Niger’s military leaders with communications, criticized the United States for pressuring Niger to choose between its strategic partners. Furthermore, Colonel-Major Abdramane announced that the Nigerien government “denounced with force the condescending attitude” of the head of the U.S. delegation, which he said, “had undermined the long relationship between the two countries.”
The U.S. policy in the Sahel has primarily aimed to promote stability through diplomatic engagement, capacity-building efforts, and support for regional initiatives. Historically, this policy relied on engagement through former colonial powers rather than direct interaction with individual nations. However, a string of coups and the subsequent Congressionally mandated suspension of aid to Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, has disrupted this approach, effectively halting U.S. capacity-building and cooperative efforts in the region. As a result, the United States is now seeking an alternate host nation to base its counterterrorism and surveillance operations. In the following sections, I will explore how the shortcomings of the current policy necessitate a shift toward more direct, nuanced engagement with Sahelian countries. By examining existing U.S. foreign policy frameworks and their limitations, I will propose a comprehensive strategy to enhance stability and counter extremist influences in the Sahel.

**Evaluating the Present Strategy: A Critical Assessment**

U.S. current policy towards Niger and the Sahel fails to address the gravity of the threats facing the region adequately. Without robust intervention, jihadi-Salafist terrorist groups are expanding their influence and territorial gains, which could potentially lead to the collapse of the fragile Sahelian states, invoking an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, and the proliferation of terrorism across the whole of West Africa. The withdrawal of international forces has led to increased violence across the Sahel. The Counter Extremism Project reports that the number of jihadist attacks has surged, with November 2023 witnessing the second-highest number of reported incidents since the beginning of their monitoring. This trend highlights how jihadist groups capitalize on the reduced foreign military presence to expand their influence and control.

The waning influence, and in several cases, the wholesale expulsion of the former colonial powers, has left the United States without a flow-through for its engagement with African nations. Absent this and considering Secretary of State Blinken’s new U.S.-Africa initiative, one would expect a more granular U.S. approach to its African foreign policy. Instead, the United States shifted its engagement-by-intermediary policy approach from former colonial powers to institutions such as ECOWAS and the African Union. The U.S. continues to fail to engage African nations on a state-by-state and state-to-state basis.

Despite the rollout of the new U.S.-Africa initiative in which the U.S. policy was to fully staff and fund its perpetually understaffed and underfunded embassies and consulates to promote more state-to-state engagement, the U.S. has continued its policy of regionalism, engaging African nations through intermediaries, instead of bilaterally, viewing African nations through a monolithic prism. Additionally, despite Blinken’s proclamation in his speech unveiling the new initiative that “the United States will not dictate Africa’s choices, and neither should anyone else,” U.S. policy continues to do just that. The statements from the Nigerien government spokesperson Colonel -Major Amadou Abdramane, that “denounced with force the condescending attitude” of the head of the recent high-level U.S. delegation, along with the statement from Nigerien government communication assistant Insa Garba Saidou, which criticized the U.S. for trying to force Niger to choose between its strategic partners, demonstrates a continued patronizing policy that has not changed.
Section 7008 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2023 is the law that restricts U.S. military and economic assistance to nations that have suffered from unconstitutional changes in their government.\(^{44}\) As written, Section 7008 applies when “a duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d'état or decree” or “a coup d'état or decree in which the military played a decisive role in the ousting of a duly elected head of government.”\(^{45}\) It is no doubt that Section 7008 applies in the case of Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Gabon. That Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Guinea, and Gabon suffered coup d’état is without debate. As initially written and narrowly interpreted, Section 7008 does not allow the U.S. the flexibility to engage in nuanced foreign policy.

In December 2022, Congress made two changes to Section 7008. The first allows restricted assistance to “support a democratic transition.” The second, and most important in the context of Niger, is that Congress included a waiver that allows the secretary of state to “waive funding restrictions on a program-by-program basis if the secretary certifies and reports to appropriations committees that the waiver is in the national security interests of the United States.”\(^{46}\) It is unfathomable that a waiver exists allowing the U.S. to re-engage economically and militarily in the Sahel, yet it has not been applied. The reliance on regional initiatives without direct U.S. involvement and support leaves indigenous forces lacking the necessary resources and capabilities to effectively combat extremist groups and safeguard American interests in the region. While diplomatic engagement is essential, it must be coupled with tangible military support and strategic intervention to address the root causes of instability and promote long-term security and stability.

The United States must commit itself to a whole of government engagement diplomatically, economically, and militarily or risk a growing regional challenge.

**Recommendations**

The U.S. government must apply the Section 7008 waiver to Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger utilizing the September 2022 amendment on the basis that such a waiver is necessary to protect US national security interests. Allowing jihadists to gain control of a massive territory in northern Africa and use it as a haven is a threat to the national security of the United States and its allies. Additionally, such a territory would provide these groups the resources to fund a global terrorist network and provide a launch point into the rest of West Africa. The vast uranium-rich deposits in Niger would allow the proliferation of dirty bombs on an unprecedented scale and potentially allow for the supply of material to hostile nations such as Iran and North Korea. Section 7008 waiver based on national security would apply in this case. I therefore propose the following:

1. **Application of Section 7008 Waiver:** Utilizing the waiver provision of Section 7008 to resume military and economic assistance to Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger is crucial for countering jihadist threats and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This waiver would allow the U.S. to allocate funds toward security assistance programs, capacity-building initiatives, and development projects to address underlying instability drivers. While the exact budgetary allocation would depend on specific program requirements and needs assessments, a sizable portion of Africa’s U.S. foreign aid
budget should be earmarked for this purpose. A preliminary estimate suggests that allocating an additional $500 million annually towards security assistance in the Sahel could effectively support indigenous forces, strengthen governance institutions, and enhance socio-economic development, thereby contributing to regional stability and security.

2. **Increase Engagement:** Enhancing diplomatic efforts and high-level engagement with Sahel governments requires additional resources for staffing, operational costs, and diplomatic initiatives. Allocating an additional $50 million annually towards embassy staffing, travel expenses, and diplomatic initiatives in the Sahel would enable the United States to bolster its regional presence and engagement. This investment would facilitate regular dialogue, coordination, and collaboration with Sahel governments, regional organizations, and international stakeholders, thereby strengthening partnerships and promoting collective action towards addressing shared security challenges.

3. **Enhance Military Support:** Increasing funding and training for indigenous forces is essential for building their capacity to combat extremist groups effectively. In addition to financial resources, providing advanced military hardware is necessary to enhance their operational capabilities on the ground. Specific equipment from the U.S. inventory could provide includes night vision technology, helicopters (such as Black Hawks and Cobra attack helicopters), armored vehicles (Stryker, MRAPs, stored M1A2 Abrams, retired Bradelys), intelligence assets (satellite intelligence, Global Hawk intelligence, communications intelligence), and artillery (Howitzers, mortars, MLRS). Allocating an additional $1 billion annually towards military assistance programs in the Sahel would enable the procurement and provision of essential equipment, resources, and logistical support to indigenous forces, thereby strengthening their ability to counter jihadist threats and maintain security and stability in the region.

4. **Strategic Intervention:** Conducting direct and targeted military strikes against jihadist groups requires careful planning, coordination, and intelligence sharing with indigenous forces and regional partners. While the exact cost of such operations would vary depending on the scale and scope of military engagements, allocating an additional $500 million annually towards counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel would enable us to conduct targeted airstrikes, special operations, and intelligence-driven missions aimed at disrupting terrorist networks, degrading their capabilities, and rolling back their influence. This investment would support ongoing efforts to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, disrupt supply chains, and neutralize high-value targets, enhancing regional security and stability.

5. **Protect Strategic Assets:** Safeguarding critical U.S. interests, including the drone base in Northern
Niger and uranium deposits, requires enhanced security measures and surveillance capabilities. Investing in infrastructure upgrades, perimeter security, and surveillance technology would mitigate the risk of attacks or infiltration by extremist groups. Allocating an additional $100 million annually towards security enhancements and counterterrorism measures at strategic assets in the Sahel would strengthen their protection and resilience, thereby safeguarding American interests and preventing their exploitation by hostile actors.

6. **Counter Chinese and Russian Influence:** Countering Chinese and Russian influence in the Sahel requires a comprehensive strategy that leverages American resources, expertise, and partnerships to promote sustainable development and strengthen governance institutions. Investing in economic development projects, infrastructure initiatives, and capacity-building programs would demonstrate U.S. commitment to the region's stability and security. Allocating an additional $200 million annually towards development assistance and governance support in Niger and the Sahel would enable us to counterbalance Chinese and Russian investments, promote democratic governance, and foster long-term stability and prosperity in the region.

7. **Support Democratic Governance:** Promoting and supporting democratic governance in Niger and the Sahel requires sustained investment in technical assistance, capacity-building support, and financial resources. Strengthening electoral processes, enhancing rule of law mechanisms, and combating corruption are essential for consolidating democratic gains and promoting human rights. Allocating an additional $50 million annually towards democracy promotion initiatives and civil society engagement would empower local communities, strengthen governance institutions, and uphold democratic values, thereby fostering political stability and inclusivity in the Sahel.

8. **End Patronizing and Paternalistic Policies:** Ending regionalism and multilateral approaches to diplomatic engagement requires a paradigm shift towards granular, state-to-state engagement with African nations. Investing in language and cultural training for diplomats, expanding embassy staffing and resources, and fostering direct dialogue and collaboration with Sahel governments would enhance mutual understanding and trust. Allocating an additional $20 million annually towards diplomatic initiatives and cultural exchange programs would facilitate more nuanced and effective engagement with African nations, thereby promoting respectful and equitable partnerships based on mutual interests and shared values.

The total additional funding recommended for the region amounts to a paltry $2.42 billion annually. Consider that during the 2023 holiday season, Americans spent over $850 billion on holiday shopping—which averages more than $2.3 billion per day. In comparison, the proposed $2.42 billion annual allocation for the Sahel is a modest investment for promoting stability, security,
and democratic governance in the region. By implementing these recommendations and allocating resources accordingly, the U.S. can effectively address the root causes of instability in Niger and the Sahel, promote democratic governance, and safeguard American interests in the region. Moreover, an initiative-taking and comprehensive approach will help prevent further escalation of violence, mitigate the risk of terrorism, and promote long-term peace and prosperity in the Sahel and the broader coastal regions of West Africa.

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