



## Unfolding Geopolitical Events Suggest a New Order in Strategic Competition – Perspectives from West Africa

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**Abstract:** The world is witnessing a fundamental change in the international system. The international politics will likely evolve into a competition of systems in a multipolar world. This shift has significantly influenced how African countries interact with the rest of the world. African states have entered an era of choice. The narrative of Africa being the “Dark Continent” is transforming into one of a “rising continent,” with interactions increasingly involving a growing number of “non-traditional actors.” Some African governments have increasingly embraced economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Russia. Africa’s abundance of strategic resources, favorable demographics, and attractive growth prospects give its leaders leverage in global affairs.

Africa’s relationship with the West has been complex, producing both positive and negative impacts. Neither capitalist-oriented nor socialist African governments have been able to transform the continent. A general sense of disappointment and frustration prevails among Africans toward Western powers, stemming from unfulfilled promises that democracy would lead to development and economic growth. Building trust and credibility will require greater European transparency regarding their interests, minimizing policy incoherencies, and addressing the gaps between European offerings and African needs.

**Keywords:** strategic competition, Africa, Europe, United States, Russia, China

## Introduction

Like many other regions and countries, West Africa has entered a new “era of choice” as global actors—both emerging and established powers—show increased interest in the region amidst a changing world order characterized by “strategic competition.” However, domestic and regional challenges, conflicts, neo-colonial patterns of behavior, and global issues continue to threaten the region’s stability and future development.

The end of colonial rule had completely restructured the continent: it created new states, redefined power dynamics, reoriented economic activities, and introduced new interests. Consequently, many of these states developed a natural inclination and orientation toward their former colonial powers. However, the emergence of an increasingly interconnected and multipolar world has profoundly influenced Africa’s engagement with foreign actors, all of whom have developed a growing interest in the region. Additionally, traditional powers such as Europe, the United States, and Russia have renewed their interest in Africa, leading to significant and heightened regional engagement.

Strategic competition has become a defining characteristic of contemporary international relations, with substantial implications for regional stability and security across the globe. Despite West Africa being one of the least integrated regions in the global economy and frequently beset by internal conflicts, the ramifications and influence of strategic competition on the region cannot be overlooked. An era of choice seems to have dawned. However, West Africa faces significant challenges and conflicts at local, national, and transnational levels that threaten to destabilize the entire region. These challenges are fundamentally rooted in and perpetuated by two interrelated dimensions: inequality and insecurity.

The emerging bipolar logic, which increasingly shapes the thinking and actions of key players in the context of strategic competition at the global level, has far-reaching implications for the engagement of major powers with and towards West Africa.<sup>1</sup> This logic dictates their approach to the region, hindering cooperation among themselves and with regional actors despite partly overlapping interests. Although these interests are often similar and the measures and means to address major challenges are known and available, strategic competition shifts the focus and commitment toward individual national priorities, preventing effective action. As a result, both major foreign powers and key regional actors primarily focus on protecting their own interests, which makes long-term positive development unlikely. The adoption of this bipolar logic of strategic competition, therefore, appears to be opposed to the interests of West Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Lippert and Volker Perthes, eds., “Strategic Rivalry between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories, and Implications for Europe,” *SWP Research Paper 4* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2020), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020RP04>.

This article presents the authors' perspectives on the increasingly dominant characteristic of the international system: *strategic competition* and a new *era of choice*. It aims to analyze the interests and engagement of foreign actors in West Africa, offering insights into the region's development in light of emerging global dynamics. The article further examines the role of key players involved in strategic competition at the global level and their engagement in the region. Additionally, it analyzes the impact of strategic competition on regional conflicts. The article will highlight the complexity, interdependence, and interconnectedness of the threats and challenges the region faces. Finally, it will explore the implications of strategic competition on West Africa's fragile defense and security, as well as its political, economic, and social challenges, concluding with reflections on the new world order from a West African perspective.

## **Threats and Challenges in West Africa**

The volatile West African region faces a myriad of complex threats and challenges that profoundly impact its political, economic, security, and social stability.<sup>2</sup> These interconnected and multifaceted challenges include historical conflicts rooted in the region's tumultuous past, as well as overarching trans-regional and global challenges that exacerbate existing conflicts or give rise to new ones. Collectively, these factors can be categorized into two primary dimensions: insecurity and inequality.

The nexus of inequality and insecurity in West Africa presents a profound, multidimensional challenge that undermines stability and development. These two dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, creating a complex landscape of threats that manifest at systemic levels, affecting societies and states at regional scales. The roots of these challenges are in the region's historical, social, and political contexts, with the legacy of colonization playing a critical role in shaping the dynamics of inequality and insecurity.

### ***Social and Economic Inequality and Insecurity***

Social inequality and insecurity in West Africa are often rooted in ethnic and social group affiliations, which determine access to economic resources and income opportunities, as well as basic services such as education or healthcare. The region's diverse social landscape has perpetuated disparities that foster social fragmentation and contribute to recurring inter-group tensions and conflicts, destabilizing societies.<sup>3</sup> The distribution of wealth and resources remains extremely unequal; nevertheless, many West African governments are unwilling or

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<sup>2</sup> The diversity of states, ethnicities, religions, geographical areas and the different historical, cultural and social experiences and living realities of the inhabitants make statements about West Africa as a whole extremely difficult. We therefore concentrate on a few selected challenges and threats that apply to the entire region or to most states in the region.

<sup>3</sup> Abebe Shimeles and Tiguene Nabassaga, "Why Is Inequality High in Africa?" *Working Paper Series* No. 246 (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: African Development Bank Group,

unable to address this issue.<sup>4</sup> As a result, marginalized populations become vulnerable to exploitation by armed groups and criminal networks, often seeking alternative means of survival in the face of economic deprivation.

### ***Political Inequality and Insecurity***

Political inequality is closely intertwined with social and economic disparities, as marginalized groups are systematically excluded from meaningful political participation. This exclusion is driven by entrenched elites who maintain power through control of state institutions and resources. Political insecurity, in turn, arises when disenfranchised groups seek to challenge the status quo, often through protests, rebellion, or insurgency. The concentration of political power in the hands of a small elite reinforces both inequality and insecurity, as the broader population has no access to political influence.<sup>5</sup> This concentration of power encourages the temptation of coups and other forms of political violence as factions vie for control of the state. In many instances, the ruling elite monopolizes not only political power but also economic and social resources, exacerbating inequality and fueling instability. The persistence of political instability and coups in the region reflects the unfinished nature of nation-building processes, which remain incomplete due to the legacies of decolonization, the imposition of artificial state boundaries, and the elites' lack of interest in fundamentally addressing these issues.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Corruption and Nepotism***

Corruption and nepotism are pervasive challenges that hinder governance and development across West Africa. Deeply rooted in the region's political culture, these practices allow elites to allocate state resources and opportunities based on personal and social connections rather than merit or need. This undermines public trust in government institutions and exacerbates inequality, as resources intended for the public good are diverted to benefit specific social groups.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Terrorism, Insurgencies, and Transnational Organised Crime***

The rise of terrorism, insurgencies, and armed groups—often linked to transnational organized crime—poses a significant security threat to West Africa. These groups exploit the region's porous borders and weak state institutions, engaging in activities such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking. The proliferation of violent extremism, particularly the spread of jihadist ideologies,

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January 2017), [https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/WPS\\_No\\_246\\_Why\\_is\\_inequality\\_high\\_in\\_Africa\\_A.pdf](https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/WPS_No_246_Why_is_inequality_high_in_Africa_A.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> "West Africa: Extreme Inequality in Numbers," *Oxfam International*, [www.oxfam.org/en/west-africa-extreme-inequality-numbers](http://www.oxfam.org/en/west-africa-extreme-inequality-numbers).

<sup>5</sup> Olayinka Ajala, "Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel," *Geneva Centre for Security Policy*, In Focus, October 19, 2023, <https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/understanding-crisis-democracy-west-africa-and-sahel>.

<sup>6</sup> Ajala, "Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel."

<sup>7</sup> Ajala, "Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel."

has further destabilized the region, with armed groups targeting vulnerable populations and state institutions. Notable examples include the recruitment strategies employed by these groups, which target the Fulani<sup>8</sup> and Tuareg ethnic groups and capitalize on existing tensions.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Migration, Brain Drain, and Demographic Pressure***

A lack of economic opportunities and political instability have led to significant migration from the region, particularly among young people. This brain drain further weakens local economies as skilled individuals leave in search of better prospects abroad. Meanwhile, strong demographic pressures, including rapid population growth, place additional strain on limited economic resources and services. The failure to provide adequate opportunities for youth perpetuates the cycle of poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, leaving young people increasingly disillusioned and vulnerable to radicalization or criminal activity.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Structural Challenges and External Influences***

The structural roots of these challenges are partly tied to the historical legacy of colonization, which imposed artificial state boundaries, ethnic identities, and divisions according to Western models. The unfinished nation-building process in West Africa and the lack of a cohesive national identity among large population segments continue to fuel political instability, as many states struggle to overcome the social divisions inherited from colonial rule within these artificial borders.<sup>11</sup> External influences, including global political and economic factors, further compound these structural challenges. Strategic competition among major powers has also contributed to insecurity in the region. The threats and challenges facing West Africa are multidimensional, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. The complex interplay between inequality and insecurity, rooted in both internal and external factors, poses significant obstacles to stability and development in the region. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that accounts for the historical legacies of inequality, the ongoing political and economic dynamics, and the influence of external actors and global forces.

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<sup>8</sup> Africa Defense Forum, “Fulani Crisis Shows How Terror Groups Capitalize on Ethnic Tension,” *Africa Defense Forum*, September 19, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/09/fulani-crisis-shows-how-terror-groups-capitalize-on-ethnic-tension/>.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Africa Security Brief No. 38, December 2020, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ASB-38-EN.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Podcast “Can West Africa Curb Its Brain Drain?” Episode Guests: Ebenezer Obadare and Aanu Adeoye, *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/podcasts/can-west-africa-curb-its-brain-drain>.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Schubert, “Das Erbe des Kolonialismus – oder: warum es in Afrika keine Nationen gibt,” *Zeitgeschichte-online*, June 1, 2010, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/das-erbe-des-kolonialismus-oder-warum-es-afrika-keine-nationen-gibt>.

### **Strategic Competition Actors and Interests in the Region**

Strategic competition, characterized by the rivalry between the United States and China, encompasses various interrelated political, economic, and ideological dimensions.<sup>12</sup> Despite the emergence of a multipolar order, the increasingly strong logic of a bipolar world order determines the thinking and actions of key players and decision-makers in major global powers such as China and the United States.<sup>13</sup> This perception also affects other actors, including Europe, Russia, India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting polarization have further intensified this competition, deepening the divide between the West and Russia, as well as China and other actors. Many of these global players are engaged in West Africa, where this complex network of interests presents both significant opportunities and inherent risks for the region's member states.

### **Technological and Economic Dimension**

The economic interests of major foreign powers in West Africa are primarily driven by the region's rich natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, which are particularly important in the context of strategic competition as they are essential for producing new technologies.<sup>14</sup> The prospect of further valuable resource discoveries increases the region's relevance and strategic importance. As a result, the focus of major powers is clearly on the extraction of resources and the development and control of key trade routes. West Africa, as a market for goods, is comparatively small and, therefore, not particularly relevant on a global scale. China, in particular, appears to integrate its approach to West Africa into the broader Belt and Road Initiative, with infrastructure projects in the region<sup>15</sup> aimed at establishing potential trans-Saharan connections and East-West links across the Sahel to connect landlocked countries and resources to maritime trade routes leading to China.

The economic and political implications of major power conflicts for the region are interlinked, as illustrated by the impact the Russia-Ukraine war has had on the wheat supply to Africa. Ukrainian grain exports, particularly wheat, are crucial for many African countries, with over 50% of their wheat imports coming

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<sup>12</sup> Lippert and Perthes, eds., "Strategic Rivalry between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories, and Implications for Europe."

<sup>13</sup> Lippert and Perthes, eds., "Strategic Rivalry between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories, and Implications for Europe."

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Tripp, "The Critical-minerals Boom Is Here. Can Africa Take Advantage?" *Atlantic Council*, March 18, 2024, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/the-critical-minerals-boom-is-here-can-africa-take-advantage/](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/the-critical-minerals-boom-is-here-can-africa-take-advantage/); and "Developing the Critical Mineral Value Chain in West Africa," *Energy Capital & Power*, October 30, 2023, <https://energycapitalpower.com/critical-mineral-value-chain-in-west-africa/>.

<sup>15</sup> Felix Onuah and Liz Lee, "China Pledges to Encourage Investment in Nigeria," *Reuters*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/nigeria-china-sign-economic-nuclear-energy-pact-2024-09-03/>.

from Ukraine and Russia prior to the Russian invasion. The invasion disrupted these exports, leading to a significant grain shortage in Africa and prompting Russia to attempt to increase its influence by blocking Ukrainian grain exports while promoting its own grain as an alternative.<sup>16</sup> Another example is the extraction of minerals and natural resources, closely linked to Russia's engagement in the Central African Republic. The involvement of the former Wagner private military company in the Central African Republic was financed mainly by granting gold and diamond mining permits. Similar agreements are either in place or currently being negotiated in the Sahel.<sup>17</sup> Although European and U.S. companies continue to maintain a strong presence in the region, there does not appear to be an overarching and coordinated strategy, nor do they seem to have found an effective response to Russia's disruptive approach.

### Ideological and Political Dimension

The ideological and political dimension of strategic competition in the region is considerably more complex. Historically, Western perspectives often portrayed Africa as the "Dark Continent," depicting it as a place of suffering, poverty, famine, and conflict.<sup>18</sup> Recently, however, there has been a shift toward recognizing Africa's positive developments, with the continent now seen as "Rising" due to economic growth, an expanding middle class, and an increasing number of internet users.<sup>19</sup>

Major powers engage in the region not only to pursue economic interests but also to gain political support, seeking to influence public perception and align states with their agendas. West Africa's historical experience with colonialism continues to shape its interactions with foreign powers, particularly as it occupies a strategic position in global competition. Competing narratives regarding governance models—such as democracy versus authoritarianism—inform these engagements.

However, overall, the number of disinformation campaigns—according to Western definitions—targeting African nations and societies has increased tremendously in recent years. This clearly indicates the growing importance that global actors attach to the region. West Africa has certainly become a hotspot

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<sup>16</sup> Yulia Bychkovska, "Ukraine's Grain Exports Are Crucial to Africa's Food Security," *Atlantic Council*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/ukraines-grain-exports-are-crucial-to-africas-food-security/>.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Tripp, "With Africa's Minerals in Demand, Russia and the US Each Offer What the Other Can't," *Atlantic Council*, May 1, 2024, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/with-africas-minerals-in-demand-russia-and-the-us-each-offer-what-the-other-cant/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/with-africas-minerals-in-demand-russia-and-the-us-each-offer-what-the-other-cant/).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Bates, "History of Africa through Western Eyes: From the Dark Continent to the Emerging One, Crude Generalisations Say More about the Viewer Than the Viewed," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/01/africa-history-western-eyes>.

<sup>19</sup> Bates, "History of Africa through Western Eyes."



for (dis-)information campaigns, particularly those from Russia, which can be tied to strategic competition through the anti-Western messages and narratives they promote. According to Western analysts, these campaigns had a considerable impact on the success of military coups in the Western Sahel, directly influencing the region's political power balance.<sup>20</sup>

However, despite the rise of disinformation targeting African populations with anti-Western narratives, surveys such as *Afrobarometer* (2021) reveal that many Africans still view Western democratic models as developmental role models, with Chinese models following closely behind. In contrast, Russia is perceived as having minimal influence.<sup>21</sup>

A similar picture emerges in West Africa. Here, too, most respondents prefer the Western model of government and society over the Chinese one. However, there is a notable rejection of the West in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – the three states where Russia has managed to expand its influence in recent years and on which it concentrates. It is difficult to determine whether these trends were already visible consequences of Russian and Chinese influence or whether surveys such as these were fundamental to their strategy of exerting influence. It seems that Russia plays an almost negligible role in terms of role models, despite the display of Russian flags and symbols during anti-Western protests supporting the coups in the Western Sahel. Unlike China, Russia cannot present a competing political model. Instead, it focuses on positioning itself, like China, as a protective power against Western neo-colonialism – a narrative China also heavily promotes.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, the perception of the old, predominantly European colonial powers as role models appears to be negative.<sup>23</sup> This perception is influenced by the legacy of European colonialism in the collective memory of West African societies, which contributes to low approval ratings for former colonial powers as role models. While there is sympathy for Western social and political models among African populations, China's recent emergence as a significant player is noteworthy. In contrast, Russia lacks a competing political model and cannot be considered a systemic rival to Western powers.

Therefore, strategic competition in this region will likely become even more severe and intense on an ideological level. As the cognitive domain is increasingly

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<sup>20</sup> "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 13, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>.

<sup>21</sup> Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations," *Afrobarometer Dispatch* No. 489, November 15, 2021, [https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ad489-pap3-africans\\_welcome\\_chinas\\_influence\\_maintain\\_democratic\\_aspirations-afrobarometer\\_dispatch-15nov21.pdf](https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ad489-pap3-africans_welcome_chinas_influence_maintain_democratic_aspirations-afrobarometer_dispatch-15nov21.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Sanny and Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations."

<sup>23</sup> Sanny and Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations."



recognized as a key area in future conflicts between major powers, West Africa will also be increasingly affected by the intensifying competition for people's attitudes.<sup>24</sup> The growing willingness of major players to grant African states more influence in international organizations, e.g., a seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC), clearly shows the extent to which they are contending for the favor of African actors. At the same time, the continued denial of veto rights reveals their reluctance to resolve the asymmetry in these relationships or to grant countries in the Global South an equal standing.<sup>25</sup>

### **The United States of America's Interest in West Africa**

The U.S. interest in strategic competition lies in maintaining the status quo by preserving the liberal rules-based order, with international organizations dominated by the West. U.S. engagement in the region is primarily focused on countering Islamic extremism and violent terrorism by fighting and containing globally operating Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. However, the United States increasingly views Africa, particularly West Africa, as a battleground in its broader effort to contain the rising influence of China.<sup>26</sup>

While the United States focuses its strategic attention on the Middle East, Russia, and China, West Africa appears to be perceived as a peripheral area of secondary importance. The United States has not been particularly engaged in international efforts and interventions since 2014, led primarily by France, most notably through Operation Barkhane and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which have not yielded the desired outcomes. Rather than stabilizing the region, these interventions have often aggravated existing tensions and contributed to deteriorating security conditions. Moreover, the U.S. failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mali have further eroded trust in Western models of intervention and governance, leading to skepticism regarding the West's ability and commitment to addressing regional challenges.

### **The Interest of Europe in West Africa**

Europe is also interested in maintaining the status quo at the global level with its international organizations and the liberal rules-based world order, as the post-war order grants Europe a relatively significant influence in these organizations,

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<sup>24</sup> Tzu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung, "How China's Cognitive Warfare Works: A Front-line Perspective of Taiwan's Anti-Disinformation Wars," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7, no. 4 (December 2020): 1-18, 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac016>.

<sup>25</sup> Michelle Nichols, "US Supports Two Permanent UN Security Council Seats for Africa," *Reuters*, September 13, 2024, [www.reuters.com/world/us-supports-two-permanent-un-security-council-seats-africa-2024-09-12/](http://www.reuters.com/world/us-supports-two-permanent-un-security-council-seats-africa-2024-09-12/).

<sup>26</sup> Gabriel Delsol and Claire M. Metelits, "A New Type of Threat: Russia, China and Digital Authoritarianism in West Africa," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, December 26, 2020, <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2020/12/26/a-new-type-of-threat-russia-china-and-digital-authoritarianism-in-west-africa/>.

which no longer fully reflects its current global relevance. While maintaining a strong alliance with the United States through NATO and shared political interests, Europe and the European Union aim to avoid becoming overly entangled in a bipolar framework of strategic competition. This caution is largely driven by Europe's substantial economic ties to China, making it reluctant to adopt a confrontational stance that could jeopardize its position as a dominant global economic and trade power. A multipolar world, characterized by the integration of diverse voices and perspectives, would provide Europe with greater flexibility in navigating the complexities of international relations.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 highlighted the critical importance for European states to diversify trade and secure access to essential resources. In this context, West Africa emerges as a potential alternative source of natural resources, offering Europe an opportunity to reduce its dependence on China and Russia while broadening its resource and trade base.

The historical ties between European nations and West African states are often overshadowed by the colonial legacy and contemporary challenges such as migration, security threats from extremist groups, and economic disparities. Europe has traditionally followed French leadership in West Africa, particularly in the Western Sahel. It has been unable to develop a common policy, resulting in a fragmented and disordered EU approach, lacking a cohesive strategy for the region.<sup>27</sup>

Despite being affected by irregular migration, as well as challenges such as human and drug trafficking, Europe's focus has shifted towards the East due to the war in Ukraine and the growing threat of a more aggressive Russia. At the same time, European powers had to withdraw from the Sahel following a series of coups. Although the new regimes' rhetoric was primarily directed against France, other European actors were unable to distance themselves from French dominance to set their own priorities and maintain a European presence, ultimately withdrawing their military forces from the region.

Simultaneously, Europe continues to promote civil society, humanitarian initiatives, and democratic governance as key components of their engagement. Consequentially, Russia openly contests Western influence through assertive actions, while China employs a more subtle approach characterized by gradual economic and political expansion.<sup>28</sup>

## Russia's Interest in West Africa

Russia appears to be a classic realist actor whose basic premise is the zero-sum game and thus acts to maximize its power at the expense of the power of other

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<sup>27</sup> Benedikt Erforth and Denis M. Tull, "The Failure of French Sahel Policy: An Opportunity for European Cooperation?" *Megatrends Spotlight* 13, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 5, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-13-the-failure-of-french-sahel-policy>.

<sup>28</sup> Alexandra Heldt, "Westafrika und die EU-Wahlen," Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, June 19, 2024, <https://www.freiheit.org/de/westafrika/westafrika-und-die-eu-wahlen>.

actors, at least up to a certain threshold. Russia's engagement in West Africa, particularly in the Western Sahel region, reflects its ambition to redefine the global international order. This engagement is characterized by a strategic alignment with authoritarian regimes that prioritize the consolidation of power over democratic governance and human rights. While Russia seeks to position itself as a counterbalance to Western influence, its support for local governments serves the interests of those in power rather than fostering genuine political alternatives for the populace. Additionally, Russia has tested grey zone tactics in West Africa before applying them elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

Through its actions, Russia often undermines the credibility and effectiveness of Western actors and institutions, including those dominated by Western powers or the United Nations. By cultivating alliances with regimes in West Africa, Russia challenges the established norms of international engagement and diminishes the influence of Western-dominated multilateral organizations and Western powers. As described above, the Russian approach is twofold, with a clear focus on security assistance in exchange for natural resources and as a political-ideological approach to openly challenge Western global dominance. In the long term, these dynamics pose significant risks not only to regional stability and security but also to the well-being of the general population. The prioritization of regime security over public welfare may increase insecurity, while the regimes' overall reliance on Russia may not pay off in the mid to long term.<sup>30</sup>

## **China's Interest in West Africa**

China's increasing economic and political power, along with its further integration into the global economic cycle, has created opportunities to expand its influence globally through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the spread of Anti-Western narratives, and its still relatively small but growing military engagement. These efforts aim to challenge Western dominance and offer alternatives.<sup>31</sup> China has deployed military forces in West Africa as part of the MINUSMA operation. Its plans to build a naval base in Guinea, the second on the

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<sup>29</sup> Delsol and Metelits, "A New Type of Threat: Russia, China and Digital Authoritarianism in West Africa."

<sup>30</sup> Saskya Vandoorne, Nick Paton Walsh, and Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Massacre in Burkina Faso Left 600 Dead, Double Previous Estimates, According to French Security Assessment," *CNN*, October 4, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/04/africa/burkina-faso-massacre-600-dead-french-intel-intl/index.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Amar Bhattacharya et al., "China's Belt and Road: The New Geopolitics of Global Infrastructure Development," Interview by Bruce Jones, edited by Ryan Hass, Bruce Jones, and Jennifer Mason, *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, April 2019, [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP\\_20190419\\_bri\\_interview.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP_20190419_bri_interview.pdf).

African continent, clearly demonstrate its growing interest in the region, particularly in the Atlantic zone, and its heightened readiness to protect global investments militarily.<sup>32</sup>

On the economic front, China focuses on exploiting West Africa's natural resources and connecting resource-rich areas to the coastal states and their ports through infrastructure projects. China also leverages its advanced technology sector and the BRI to promote digital authoritarianism by selling sophisticated technologies, such as smart city platforms and facial recognition systems. While China's strategy aims to enhance its international image and export governance values aligned with digital authoritarianism, it is also profit-driven due to private sector involvement.<sup>33</sup>

In this way, China positions itself as a strategic competitor to the West, especially in West Africa, by presenting alternatives to Western models, spreading positive narratives, portraying its own model as successful and worthy of emulation, and seeking support and access. China's strategy aims to reshape perceptions of the People's Republic of China among West African decision-makers while negatively framing Western models.

Consequently, rather than positioning itself as a systemic rival or competitor to the West in West Africa, China primarily emerges as an economic competitor on the surface. However, through its long-term strategy of subtle and indirect influence, China seeks to establish incremental advantages within the region as part of its overall strategic approach on a global scale.<sup>34</sup>

This analysis clearly illustrates the various forms of involvement and interests of foreign players in the region. It also highlights how the perception and mindset of global strategic competition dominate these actors' overall engagement in West Africa. These patterns of perception and thinking largely hinder cooperation with regional counterparts and exacerbate regional conflicts or prevent adequate support in addressing them.

Western approaches to aid and development in West Africa are often perceived as paternalistic and neo-colonial, largely due to the region's historical ties to colonialism. Western assistance is typically accompanied by conditions related to good governance, the promotion of democracy, and respect for human rights, which can create a sense of external imposition. In contrast, China and Russia are seen as less prescriptive in their involvement, as they do not impose such conditions. However, their engagement also carries significant long-term risks, exemplified by China's controversial involvement in Sri Lanka and Russia's active reshaping of the region's political, social, and economic structures. Despite these

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<sup>32</sup> Sankalp Gurjar, "The Changing Contours of Great Power Politics in West Africa," Indian Council of World Affairs, April 10, 2023, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=9250&lid=6003](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=9250&lid=6003).

<sup>33</sup> Delsol and Metelits, "A New Type of Threat: Russia, China and Digital Authoritarianism in West Africa."

<sup>34</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

complexities, surveys indicate that the Western development model remains the preferred option among West African populations. Nonetheless, regional elites often act as proxies for the interests of external powers – a strategy employed not only by China and Russia but also by Western actors, who, despite their rhetoric, have historically collaborated with favorable dictators in the region. This dynamic reflects an emerging pattern of strategic competition, with local elites instrumentalized by global powers to counter their rivals' influence.

## **Conclusion and Future Perspectives**

The contemporary international system is confronted with significant challenges, including intensifying strategic competition, climate change, rapid technological advancements, large-scale migration, global epidemics, inter-state conflicts, and terrorism. These dynamics contribute to an increasingly volatile and uncertain world order with significant ramifications for West Africa, as evidenced by heightened Chinese engagement, Russia's presence, military coups, the withdrawal of Western forces from the Sahel, and the exit of the Alliance of Sahel States from ECOWAS. Strategic competition in West Africa has political, economic, and ideological dimensions that shape interactions among states and non-state actors. The ongoing geopolitical tensions, exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have further complicated these dynamics. (Dis)information campaigns, particularly from Russia, aimed at promoting anti-Western narratives, have influenced political developments in the region, including military coups and the retreat of Western/European forces that have dominated the region for over a century. Ultimately, while Russia positions itself as a counter to Western influence without offering a viable alternative political model, China's increased influence may change West Africa's strategic landscape in the long term. This multifaceted competition among global powers poses significant risks to regional stability and development, as each actor prioritizes its strategic interests over providing genuine political alternatives for local populations.

While recent proposals to include Africa in the G20 and the UN Security Council represent initial steps toward establishing equitable partnerships, they may be insufficient to address the structural imbalances that undermine the Western-dominated international order. Enhanced African representation in institutions like the UNSC is not only a moral imperative but also essential for revitalizing a multilateral system that depends on legitimacy through fair representation.

West Africa possesses the potential to significantly influence the future of the African continent, either as a peace broker or a conflict instigator. If viewed solely as a site of competition and resource exploitation, it could exacerbate global security issues and lead to increased migration towards Europe and the Americas. To foster mutually beneficial partnerships that enhance quality of life and position Africa as a regional actor in global affairs, external partners must demonstrate genuine interest in addressing West Africa's challenges, reconsider political interference, and support local solutions. At the same time, African nations should unify their interests to present a cohesive voice on the global stage.

However, West Africa's fragmentation and relatively low economic performance hinder its ability to assert influence amid strategic competition. The region remains heavily reliant on external assistance for security, economic development, and climate change mitigation, with internal divisions complicating coordinated efforts. Europe, not having a common position, offers an opportunity for more equitable negotiations. Yet, West Africa's asymmetric relationship with Europe limits its prospects for rapid economic growth without deeper regional integration and technology transfers.

The complex relationship between Africa and the West has yielded benefits and exploitation, highlighting the necessity of understanding Africa within its own context rather than through external frameworks. Disillusionment among Africans towards Western powers stems from perceived failures in delivering on promises of democracy as a catalyst for development. Establishing trust will require greater transparency from European powers regarding their interests while reducing policy inconsistencies.

As these new policies may unfold, caution is necessary to avoid neocolonial pitfalls by refraining from exploitative practices undermining the local agency. A balance between tradition and modernity is essential; aligning traditional structures with modern advancements ensures culturally sensitive development that respects heritage while embracing innovation. Such a strategy—encompassing technological innovation, education, regional collaboration, local empowerment, and cultural sensitivity—can create a robust foundation for sustainable progress in West Africa. As global powers engage with this resource-rich region, prioritizing local agency and sustainable development will be crucial for fostering trust among West African nations. These concepts have been well-known and recognized for decades; nevertheless, both international and regional actors have often been unable or unwilling to implement them effectively.

Brain drain and the migration crisis from West Africa receive little attention from global powers, with Europe being a notable exception. However, Europe's engagement with the issue is largely driven by concerns over security and the rise of right-wing anti-immigration movements rather than a genuine commitment to addressing the root causes of migration. Consequently, Europe's response remains limited in scope and lacks a comprehensive strategy to support the region's development and create sustainable alternatives to migration. Nevertheless, in their efforts to resist and escape the emerging bipolar logic, both Europe and West Africa appear to be natural allies that could join forces on the global stage for mutual benefit.

In the broader geopolitical context, major powers are engaged in a competitive struggle for influence in West Africa, often prioritizing access to resources and political leverage over good governance or democratic principles. This is particularly evident in the strategic competition between Russia and France in the Sahel, China's influence through its Belt and Road Initiative, and the United States' attempts to counterbalance Chinese expansion in the region. These geopolitical rivalries frequently overshadow efforts to improve political stability or

governance structures, as weak and corrupt governments often enable external actors to advance their own agendas.

The logic of strategic competition has created a scenario where major powers prioritize expanding their spheres of influence over collaborating to address regional challenges. This is further compounded by disinformation campaigns targeting both elites and local populations to sway them toward the interests of one or another power. While there is some common ground in the fight against Islamic terrorism, cooperation remains limited due to shifting geopolitical dynamics and competing strategic interests, further hampering the development of a coordinated international response to terrorism in the region.

This pattern of competition among major powers prevents a unified approach to addressing the underlying challenges facing West Africa. Instead, the region is pressured to choose sides within a global framework of strategic rivalry, particularly in light of tensions between the West, Russia, and China. These external pressures, combined with internal governance challenges, prevent West African states from achieving deeper regional cooperation and integration, which could otherwise strengthen their collective influence on the international stage. The lack of regional unity further weakens their position, leaving them vulnerable to external manipulation and unable to negotiate effectively with major powers.

Recent developments suggest that rather than progressing toward greater regional integration, West Africa is experiencing fragmentation. The “era of choice,” in which many West African actors see themselves as navigating a geopolitical landscape of competing influences, offers potential leverage. However, this potential can only be realized if regional actors manage to consolidate enough political and economic weight to negotiate on more equal terms with global powers. Unfortunately, given current trends, this seems unlikely in the near future. As a result, West African nations will likely continue facing difficulties in asserting their agency and advancing their interests in a global arena dominated by major powers prioritizing their strategic goals over the region’s long-term stability and development.

## **Disclaimer**

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