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## **A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Sahel**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**A**merican foreign policy in the Sahel has not worked. Counterterrorism has predominated in the U.S. approach to the region since 2001, resulting in a policy focused on security assistance and military cooperation. However, the influence of Salafi-jihadist groups in the region has markedly increased, civilian fatalities have skyrocketed, and a militarized approach has undermined security sector governance. U.S. strategy has not adequately addressed the root causes of conflict—political marginalization, poverty, and environmental pressures—that have contributed to a vicious cycle of conflict and fragility. The challenges facing the Sahel call for a new approach.

To effect lasting change in the Sahel, the United States needs to replace the overmilitarized status quo with an affirmative strategy of diplomatic engagement. The United States should reduce military engagement in the Sahel, which is disproportionate to relatively limited interests. However, withdrawal alone would be insufficient to shift regional dynamics because other stakeholders would continue counterterrorism campaigns based on the American model.

Therefore, the Biden administration should implement the Global Fragility Strategy in the Sahel and phase out the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership to right the balance between diplomatic and military tools. The United States should work with regional stakeholders to coordinate a broader shift in its Sahel policy.

## **The Status Quo Approach to the Sahel Has Failed**

The Sahel is a semi-arid strip of grassland stretching from Mauritania to Eritrea that occupies an important environmental zone at the edge of an expanding Sahara. In the western Sahelian countries of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, political marginalization, climate change, and poverty have contributed to fragility and armed conflict.

The United States's involvement in the Sahel began in earnest as part of the global war on terror, which saw policymakers increase military engagement in the region. However, instead of preventing the rise of new Salafi-jihadist groups, the United States presided over the proliferation of militant groups and intensification of armed conflict. Meanwhile, the root causes of militancy have worsened. Nevertheless, successive administrations have doubled down on a military-first approach while sidelining alternative frameworks that emphasize diplomacy and development.

## **The Global War on Terror Has Defined U.S. Sahel Policy**

Counterterrorism concerns have dominated U.S. policy in the Sahel and Sahara since the beginning of the war on terror. Before 9/11, U.S. engagement with the region was limited. Modest foreign aid to the region came in the form of Peace Corps programs, food aid, and development assistance.<sup>1</sup> American policymakers paid little attention as Islamist splinter groups from Algeria's civil war accumulated influence in the country's Saharan south.<sup>2</sup> After 9/11, however, the U.S. government increasingly saw the region through the lens of counterterrorism. Within weeks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government began cooperating with Sahelian governments to track down suspected al-Qa'ida members.<sup>3</sup> Soon after, U.S. involvement in the region expanded to include security assistance to Sahelian governments and deployments of U.S. troops eventually followed.

## **Initiatives Such as the TSCTP and AFRICOM Have Failed to Curb Militancy**

The U.S. established new institutions to carry out counterterrorism missions while marginalizing other issues. On November 7, 2002, the State Department's Office of Counterterrorism started the Pan Sahel Initiative to "protect borders, track movement of people, combat terrorism, and enhance regional cooperation and stability."<sup>4</sup> The Initiative encompassed Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. In response to the kidnapping of European tourists in Algeria and a coup attempt in Mauritania in 2003, PSI expanded in 2005. Renamed the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), the Partnership incorporated the entirety of the Sahara and Sahel—Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia.<sup>5</sup> Since then, TSCTP has been the cornerstone of U.S. Sahel policy, and the U.S. government has spent over \$1 billion on the program since its inception.<sup>6</sup> The Partnership seeks to coordinate a whole-of-government approach to the Sahara and Sahel and cooperates extensively with local governments. In practice, the TSCTP focuses on equipping and training local militaries to advance counterterrorism programs.<sup>7</sup>

The American focus on counterterrorism also extends to other regions of Africa. In 2007, the Department of Defense established AFRICOM, a combatant command based in Germany that oversees military operations in all of Africa except Egypt. Counterterrorism was a primary justification for establishing AFRICOM.<sup>8</sup> However, a rushed rollout of AFRICOM prevented the US government from building trust among African governments, leaving many skeptical of an approach that evoked memories of European imperialism.<sup>9</sup> Criticism was especially prevalent among those countries with strong economies that do not rely on US foreign aid. By contrast, governments that either received assistance or hoped to court American economic aid fell silent.<sup>10</sup> In the intervening years, AFRICOM has come to dominate the American approach to Africa writ large.<sup>11</sup> However, many African leaders have seen AFRICOM as a symbol of

neocolonialism the militarization of U.S. policy in Africa.<sup>12</sup> Decision-makers originally intended to establish AFRICOM in Africa but were unable to convince an African country to host AFRICOM, forcing it to remain in Stuttgart, Germany.<sup>13</sup>

## **U.S. Militarism Makes the Problem Worse**

Despite U.S. involvement, and perhaps in part because of it, armed conflict in the Sahel has escalated significantly since 2001. The frequency and intensity of attacks have increased. There were no al-Qa'ida affiliates active in the Sahara or the Sahel at the time of 9/11. Only in 2006 did the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Conflict, a splinter group that emerged from Algeria's civil war, rebrand as al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The number of armed Islamist groups has increased as the United States has expanded its counterterrorism operations.<sup>14</sup>

The current crisis in the Sahel dates back to the 2012 Malian civil war. After the overthrow of Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya, many Tuareg soldiers from Mali and Niger who served in the colonel's Islamic Legion or as mercenaries took weapons from Libya's arsenals and returned to their home countries.<sup>15</sup> Tuareg insurgencies have periodically occurred in present-day Mali and Niger for over a century, and Tuareg nationalism that arose in response to French colonialism has maintained relevance after independence due to patterns of regional neglect from Bamako.<sup>16</sup> However, in 2012, a Tuareg uprising metastasized into an opportunity for foreign Salafi-jihadist organizations to establish a foothold in the Sahel. Militant groups like Ansar Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, al-Mourabitoun, and al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb formed a web of alliances and rivalries. Now, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, successors to groups that participated in the Malian civil war, are the region's most prominent Islamist militant groups, and they have gained ground in recent years.<sup>17</sup>

Since the Malian civil war, porous borders and transnational communal ties have facilitated the spread of conflict to Mali's neighbors and beyond. The center of gravity for jihadist militancy has shifted south. Whereas militancy previously centered at the southern edge of the Sahara in Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali, conflict has become more prevalent in the Sahelian regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. While violence has been most intense in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, attacks have also recently occurred in Cote d'Ivoire. Now, concerns of conflict spreading even further south to the coastal countries of Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin have risen.<sup>18</sup>

The escalation of conflict in the region carries dire human consequences. If trends hold, casualties in the Sahel will reach new heights in 2021.<sup>19</sup> Violence has displaced nearly 3 million people, many of whom have fled across the Mediterranean to Europe.<sup>20</sup>

## **Current U.S. Policy Distorts Incentives**

U.S. military assistance has distorted incentives in local governments. Since 9/11, governments have framed internal security challenges in terms of the war on terror to attract U.S. support and draw attention away from authoritarian tendencies.<sup>21</sup> With counterterrorism taking priority over concerns about government repression, the United States and France have turned a blind eye to the abuses of rulers like Chad's late president Idriss Deby.<sup>22</sup> Military assistance has made foreign governments increasingly accountable to the counterterrorism goals of foreign powers and less accountable to their citizens. Militaries across the region have been implicated in massacres of civilians, which fuels recruitment into militant groups.<sup>23</sup> Flows of military assistance have overdeveloped Sahelian security sectors relative to civilian governing institutions. For example, in 2018 and 2019 the United States provided about 2/3 of Burkinabe military spending.<sup>24</sup>

The imbalance between military capacity and governing capacity has elicited tangible consequences. U.S. training of foreign officers is associated with a higher

coup propensity because military training programs increase the power of the armed forces relative to civilian institutions.<sup>25</sup>

The example of Mali demonstrates the adverse effects of U.S. military assistance. In Mali, U.S. security assistance focused primarily on equipping and training the country's armed forces to fight Salafi-jihadist militants without adequately strengthening civilian oversight or governance.<sup>26</sup> Amadou Sanogo, a U.S.-trained military officer, mounted a coup in 2012 that overthrew Mali's democratically elected president.<sup>27</sup> The coup sparked a civil war that sent Mali, and the entire Sahel region, into crisis. Millions of dollars of security assistance did not prevent the collapse of Mali's government or stop armed Islamist groups from controlling a broad swathe of the northern Azawad region.<sup>28</sup> From 2012 to 2020, Mali's security spending as a percentage of GDP doubled.<sup>29</sup> While receiving U.S. military assistance, the Malian military was repeatedly implicated in war crimes and other atrocities, but little accountability has followed.<sup>30</sup> In 2020, Assimi Goita, who also received training from the U.S. military, overthrew the democratically elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and the United States halted military assistance to Mali.<sup>31</sup> However, the cuts may be insufficient to reverse the damage done. The imbalance in civil-military relations and the equipment that the U.S. provided remain.

## **The U.S. Needs to Redefine its Interests in the Sahel**

Sahelian Salafi-jihadist groups have never posed a direct threat to the United States. Conflicts in the Sahel have largely focused on local issues. Although some Salafi-jihadist groups in the Sahel are affiliated with al-Qa'ida and ISIS, they have not targeted the U.S. homeland. Fighters' concerns remain localized. Thus far, the U.S. has seen its core interest in the Sahel as preventing the emergence of an ungoverned territory or a quasi-state that could serve as a launching pad for international terrorist attacks.<sup>32</sup> The trope of a "new Afghanistan" has long influenced U.S. thinking about the region.<sup>33</sup>

However, this conception of U.S. interests is too expansive. Such a broad preventative mission would warrant permanent military presence in fragile regions around the world. Sahelian Salafi-jihadist organizations form a tangled web of splinter groups and competing factions that remain too preoccupied with local disputes to launch an attack in the United States. The United States maintains a strong interest in defending itself against terrorist attacks, but this interest is best served not by exerting military force, whether directly or indirectly, in every fragile state. Instead, the U.S. should support sustainable development, inclusive governance, and human security to address root causes of instability. These goals should guide U.S. policy in the Sahel, which does not have particular geostrategic or political distinctions to differentiate it from other fragile regions.

## **U.S. Policy in the Sahel Neglects Root Causes of Instability**

The root causes of conflict and insecurity in the Sahel are complex and interconnected. Generally speaking, governance issues, environmental pressures, and economic underdevelopment undergird armed conflict.

Governance issues are at the heart of insecurity in the Sahel. During the colonial era, French officials established a pattern of indirect rule that privileged certain ethnic groups while marginalizing others.<sup>34</sup> When Sahelian states gained independence from France in 1960, patterns of ethnic politics prevailed. Since then, inequitable distribution of political power and resources has deepened divisions between regions and ethnic groups. The Fulani people, a Muslim-majority group that includes pastoralists across West Africa, have faced particular discrimination in much of the Sahel.<sup>35</sup> National governments have neglected economic development and the provision of basic services, and policies have often ignored the needs of marginalized groups.

Environmental pressures exacerbated by climate change have worsened intercommunal tensions. Although the Sahel contributes very little to glob-

al emissions, people there have disproportionately suffered from climate change. Temperature rise in the Sahel is projected to exceed the global average by 50%.<sup>36</sup> The Sahara Desert, which borders the Sahel to the north, is steadily expanding.<sup>37</sup> Climate change will make weather patterns more intense and unpredictable, resulting in both flooding and droughts.<sup>38</sup> A devastating drought that engulfed the Sahel from the 1960s to 1980s resulted in famine and displacement, and normal rainfall has not returned in much of the region even today.<sup>39</sup> In a region reliant on rain-fed agriculture and livestock herding, fluctuations in rainfall can have devastating effects on livelihoods. Environmental changes have caused changes in land use as shifting weather patterns have forced both farmers and herders to seek out new land, elevating tensions between pastoral and agricultural communities. Often, those tensions exacerbate existing political and ethnic divisions in the region.

Poverty and economic underdevelopment are inextricably linked to inequitable governance and environmental pressures. Economies in the Sahel mostly rely on agriculture, whether farming or herding.<sup>40</sup> Environmental disruption has damaged crop yields, leading to lower food supply and fewer employment opportunities. Sahelian countries have some of the lowest human development metrics with Niger, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso all falling in the bottom ten countries in terms of HDI.<sup>41</sup> Populations in the Sahel are also quite young on average--Niger, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso all feature among the world's youngest countries, with median ages between 14 and 17.<sup>42</sup> The youth bulge contributes to fragility as poverty and economic underdevelopment increase incentives for young people to participate in armed conflict.<sup>43</sup>

Each of the factors that contribute to armed conflict is worsening, both because of armed violence and due to external factors. The war on terror exacerbated existing divides by providing ruling elites with a security rationale for cracking down on Muslim-majority communities. Central governments have increasingly defaulted to a coercive approach to dispute resolution, resulting in growing dissatisfaction that in turn

deepens animosities.<sup>44</sup> Armed conflict in the Sahel has contributed to a vicious cycle. Repression and ethnic violence by state security forces incentivize marginalized people in the Sahel to cast their lot with militant groups, which often offer economic stability and a chance at retribution. Militant groups have also increased their appeal by offering localized conflict resolution and basic services in regions where they hold sway, providing an alternative to mostly absent states.<sup>45</sup> Climate change has contributed to desertification and more intense droughts in the Sahel, changing land use patterns and increasing frictions between agricultural and pastoral communities.<sup>46</sup> Managing these frictions would usually fall to central governments, but a securitized view of marginalized groups has encouraged repression instead of reconciliation.<sup>47</sup>

Salafi-Jihadist groups have exacerbated inter-communal conflict in much of the Sahel, introducing new dimensions to existing militancy.<sup>48</sup> By exploiting existing tensions, Salafi-jihadists have become increasingly rooted in local communities and recruited new members.

## **The U.S. Military is Ill-suited to Address Conflicts in the Sahel**

The current U.S. approach to the Sahel does not adequately address the root causes of social, environmental, and political challenges.

In the Sahel and elsewhere, the U.S. military has been thrust into roles typically reserved for diplomatic and development agencies.<sup>49</sup> With over \$700 billion dollars of funding annually, the Pentagon has taken on new missions distant from its core duties of performing kinetic operations. The military has taken on more "Phase Zero" operations that call for greater military involvement during peacetime. While conflict prevention is a desirable goal, the military is ill-equipped to achieve it.

Underfunding diplomatic and development agencies while transferring diplomatic and development functions to the Department of Defense creates a cycle of

neglect. Expanding definitions of military operations crowd out diplomatic and development agencies. Expanded Department of Defense responsibilities justify budget hikes despite the presence of underfunded specialized agencies designed to undertake diplomatic missions and development projects.

The U.S. cannot fix all of the Sahel's challenges. Previous U.S. efforts to restructure governing systems and create institutions from scratch have failed in Iraq and Afghanistan; There is no reason to believe nation-building efforts would be more successful in the Sahel. Local governments ought to play a leading role in combating poverty, building climate resilience, and providing basic services. Decentralizing governing institutions could help increase accountability at the local level.<sup>50</sup> However, current incentive structures for governments in the Sahel reward military operations, not inclusive governance. Changes in governance must be locally led to be sustainable. The United States cannot build inclusive governing institutions, but it can change incentive structures for political elites in the Sahel to disincentivize repression and human rights abuses.

## **Towards a Diplomacy-First, Human-Centered Approach**

The Biden administration should right the balance between diplomatic and military approaches in the Sahel. Specifically, the administration ought to reduce the role of military approaches in U.S. Sahel policy, phase out the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership, and implement the Global Fragility Strategy in the Sahel. The United States cannot change regional dynamics alone, so the Biden administration should coordinate with France, Sahelian governments, and other stakeholders to turn away from the counterterrorism-focused status quo.

## **Rebalancing the Foreign Policy Toolkit**

Militarizing U.S. relations with Sahelian states has damaged civilian governing institutions by privileging foreign militaries. Reversing the damage of a mili-

tary-first approach requires restoring the leadership of diplomats in U.S. Sahel policy. Each of the three major problems that the Sahel faces — economic underdevelopment, environmental insecurity, and extractive governing institutions — calls for American engagement that centers civilian agencies.

USAID is best equipped to advance economic development goals and reduce poverty. Implementing economic development projects could provide employment alternatives to young people, mitigating economic incentives to participate in armed conflict. The Agency is already active in much of the Sahel, but shifting some security aid funding to development programs may result in a higher return on investment in the long term.

Diplomatic and development agencies should cooperate with Sahelian counterparts to ramp up climate diplomacy and resilience initiatives. As the State Department incorporates climate change into every aspect of U.S. policy, the Sahel offers an opportunity to better understand the interaction between environmental injustice and armed conflict. Ramping up US-AID programs with a specific focus on food security and climate resilience would help disrupt cycles of violence in the region.

Governance issues, too, call for increased diplomatic engagement. A diplomacy-first approach to the Sahel would increase U.S. soft power and result in a deeper understanding of internal politics, thereby providing leverage in U.S.-Sahel relations and informing decision-making to prioritize good governance. Engaging more deeply with civilian counterparts would help correct the imbalance in civil-military relations.

## **The U.S. Should Reduce Military Commitments**

Rightsizing U.S. military commitments in the Sahel would require closing military facilities in the region and reforming the legal structures that authorize the use of military force.

A broad consensus has emerged among Sahel experts that the current military-first approach that the United States, France, and local governments have adhered to is ineffective.<sup>51</sup> However, efforts to reduce U.S. military engagement met resistance among policymakers.

In 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper reportedly considered withdrawing U.S. troops from West Africa to rebalance force posture towards great power competition.<sup>52</sup> Commentators criticized the anticipated drawdown, claiming that a reduction in relatively modest troop levels in the Sahel would hurt U.S. influence in the region, allow militant groups to gain ground, and abandon allies.<sup>53</sup> French officials urged U.S. forces to remain in the region.<sup>54</sup> Members of Congress, too, resisted the move.<sup>55</sup>

The U.S. military has nominally adopted a “light-footprint” approach to the Sahel, but recent years have seen an uptick in both deployments and facilities nonetheless.<sup>56</sup> In Niamey, the U.S. military maintains Niger Air Base 101, which enables drone surveillance missions across northwest Africa. In 2016 in Agadez, AFRICOM began building Niger Air Base 201, which was plagued by mismanagement during the construction process.<sup>57</sup> Drone missions at the base were authorized in June 2019.<sup>58</sup> Separately, the CIA has steadily expanded another U.S. drone base in the town of Dirkou, from which U.S. forces have carried out reconnaissance and surveillance missions.<sup>59</sup> Outside of Niger, the Pentagon also maintains facilities in Burkina Faso and Chad.<sup>60</sup>

The United States should avoid deploying personnel and establishing facilities in the Sahel. Deployments should remain minimal, allowing French and local forces to engage in lethal operations when necessary. The Tongo Tongo ambush of 2017, in which Islamic State in the Greater Sahara militants killed four U.S. soldiers, shows the risks that even supposedly non-combat deployments pose.<sup>61</sup> AFRICOM has repeatedly described military facilities in the Sahel as temporary, but without clear timelines for withdrawal, the facilities might as well be permanent. Even though U.S. drone bases have been used mostly for

intelligence purposes thus far, they still pose problems for U.S. foreign policy in the region. First, the United States could easily use the bases for lethal operations if a president saw fit. Second, the facilities create a long-term commitment that does not reflect the limited extent of U.S. interests in the region.

## **Congress Should Increase Oversight**

Congress should exercise its oversight powers to reduce military engagement in the Sahel. As debates about reforming the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) and ending forever wars wear on, policymakers should pay special attention to the Sahel. Even though the war of terror in the Sahel has been less conspicuous to Americans than the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. involvement has had an outsized impact on conflict dynamics in the region.

The legislature should revoke the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, which provides an open-ended legal justification for military operations in the Sahel and around the world. Passed just days after the September 11 attacks, the 2001 AUMF has been broadly interpreted to authorize a wide range of military actions without sufficient legislative oversight. The Obama administration interpreted the 2001 AUMF as inclusive of al-Qa’ida’s associated forces. As ISIS rose to prominence in Syria and Iraq, the Obama administration concluded that, as a successor organization to al-Qa’ida in Iraq, ISIS is included in the 2001 AUMF—even though it publicly broke with al-Qa’ida and did not exist at the time of 9/11.<sup>62</sup> Under this logic, the Executive Branch has used the 2001 AUMF to authorize operations in the Sahel. However, even if the Executive Branch chose not to invoke the 2001 AUMF, its existence leaves the door open for future presidents to use the law as a blank check for military force.

If Congress chooses to replace the 2001 AUMF with a new one, it should specify a list of targeted organizations based on the direct threat they pose to the United States. Most insurgent groups in the Sahel focus on localized issues, not attacking Western powers. Sahe-

lian groups that remain occupied with intercommunal conflict should be excluded. Although some militant groups have aligned themselves with ISIS and al-Qa'ida, they have not demonstrated the capacity or desire to directly target the United States. In debating which groups to include in future AUMFs, Congress should consider the totality of the circumstances for each group rather than broadly characterizing all affiliates of al-Qa'ida or ISIS in the same manner.

However, repealing the AUMF would not be sufficient to change most U.S. military operations in the Sahel because of the legal ambiguities of low-level military engagement in the region. The death of four U.S. special forces soldiers in a firefight in the remote Nigerien town of Tongo Tongo in 2017 exemplifies the shortcomings of repealing the 2001 AUMF without parallel reforms in other areas of the law. Pursuant to the War Powers Resolution, the Department of Defense submitted reports to Congress starting in 2013 communicating that “combat-equipped” troops had been deployed to Niger.<sup>63</sup> However, the reports did not characterize the deployments as a use of force. Although combat may have occurred, U.S. forces were primarily responsible for training local forces, building facilities, and supporting partners as authorized under 10 U.S.C. § 167. Only when combat broke out did the Department of Defense invoke the 2001 AUMF to authorize the firefight in Tongo Tongo.<sup>64</sup>

Other paths to authorize military engagement further complicate congressional oversight. For example, presidents have invoked their Article II authority to carry out military action as commanders in chief, most recently with President Biden’s airstrike in eastern Syria.<sup>65</sup> Similar to the 2001 AUMF, whether a president invokes this authority in the Sahel or elsewhere is immaterial. The mere fact that the door to military intervention without congressional consent remains open raises concern. Congress should close these loopholes to narrow the Executive Branch’s ability to conduct military operations in the Sahel without explicit authorization.

Shifting from a policy that prioritizes security assistance and military cooperation to a policy that centers diplomacy and development will subject civilian personnel to new risks. After all, addressing issues of governance, environmental degradation, and economic underdevelopment in the Sahel will entail civilian presence in insecure areas. The State Department and USAID will need to effectively evaluate and manage security risks and empower Diplomatic Security to protect civilian personnel instead of unduly relying on military deployments.<sup>66</sup>

## **Implementing the Global Fragility Strategy in the Sahel**

The Biden administration needs a new strategy for the Sahel. Merely improving the implementation of the militarized, counterterrorism-centered approach will be insufficient to fix deep-seated flaws in U.S. Sahel policy. To shift the focus of U.S. strategy from counterterrorism to governance, the Biden administration should replace the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership with a regional application of the Global Fragility Strategy.

The TSCTP is emblematic of the current U.S. approach to the Sahel. While the Partnership nominally incorporates stakeholders from the Department of Defense, the State Department, and USAID, in practice it has focused on security assistance and cooperation while neglecting root causes. An audit by the State Department in 2020 described problems with TSCTP implementation, concluding that the Department will have “limited assurance that TSCTP is achieving its goals of building counterterrorism capacity and addressing the underlying drivers of radicalization” without addressing the Partnership’s flaws.<sup>67</sup> Specifically, the report identified over \$200 million in potentially “wasteful spending due to mismanagement and inadequate oversight.”<sup>68</sup> Although the TSCTP is nominally a whole-of-government program, the audit described a lack of coordination between implementing agencies.<sup>69</sup>



Congress has attempted to fix some of the TSCTP's shortcomings. In March 2021, members of Congress reintroduced the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program Act. The bipartisan bill would increase congressional oversight over U.S. operations in the Sahel and Sahara and provide permanent statutory authority for the program.<sup>70</sup> The bill tries to solve some problems in the implementation of current U.S. Sahel strategy. It would involve Congress in strategic decisions by requiring five-year strategies for both TSCTP specifically and the Sahara-Sahel region writ large. The bill also requires the State Department to enact the recommendations proposed in the 2020 State Department audit. The bill does not, however, include any appropriation of funds to empower agencies to take on the necessary reforms. In short, the bill takes some modest steps to improve the implementation of a strategy that has demonstrably failed.

Improving the implementation of current U.S. strategy would not be enough to change the American approach to the region. While the Act references the whole-of-government approach that the TSCTP has nominally adhered to since its establishment, the bill does not include specific measures to right the balance between military and civilian approaches. Requiring specific benchmarks related to governance in five-year strategies indicates that the bill's authors understand the need to shift priorities in the region, but the scale of the problem requires a more fundamental rethink. In light of these shortcomings, the Biden administration should wind down the TSCTP and start anew.<sup>71</sup>

## **Replace the TSCTP With the Global Fragility Strategy**

Instead of solidifying the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, the Biden administration should implement the Global Fragility Strategy and place it in the center of its approach to the Sahel. Passed in 2019 with bipartisan support, the Global Fragility Act offers an affirmative alternative to the forever-war mindset that has dominated the U.S. approach to insecurity in fragile states. The Act calls for foreign affairs agen-

cies to collaborate to advance an integrated approach to fragility that focuses on conflict management and prevention. Unlike the counterterrorism-centered strategy that has defined U.S. engagement with fragile states, the Global Fragility Act recognized the political, economic, and social roots of violent conflict and offered policy frameworks to address those roots. The Act mandated the president submit a corresponding strategy that designated priority countries or regions, but the Trump administration omitted those prioritizations in their 2020 Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability.<sup>72</sup> The Trump administration's omission offers an opening for the Biden administration, which should reaffirm U.S. commitment to the Global Fragility Strategy and designate the Sahel as a priority region.

The Biden administration can streamline bureaucratic processes in U.S. Sahel policy by appointing a Sahel envoy. President Trump appointed the first Special Envoy for the Sahel Region, African affairs expert Peter Pham, in 2018.<sup>73</sup> President Biden has yet to appoint a successor. President Biden should appoint a Sahel envoy and authorize them to exercise broad authority over the American strategy in the region to improve coordination among agencies by reducing interagency tensions.<sup>74</sup> Appointing an envoy would convey presidential buy-in and grant Global Fragility Act implementation with the level of attention necessary to succeed.

The envoy could also facilitate better cross-regional policy coordination. Long a bridge between coastal North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel plays a key role in both regions but receives relatively little attention in academic and policy spaces. For example, porous borders and deep-seated transnational cultural ties make the Sahel critical to regional security. Addressing security concerns in West Africa requires coordination between the Maghreb, the Sahel, and coastal West Africa, but current bureaucratic divisions do not reflect the interaction between those regions.

When it comes to building inclusive governing institutions, the United States can only play a limited

role. However, supporting local governance capacity should be a top priority for President Biden's Sahel envoy. Directly targeting funding to NGOs and municipal governments when possible would decrease the likelihood of funds fueling state violence. Investing in localized peacebuilding projects would create alternative conflict resolution pathways. Whereas a militarized policy approach has distorted incentives for partner governments and widen rifts between governing elites and marginalized groups, the Global Fragility Strategy would help mend the social contract and incentivize good governance.<sup>75</sup>

A fragility-focused strategy in the Sahel should afford particular attention to environmental factors. Climate-specific measures won't end conflicts, but they will ease pressure over time. In particular, projects to reduce desertification and improve crop resilience would help address the changing land-use patterns that spur conflict between livelihood groups in much of the Sahel. On a local level, the U.S. can support crop diversity to increase agricultural resilience, share projections of extreme weather events, and otherwise support the productivity and resilience of farmers and herders. Offering funds and assistance to tap significant groundwater reserves situated beneath the Sahel could also help reduce concerns around water scarcity.<sup>76</sup> The Sahel's arid climate and consistent sunshine offer great promise for the development of solar power in the region, which has been remarkably successful in nearby Morocco and could offer new opportunities for green development.

Regionally, the United States ought to donate funds to the Great Green Wall project. An African Union initiative to cultivate a 5000-mile-long band of vegetation on the Sahel's northern edge, the project would slow desertification and create jobs, mitigating the factors that contribute to armed conflict.<sup>77</sup> The Great Green Wall would also capture carbon, yielding benefits not just in Sahel but for the global community writ large.

Security assistance in the Sahel has often driven a wedge between citizens and the state, a problem

the Biden administration can remedy with security assistance reforms embedded in a regional fragility strategy. Security assistance has typically been inefficient and has not resulted in better outcomes, often failing to mitigate state repression and undermining legitimacy.<sup>78</sup> To prioritize effectiveness in security assistance, the U.S. should borrow from the development sector to make aid provision decisions based on aid effectiveness. Gauging aid effectiveness would require assessing a partner government's willingness to improve security governance, creating monitoring and evaluation tools, developing inclusive and broad-based in-country partnerships, promoting transparency and accountability, and judging affordability.<sup>79</sup>

The U.S. approach to security assistance in the Sahel should also prioritize civilian harm prevention. The United States should explicitly condition assistance on security governance reforms and greater accountability for killings of civilians by security forces.<sup>80</sup> By engaging directly with civil society groups, the U.S. can better gauge people's needs and concerns regarding security assistance.<sup>81</sup>

## **The U.S. Should Coordinate with Regional Partners**

The United States is just one of many states and multilateral organizations active in the Sahel. A reduction of U.S. military involvement in the Sahel would not fundamentally change the region's policy dynamics. Even without U.S. forces, reliance on the U.S. counterterrorism model would endure. Therefore, the U.S. should cooperate with other international stakeholders to shift the focus of regional strategy.

France, the region's former colonial ruler, has been especially active in the Sahel due to its geographic proximity and domestic politics towards migration.<sup>82</sup> France has played a leading role among foreign powers in the Sahel since the Malian civil war in 2012, when the French military launched Operation Serval. French commitments in the Sahel have increased since then with the inception of Operation Barkhane, and more than five thousand French troops are now

deployed in Chad, Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso.<sup>83</sup> However, the French public disapproves of the Macron administration's Sahel policy more than ever, and fatigue with France's campaign in the Sahel is mounting.<sup>84</sup> Local populations have also expressed opposition to France's continued military presence, sparking protests in Mali.<sup>85</sup> Most recently, the French government faced backlash for an airstrike on a wedding party that killed nineteen civilians.<sup>86</sup> Without a change in policy, the Macron administration may find itself entrenched in a forever war.

Several multilateral security frameworks complicate matters further. Since 2017, local governments have coordinated their security operations and economic development programs through the G5 Sahel, which comprises Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. The United Nations has maintained a peace-keeping mission in Mali since 2013.<sup>87</sup> On top of these missions, an EU special operations task force, Takuba, have been active in the Sahel since late 2020.<sup>88</sup>

The web of overlapping missions in the Sahel means that a course correction is easier said than done. A change in U.S. policy alone will not significantly change the status quo in the region, which has its own inertia following the American counterterrorism model. Even if the U.S. completely withdraws, France may continue its failed policy and local security forces will likely maintain current patterns of engagement. Withdrawal alone is insufficient to reverse the harm of the war on terror in the Sahel.

Therefore, the United States should take up diplomatic leadership and qualitatively change its engagement in the region to prioritize diplomacy, governance, and civilian protection while simultaneously encouraging other stakeholders to reduce their emphasis on military force. The U.S. plays a key role in the Sahel that provides the necessary leverage to shift regional dynamics.<sup>89</sup> American surveillance, intelligence, and logistics enable military operations for local and foreign militaries.

Using this leverage, the United States should convene local partners and international stakeholders to correct the balance between military and diplomatic tools. In particular, the United States should collaborate with France to center governance in a collaborative new approach to the Sahel. The Biden administration can help shift broader regional dynamics, beginning a new chapter for not just U.S. policy in the Sahel, but for the region as a whole.

## Conclusion

The United States can change its strategy in the Sahel to center the root causes of fragility and encourage partners to work alongside the U.S. in implementing a new approach. Years of a failed counterterrorism paradigm that prioritizes military action and security assistance have left the Sahel and its people less safe while exacerbating underlying issues. As environmental, economic, and political challenges intensify, stakeholders need to change course. Committing to the Global Fragility Strategy, with special attention to security assistance reform and environmental pressures, offers the best way forward for the Biden administration and its partners.

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