



How Can the United States Better Engage with Africa's Fragile and Conflict-Affected States?

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In 2022, President Joe Biden's administration crystallized its new approach to U.S.-Africa relations with the conclusion of the second [U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit](#) and the release of the [U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa](#) and the [implementation plan](#) for the 2020 [U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability](#). In both strategies and during the summit, the administration emphasized the United States' role in advancing peace and stability in fragile and conflict-affected states in Africa.

The Biden administration's demonstrated interest in Africa is good news, but attention should now be focused on the means and modalities of implementation of the commitments made. According to Molly Phee, assistant secretary for African affairs at the Department of State, [a new inter-agency strategy for the Sahel](#) is in the works. Separately, the United States plans to move ahead with conflict mitigation in Coastal West Africa under the Global Fragility Act. What are the gaps in previous U.S. approaches? What lessons should the United States apply to preventing conflict and promoting security in fragile countries in Africa going forward?

Fragility in Coastal West Africa and the Sahel

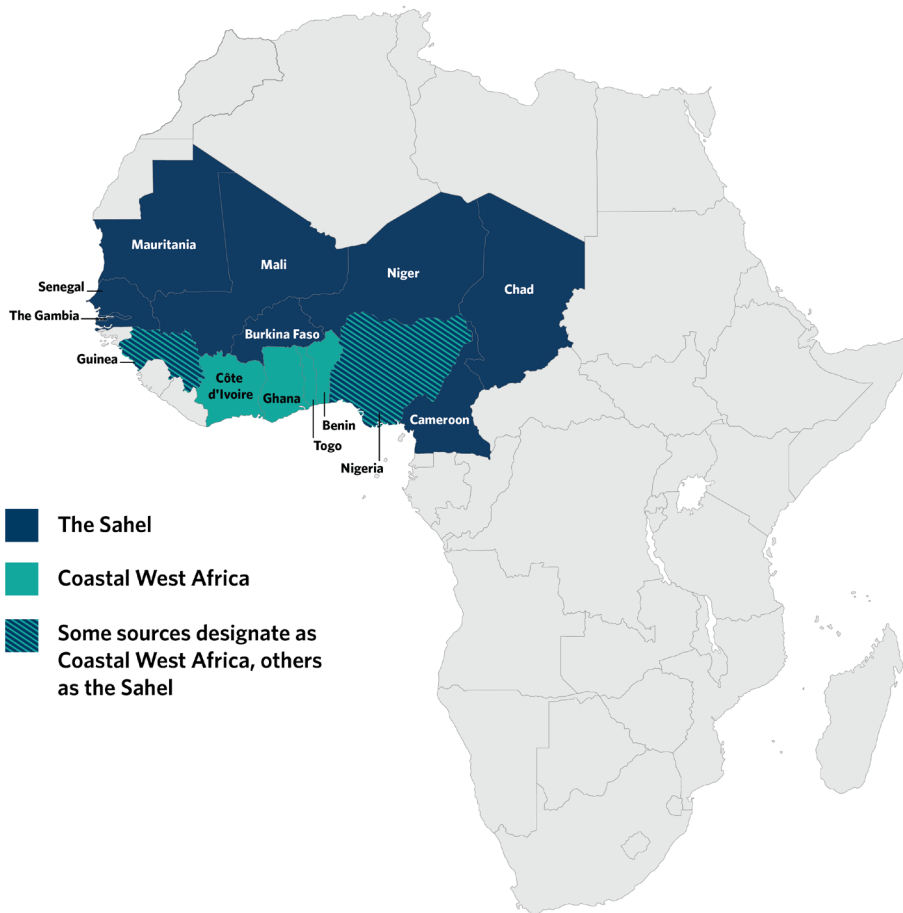
In response to the passage of the bipartisan Global Fragility Act of 2019, in 2020 the Biden administration published the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (also known as the [Global Fragility Strategy](#), or GFS). As the White House outlined [in April 2022](#), GFS implementation would represent “a ten-year, evidence-based, whole-of-government effort to foster peace and long-term stability through integrated U.S. diplomacy, development, and security-sector engagement with dual goals of strengthening national and regional peace, resilience and stability and enhancing the way our government operates.” The August 2022 Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan reiterated an [important aspect](#) of the GFS—committing to use diplomacy, development, and defense as “tools to strengthen and enable partners to respond to the drivers of conflict . . . advance regional stability [and] provide internal security.”



Indeed, many of the countries identified for the implementation of the GFS are in Africa. Within the continent, these can be narrowed to Libya, Mozambique, and a region the United States has designated Coastal West Africa, comprising Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo. The coastal countries of West Africa face newer challenges as insecurity at their northern borders threatens to expand into their territory.

The security prospects of Coastal West Africa are intimately linked to the evolution of the security and political context of the Sahel countries to their north: Senegal, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Niger (see map 1). Over ten years have passed since the start of armed rebellions in the north of Mali and the military coup that ended two decades of civilian democratic rule. As the conflict in Mali became more complex, bringing in violent Islamist groups along with other armed rebel movements and criminal networks, it extended to the country’s wider neighborhood.

Map 1. Coastal West Africa and the Sahel



Source: Author’s elaboration on “Coastal West Africa | Stabilization and Transitions,” U.S. Agency for International Development, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/stabilization-and-transitions/coastal-west-africa>; and “UN Support Plan for the Sahel: Working Together for a Prosperous and Peaceful Sahel,” Africa Renewal (United Nations), May 2018, https://www.un.org/africarenewal/sites/www.un.org.africarenewal/files/English%20Summary%20Report_0.pdf.

Note: While the designations “Sahel” and “Coastal West Africa” are used in official documents and memos, there is no clear consensus among policymakers about the countries that make up these subregional groupings. Yet although there is no agreed-upon list of Sahel and Coastal West Africa countries, there is a list of West African countries—members of one of the economic regional communities of the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The fifteen members of ECOWAS are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

The eight years since 2015 saw the [exodus](#) of rural populations in Niger and Burkina Faso because of violence and insecurity. Those two countries joined Nigeria and Mali in the [top ten countries](#) most affected by terrorism in the world, according to the Global Terrorism Index 2022. Burkina Faso is the best illustration of this domino effect: violence and lawlessness at its northern borders pose a [serious threat](#) to the security and stability of Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d’Ivoire.

For these regions, this period was also shaped by the painful experience of neighbor Nigeria, the most populous and powerful country in West Africa. From the late 2000s, the [Boko Haram group](#) brought years of extreme violence and insecurity to rural areas within Nigeria, Niger, and neighboring countries in the region. While the GFS areas of focus do not include Nigeria, it is clear that the country’s fortunes in the coming years will have significant impacts on its West African neighborhood, the Sahel included. In particular, the strength of regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States to defend the vital interests of member countries depends on the regional anchor.

As the Biden administration [drafts the U.S. Strategy for the Sahel](#), the United States must recognize the inseparability of volatility in Sahel countries, insecurity in Coastal West Africa, and political and security developments in Nigeria. It may be counterproductive to disconnect the Sahel and Coastal West Africa in any analysis of the security prospects of this part of the continent, where free and large movement of people has been a fact for centuries despite infrastructure deficits and harsh natural conditions.

The Sources of Conflict and Fragility in African States

The Sahelian countries and the states of Coastal West Africa, like many conflict-affected African states, face two primary sources of conflict: one internal and one external.

The [return of economic growth](#) in many African countries in the 2000s was not always accompanied by a reconstitution of the capacity to implement public policies, provide services, and guarantee security, particularly outside urban centers. The issue of the limited capacity of several states to deliver even basic public services, starting with security, is crucial and cross-cutting. The extremely worrying situation in the rural areas of several Sahelian countries—marked by little economic development and infrastructure and the absence of basic public services such as health, education, water, and energy supply—is one of the most tragic manifestations of failures in state-building over the past three decades in all key areas of public policy.

Lack of political will is an immense constraint in many countries, but in several West African nations, the huge deficit of human and material resources and appropriate incentives within public administration is equally dramatic. [Data from the countries](#) of the Sahel tell the story of a dearth of human and financial resources to maintain effective state presence and service provision throughout vast territories. In landlocked Sahelian countries, government [revenues excluding aid](#) are between \$200 and \$450 per year per capita, in contrast to \$4,000 in Algeria and \$25,000 in France. The [number of civil servants](#) is also very low: six civil servants per thousand inhabitants in Mali versus seventy civil servants for every thousand inhabitants in the United States and ninety in France. Though the public service is understaffed, and remunerations are low, the [civil service wage and salary bill](#) in Sahelian countries represents about 40 percent of public expenditure, compared with 5–15 percent in Europe—a public service that is understaffed and underpaid yet consumes



many scarce national resources without delivering commensurate results. These challenges remain as relevant as ever, and any foreign strategy to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of African populations must integrate the need to strengthen the legitimacy of states through their capacity to supply public goods.

Beyond internal challenges, the significant failures of the strategies of foreign powers active in the region for decades are also an important factor in fragility and conflict in West Africa. The prevention of violent extremism in the Sahel and more recently in Coastal West Africa has become an essential part of the strategies and priorities of the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations over the last ten years. However, questions must be asked about the conditions necessary for the effective implementation of foreign powers' strategies, particularly in contexts where the results of previous strategies appear to have been very mixed.

Ten years of military interventions and multiple strategies for the Sahel; ten years of meetings and declarations by all the major and medium powers on the situation in the region; all these have not been enough to improve the situation.

Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and northern Nigeria are no less affected by violence and insecurity in early 2023 than they were in 2012. In fact, the situation in Burkina Faso has deteriorated in a spectacular way, due in part to policy failures by the country's leadership but also to the serious shortcomings of the strategies of foreign powers. The people of the region have serious doubts about the usefulness of the various strategies that were supposed to help their countries emerge from the deep and complex crises in which they are trapped.

Guiding Principles for an Effective U.S. Approach to Fragile and Conflict-Affected States in Africa

As the United States develops its strategy to mitigate conflict in these regions, the magnitude of the challenges they face—confronted for decades with armed conflict and facing high risk of violence in the coming years—demands a medium- to long-term approach. The principles and objectives of the GFS are encouraging in that they recognize the need for a long-term plan. As Biden wrote in a [letter on GFS implementation](#), “Prevention is hard work — measured not in days and weeks, but in years and generations. Its successes are never as evident as its failures, and it requires us to remain focused on lasting peace and stability over the allure of easier, more temporary gains that may not strengthen our position in the long term.” The challenge will be to make sure that U.S. initiatives on the continent serve this long-term vision. What should implementation look like?

A “Do No Harm” Approach to Security Interventions in Africa

As a first matter, the United States should internalize that preventing conflict and promoting stability in fragile and conflict-affected states in Africa might first require the United States, and other major powers, seriously rethink their military interventions, which have historically led to disastrous consequences for countries on the brink of fragility. For instance, the Sahel region, West Africa, and even Central Africa have undoubtedly borne the brunt of the prolonged effects of Libya's collapse after NATO military intervention. Libya has been a [major source](#) of large flows of illicit arms and weapons to violent extremists and armed groups, as well as human and drugs trafficking that are [destabilizing vast swathes of West Africa](#). In 2016, former U.S. president Barack Obama publicly said that failing to prepare for the aftermath of the military intervention in Libya was the biggest foreign [policy mistake](#) of his presidency. Decisions on Libya were

taken [in the UK and in France](#), with more weight given to domestic political considerations and calculations than to the future of Libya and its African neighbors in the Sahel and beyond. It is not only the failure to plan for the aftermath that should be questioned but the course of the military intervention itself and the decision to prioritize it above other possible options.

“Do no harm” should also mean that U.S. engagement supports, rather than weakens, regional organizations and intraregional cooperation within Africa. Some background here is in order. In the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, West African countries have been making antagonistic choices in relations with foreign partners. For example, even before the war, Malian military rulers abruptly replaced France with Russia as the country’s key strategic partner in 2021, although Mali’s neighbors Niger and Côte d’Ivoire have maintained their well-established military cooperation with France, Germany, other European countries, and the United States.

As a result, the heightened polarization between the West and Russia is spilling over into regional tensions in Africa. Russia is expanding its outreach on the continent both directly via [recent visits](#) by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and indirectly with the presence of private military contractor the [Wagner Group, which has ties to the Kremlin](#). Yet some members of the U.S. Congress have proposed [a bill to implement secondary sanctions](#) on African countries that transact or relate with Russia. Such sanctions on African countries that are poor and dealing with various security challenges would put unreasonable pressure on them. Moreover, African countries are not aligned in their positions on the war and the resulting internal confusion as well as external pressures could undermine cooperation between the Sahel and Coastal West Africa. This cooperation is an essential condition for the improvement of peace and security in the region. It would be foolish to invest in conflict prevention in coastal countries and then expect that security and stability would hold there without an improvement of the situation in the neighboring countries of the Sahel. The implication for the U.S.

government is that initiatives in individual countries must take into account regional dimensions.

Addressing Structural Economic, Governance, and Human Capital Challenges

As the United States begins implementing the GFS in Coastal West Africa and develops its Sahel strategy, it should focus its attention and funding on helping countries to address structural economic and education challenges.

Prevention of conflict and promotion of stability requires fighting corruption in all its various forms. Corruption erodes the legitimacy of those who govern, offering a powerful recruitment tool for armed groups and violent insurgencies. One of the many lessons from the United States’ extended military and civilian intervention in Afghanistan is that failing to tackle corruption while providing large financial support to local government is a recipe for disaster. Former U.S. official Sarah Chayes has written about the link between [corruption, poor governance, and insecurity](#) in Afghanistan and extended this analysis to other contexts, including African ones.

International partners such as the United States must do their part by making stronger efforts to curb international illicit flows, being consistent in not tolerating corrupt rulers across the region, and supporting local social movements that advocate for better governance and transparency. Africa loses about [\\$90 billion per annum](#) to illicit financial flows, more than the \$60 billion it receives in foreign aid every year, according to a report from the UN Conference on Trade and Development. It is important to recognize that financial globalization has [amplified the effects](#) of corruption globally and made the most fragile states of the world even more vulnerable to huge illicit outflows.

As the United States launches the GFS and develops its Sahel strategy, its efforts toward prevention of conflict and instability should involve strengthening and diversifying local economies and reducing subregional and spatial inequalities in a deliberate way. Strong

political choices must be made first and foremost by African governments to accelerate and broaden job-creating economic growth by attracting investments, providing skills-building activities particularly for young people, and supporting small and medium-scale enterprises. And when these African governments make these decisions, their international partners, including the United States, should support these initiatives. Orthodox economic recipes will not suffice—new ideas and innovations are needed. Even in fast-growing coastal economies in West Africa such as Côte d'Ivoire, economic opportunities are not growing quickly enough to reduce the risks of revolt, rural insurgencies, urban crime booms, and the further expansion of armed terrorist groups.

In addition, prevention of conflict in the longer term in Africa also requires massive investments in education and human capital development, with flexible models adapted to the local context, designed by local experts, and considering financial sustainability. In the youngest region of the world, with the fastest demographic growth, the future will be shaped by the values, principles, skills, and knowledge inculcated in today's youth. Reforming education systems and policies will be critical for the stability of the region; improving states' capacities to produce public goods further strengthens political legitimacy.

Similarly, the United States must prioritize patient but determined construction of effective civil and military administrations—a necessary task if the countries of the region are ever to achieve political stability and decent levels of security. In this effort, it is also essential to protect, sustain, or build meaningful democratic systems. Democratic resilience in a context of poverty and acute inequality is highly dependent on the capacity of states to assert their usefulness for the populations—or at least give them reason to hope for a better future.



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Toward a Joint U.S.-Africa Effort to Addressing Fragility and Conflict

The various new U.S. approaches to Africa are off to a good start, but implementation will be critical. The U.S. administration must better facilitate coordination between federal agencies to ensure foreign policy consistency.

Beyond those necessary efforts, it is essential that U.S. policymakers for specific African countries prioritize understanding the local political, institutional, and socioeconomic conditions that are the prerequisites for successful implementation and positive outcomes for the population. This should also entail a stock-taking of sorts as to why previous approaches to engaging with fragile and conflict-affected countries have not yielded the desired results.

But as the United States hones its own approach, African governments have an essential role to play, too. African governments must be committed to the necessary institutional reforms to strengthen the capacities of their public administrations in terms of human resources, service delivery, and law enforcement—particularly in remote rural areas—to meet the United States halfway in the implementation of its strategies. Strengthening national, regional, and continental institutions and tackling structural challenges in Africa will require a sustained, agile, and long-term commitment from African governments—as well as commitment from external partners like the United States.

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