

The US elections and peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel

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The US elections come at a time when US policy towards West Africa and the Sahel is at a critical juncture. Regardless of who wins the presidency, the US and its European partners will need to improve coordination, the lack of which has long characterised collaboration in the region.

The US presidential elections on 5 November come at a time when the US finds itself in a position of waning influence in West Africa and the Sahel. Authorities in Niger and Chad ordered US troops to leave, calling years of US engagement in question. The withdrawal from Niger is particularly consequential because the country has been a linchpin for the US in the region. Since 2013, the US has relied on Niger as a strategic location from which to monitor terrorist activity. Consequently, the US is now reviewing its strategy and partnerships with countries in the region.

However, any change in regional strategy by the current administration under President Joe Biden could be reversed by either presidential candidate. For most of the campaign thus far, neither Donald Trump nor Kamala Harris have addressed foreign policy towards West Africa and the Sahel as a prominent issue. But the new president will inevitably need to address the future of US engagement in the region and respond to developments on the ground.

As there are only a few hints as to which direction US policy towards the region may take, the building of scenarios can help anticipate what the presidential candidates may do after taking office. This policy brief presents two scenarios to illustrate possible consequences and implications of either Kamala Harris or Donald Trump winning the election. This exercise will also deal with the effects for European countries, which are reviewing their regional policies, too.

The situation in West Africa and the Sahel

In recent years, the Sahel, which is in part located in West Africa, has become a global hotspot of terrorism. In 2022, 43 per cent of all global terrorism deaths were recorded in the Sahel, with Burkina Faso witnessing the largest increase in terrorism deaths from 759 in 2021 to 1,135 deaths in 2022 (Institute for Economics & Peace 2023).

Once Africa's democratic poster child, West Africa has faced the repercussions of an insurgency that started in 2012 and has plunged the region into uncertainty. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, ethnic Tuareg people who had been fighting alongside then-dictator Muammar Gaddafi returned to northern Mali and joined a separatist rebellion against the Malian state. The insurgency resulted in a coup against then-President Amadou Toumani Touré. Whilst the insurgency was ended with the help of a French-led coalition and the conclusion of a peace accord in 2015, Mali has since remained divided. In the following years, numerous actors, including the UN, the EU, the African Union, the US and France, enhanced their support not only for Mali but also for neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger; their aim was to restore stability through a mix of humanitarian assistance and development, military and security cooperation. Despite the increasing engagement from outside actors, the security situation deteriorated further. It has worsened not only in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, but also in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.

US policy towards West Africa and the Sahel

US engagement in West Africa and the Sahel is in line with the overall US strategy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, which has been fairly consistent over the past decades. Since 9/11, the US has largely focused on counterterrorism in various parts of Africa. To combat terrorist groups like Boko Haram in

the Lake Chad Basin or al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in the Sahel, it established a network of military bases. In addition, the US has expanded its partnerships with African militaries and advised, trained and assisted them via the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). Seeing underdevelopment as a driver of terrorism, insecurity and state failure, the US has complemented its military efforts with development and humanitarian assistance. But despite the goal of balancing diplomacy, defence and development, development has taken the back seat.

During Trump's presidency, US policy towards the region largely stayed on course. At the outset, concerns were high that his administration would roll back military and development assistance. His statements towards these countries did not bode well. In 2013, he tweeted about then-President Barack Obama's Power Africa project: "Every penny of the \$7 billion going to Africa as per Obama will be stolen – corruption is rampant!" (Trump 2013). Five years later, during his presidency, he dubbed African states "shithole countries" (Watkins and Phillip 2018). Yet, despite Trump's harsh rhetoric and threats to downsize the UN mission MINUSMA in Mali, US support continued unabated. Development cooperation also remained unaltered, not least because the US Congress, with the help of Republican votes, prevented the administration from cutting USAID's budget by almost a third (von Soest 2021).

President Biden sought to reframe the region's importance. He stressed the need to renew US Africa policy and promised to prioritise democracy promotion, including in West Africa. In 2022, his administration added five West African countries, including Benin and Togo, to its 2019 Global Fragility Act and added the prevention of violent conflict in unstable regions as a new component of its strategy. The choice of countries signalled that West African stability was a US interest.

However, Biden's plans were overtaken by developments in the Sahel, where military coups took place in Mali, Guinea, Chad, Burkina Faso and Niger. The coup in Niger in particular has put the US in a tight spot between its commitment to promoting democracy and its interest-based foreign policy. The trade-off became obvious when it took the US weeks to call the overthrow a coup. Doing so would have meant cutting off military assistance and part of its development cooperation. After a while, the US called it a coup but pronounced that it would keep communications open. According to AFRICOM's Commander General Michael E. Langley, the US aimed to continue dialogue to get the juntas "on a roadmap back to democracy" (Akinyemi and Ewokor 2024).

Eventually, it was the Nigerien junta that ended its military partnership with the US. Among the reasons given by Nigerien officials was that the US had pursued a one-sided security relationship and pressured Niger to limit ties with Russia and Iran (Kupemba 2024). While the US decided to maintain its Niamey embassy and its engagement in other policy areas, it agreed to withdraw its troops by 15 September (U.S. Department of Defense 2024). Authorities on both sides are still trying to underscore their commitment to ongoing diplomatic dialogue. The question now is how the US will remain engaged in West Africa and the Sahel.

Scenarios: "America first" or "America is back again"

Regardless of who assumes the presidency in 2025, the new administration will have to grapple with declining US influence in the region. To anticipate possible consequences and implications for the region, the two scenarios are set one year after each candidate has taken office.

Harris I: America is still back

On 5 November 2024, Kamala Harris won the US presidential election by a slim margin. While her election campaign did not disclose many hints about her vision for future relations between the US

and West African countries, her election brought a sense of relief and optimism to the region; finally, a president was in office who had visited African countries, such as Ghana, after the last presidential visit to the continent occurred under Barack Obama in 2013.

One year after President Kamala Harris took office, optimism among West African actors has largely remained. As many experts predicted, Harris embarked on a similar foreign policy course to her predecessor, implementing the 2022 Africa Strategy and the 10-year plan to encourage stability and prevent conflicts that the Biden administration launched in 2023. The plan moves away from prioritising military approaches and instead aims to foster social cohesion and government responsiveness. Nevertheless, to maintain a military footprint in the region, the Harris administration has just concluded an agreement with Ghana that will allow the US to station reconnaissance drones at the country's airfields to continue surveillance of terrorists. Negotiations took two years but were eventually successful because Ghana has seen rising insecurity on its northern border with Burkina Faso and considers coordinated US intelligence operations as a way to maintain security in the region. To demonstrate that it is a partnership on equal footing and high-level support for a strengthened relationship, Vice President Tim Walz also travelled to Accra to sign the agreement.

But the optimism among West African policymakers may soon fade. For one thing, President Harris has inherited the challenge that US ambitions to promote democracy and development have not been matched by sufficient funding. Leaving this issue unaddressed threatens the credibility of President Harris and US support in general, but it also leaves funding gaps in promised climate finance, financial resources the region desperately needs. Moreover, the Harris administration has been unable to find common ground with Sahel countries, especially Niger. Talks are still ongoing, but since the coup in Niger in July 2023, the US has remained in an observer position, watching Russia's Africa Corps strengthen its foothold in the region and contribute to even higher levels of human rights abuses and insecurity than in the years before. Developments point to further destabilisation of the region rather than the opposite.

Trump II: America first again?

The re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024 heightened concerns and fears in West Africa and the Sahel. However, one year into Trump's presidency, there are cautious hopes in West Africa and the Sahel that he may not follow through on his earlier announcements after all. So far, his administration has not cut military and security assistance, has extended the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), which was due to expire in 2025, and, surprisingly, he has not announced the reduction of USAID's budget for climate policies; funding that Project 2025, a blueprint for the next conservative presidency by the Heritage Foundation, proposed to rescind altogether (Primorac 2023). Nor has he questioned established partnerships with countries in the region. However, he has not addressed future relations with Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad either after the US had to withdraw troops from the region in the summer of 2024.

Nevertheless, decision-makers in the region remain vigilant because changes in regional policy could come up at any time during his presidency. Much of his administration's "inactivity" can be attributed to the fact that, contrary to expectations, his administration needed significant time to get sorted out and fill many key positions. It is now being reported that representatives from Mauritania and Morocco are expected to pay a state visit to Washington in the coming months to discuss the explosion in the number of terrorist attacks in the Sahel, a development which concerns both countries. Since the US left its base in Niger in September 2024, terrorist groups have expanded their strongholds across the region. However, the crises in the Sahel do not seem to be of interest to Donald Trump, not even the fact of a greater rivalry between the US and Russia in the region. Authorities in Mali,

Burkina Faso and Niger have already realised that cooperation with Russia's Africa Corps is not yielding the expected progress in counterterrorism in their countries, but they do not expect any better kind of security and military partnership from the current US administration.

Implications for transatlantic partners and policy recommendations

The implications of the US presidential elections for US policy towards West Africa and the Sahel are relevant not only for the African region, but also for European countries. Over the past decade, European countries, especially France and Germany, have been supporting the region through various forms of assistance alongside the US. After the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the authorities ended military and security cooperation with European partners, too, and, in the case of France, cut diplomatic ties. Against this background, it is vital for European countries to anticipate the trajectory of US regional policy under a new administration. With regard to the scenarios described in this policy brief, the following recommendations can be derived for US and European policymakers:

If Kamala Harris becomes president, the US and its European partners should improve coordination of their respective development and humanitarian assistance to maximise their impact. Although several international partners launched the Sahel Alliance in 2017, coordination among them has never been ideal, struggling with incoherence and missing effectiveness of the multiple programmes. In addition, the EU should ensure that its activities under the new Gulf of Guinea Security Defence Initiative mission, which it has launched in countries such as Ghana and Benin, are coordinated with the US security and defence partnerships with these countries. They should also align their approaches and streamline their objectives with regard to engaging with the military juntas. This could increase their joint credibility vis-à-vis the military juntas and convince them that they are more reliable and stronger partners in fighting terrorism than Russia.

If Donald Trump becomes president again, European policymakers should coordinate activities with the US in development cooperation, diplomacy and military and security assistance, too. But they should be cautious and make contingency plans in case Trump changes the course of US policy after all. European countries should develop their own policies in the region and not, for instance, rely on US regional assets. Donald Trump demonstrated in his previous term in office that Europe cannot rely on him. Yet, European countries should still try to convince a possible Trump administration that engaging with the Sahel countries is in the US interest. His administration, for its part, should be careful not to underestimate how Russia's activities in the Sahel also threaten US national security.

Note: The respective author is responsible for the content of the article. The contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung and the Europa-Kolleg Hamburg.

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