



POLICY BRIEF

Foreign Powers, Interests, and
Impact on Democratic
Consolidation in West Africa'

Overview

This policy brief examines the growing influence of foreign powers in West Africa, highlighting the implications for democratic governance, sovereignty, and regional stability. It also provides actionable recommendations for policymakers and civil society actors.

Introduction

West Africa has become a key arena of geopolitical competition, as both traditional and emerging powers expand their strategic and economic influence in the region.

In a context marked by democratic backsliding and persistent security challenges, actors such as China, Russia, Türkiye, the Gulf States, Algeria, and Morocco are deploying varied engagement strategies driven by commercial, strategic, and ideological motives.

This policy brief presents insights from a baseline study by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development's (CDD-Ghana) International Desk, which maps the presence, interests, and influence of these foreign powers and analyzes their impact on democratic governance, state sovereignty, and regional stability.

It aims to guide policymakers, regional bodies, civil society, and global partners by highlighting key trends and proposing policy options to strengthen Africa's agency and support democratic resilience.

Background & Context

West Africa faces a convergence of interlinked crises; democratic erosion, unconstitutional power shifts, violent extremism, and deepening economic hardship. These internal pressures are unfolding in parallel with a surge in foreign engagement, as both Western and non-Western actors seek to expand their influence. Against the backdrop of a contested liberal international order, powers such as China, Russia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco are scaling up bilateral relations across the region.

These States pursue varied strategic goals—resource access, political leverage, ideological promotion, and soft power expansion—through channels such as investment, aid, arms transfers, religious diplomacy, and security partnerships. This intensified engagement is reshaping the architecture of governance and diplomacy in West Africa.

While foreign involvement is not inherently destabilizing, its opaque and transactional character raises urgent questions about sovereignty, institutional accountability, and the durability of democratic norms and peacebuilding efforts.

This baseline study provides a comparative, evidence-driven assessment of foreign influence across eight strategically significant West African countries: Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal.



Selected for their **political weight, economic scale, and geostrategic importance**, these countries offer a critical lens through which we examine how external actors shape governance, affect sovereignty, and influence regional stability.

The study also outlines safeguards and policy options aimed at reinforcing democratic resilience and inclusive development.

This study addresses four core questions:

01.

What strategic interests and ideological narratives drive foreign engagement in West Africa?

02.

What is the scale, nature, and impact of foreign powers' economic, security, development, and cultural activities?

03.

What mechanisms do foreign actors use to advance their influence in domestic and regional politics?

04.

How do these engagements vary in their implications for democratic governance, human rights, and regional stability?

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed qualitative approach, complemented by empirical data analysis. A comprehensive literature review of academic studies, policy briefs, think tank publications, and government reports provided foundational insights into the strategic interests and operational modalities of foreign actors in West Africa.

This was complemented by a media content analysis, which examined how foreign engagements are portrayed and contested in both local and international media, particularly in relation to governance, legitimacy, and sovereignty.

To ground the analysis in empirical evidence, the study examined quantitative data from global datasets including the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), Afrobarometer, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (OECD), and the World Bank. These sources helped identify patterns related to conflict dynamics, aid flows, governance performance, and public sentiment across countries in the region.

In addition, between August and November 2024, key informant interviews were conducted with regional and international experts from France, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Belgium, Türkiye, Germany, Ghana, Sweden, Mali, and Senegal. Respondents, including policy analysts, civil society leaders, scholars, diplomats, and former government officials, provided critical perspectives and helped triangulate the findings from the documentary and data analysis.

Finally, the study applied a case-based comparative analysis across eight focus countries to identify both common patterns and country-specific dynamics.

Limitations & Mitigation

This research faced three main challenges:

- Limited access to expert perspectives from Gulf and North African States
- Geographic variability across the region
- Complexities in cross-country comparisons due to differing political, social, and security contexts

These were mitigated through an adaptive methodological framework that combined qualitative case studies with quantitative insights.

Analysis

Key Findings

The study is structured into three core sections, each analyzing a distinct dimension of foreign engagement in West Africa.

Section 1: Strategic Interests, Engagement Modalities, and Political Maneuvering



France continues to maintain extensive political, economic, and military ties in West Africa, particularly through **historical relationships, trade agreements, and military cooperation**.

However, these ties are increasingly strained, with rising anti-French policy sentiments, particularly in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These sentiments stem from a combination of historical grievances, dissatisfaction with France's continued military presence, and perceived interference in internal affairs, which has led to a growing backlash against French influence in the region.

This shift has forced France to adopt a lower-profile strategy, relying on discreet channels such as engaging with the African diaspora, civil society actors, and independent media to sustain its influence.

Despite these efforts, deep-rooted opposition to France's military presence and policies persists, complicating its ability to maintain influence. France's evolving strategy reflects a cautious and reactive adaptation to the changing political dynamics in West Africa.



China has emerged as a key actor in West Africa through **economic diplomacy** focused on **infrastructure investment, trade, and development aid**. Its engagement is anchored in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), driven by infrastructure-for-resources deals, concessional loans, and the activities of state-owned enterprises in sectors like construction and extractives.

China's policy of non-interference allows it to work with a range of regimes, democratic and military, without appearing to challenge domestic political structures. This has widened its influence, particularly in Nigeria, Ghana, and Guinea, where it is viewed as a critical development partner.

Beyond economics, China is expanding its media and cultural presence. Confucius Institutes, journalist training programs, and partnerships with local media outlets are central to this strategy. State-backed platforms like Xinhua and CGTN operate across several countries, promoting pro-Beijing narratives. While countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal have resisted elements of China's media outreach, citing concerns over press freedom, its media footprint continues to grow.

China's model, characterized by opaque loans, elite-centered partnerships, and institutional bypass, raises concerns about debt sustainability, elite capture, and limited public oversight. Yet its objectives remain strategic: to entrench its status as a global power and leader of the Global South while deepening its influence in a region rich in resources and geopolitical value.



Russia has entrenched itself as a major external actor in West Africa, especially, in the Sahel, by offering alternative security arrangements that challenge the Western-led liberal order.

Unlike other powers, Russia invests little in development aid. Its approach centers on **military cooperation**—arms sales, bilateral security deals, and the deployment of private military contractors, notably the Wagner Group, now rebranded as Africa Corps. These forces often operate in exchange for mining concessions, expanding Russia's economic reach in resource-rich countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic (CAR).

Russia also uses disinformation to consolidate influence. Its strategy includes State-affiliated media, AI-generated content, and coordinated campaigns on social platforms to spread anti-Western, anti-democracy narratives.

These operations promote anti-Western and anti-democracy narratives, sow distrust in multilateral institutions, and amplify pro-junta and pro-Kremlin messaging, particularly in francophone Sahelian States.

By positioning itself as a partner free of political conditions, Russia appeals to regimes alienated by Western demands for democratic reform. This narrative helps entrench authoritarianism, shrink civic space, and destabilize democratic norms. Russian mercenaries have been linked to widespread human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, intimidation, and repression, with little accountability.

Russia's strategy in West Africa leverages geostrategic opportunism, transactional security partnerships, and information warfare to gain influence, extract resources, and weaken democratic institutions, shifting the regional balance in favor of authoritarian resilience and away from democratic governance.



Türkiye's expanding role in West Africa is rooted in its "Africa Opening" policy, launched in 2005 to position itself as a strategic actor in the Global South. Its approach blends **economic diplomacy, humanitarian aid, defense partnerships, and cultural-religious engagement**, enabling it to build strong bilateral ties without replicating the traditional conditionalities attached to Western assistance.

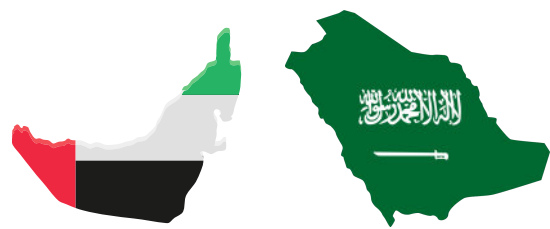
Through its soft power strategy, Türkiye has expanded its influence via education (scholarships and training programs), support for Islamic institutions, Turkish-language media partnerships, and outreach through agencies such as TİKA and the Diyanet.

These efforts resonate particularly in Muslim-majority countries such as Niger, Mali, Senegal, and Guinea, where religious and cultural affinities deepen public connections.

On security, Türkiye has emerged as a reliable defense partner through drone sales and security training by offering cost-effective alternatives to Western suppliers.

While Türkiye does not overtly engage in disinformation campaigns like Russia or China, its state-affiliated media outlets occasionally promote narratives critical of Western powers, especially France, contributing to shifts in public sentiment.

Türkiye's aid and cooperation frameworks do not emphasize governance or human rights, a stance that may enable authoritarian consolidation and reduce democratic accountability. Yet its model, what some term the "Turkish Way", is largely framed as mutually beneficial and non-interventionist, earning Türkiye a reputation as a pragmatic and adaptive partner in an increasingly multipolar West African geopolitical space.

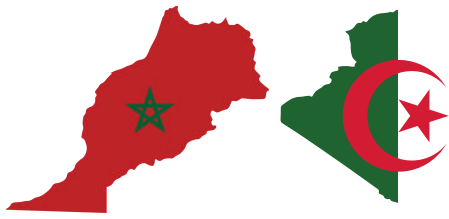


The Gulf States, particularly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, have deepened their presence in West Africa through a mix of strategic investment, religious outreach, and diplomatic engagement. Their involvement, framed as development partnerships, focuses on **infrastructure, energy, construction**, and **trade**, often supported by sovereign wealth funds and Gulf-based financial institutions.

This economic engagement is reinforced by soft power efforts, notably the expansion of Islamic education, religious charities, and cultural diplomacy. Through these efforts, Gulf countries aim to solidify ideological and religious affinities, particularly in Muslim-majority States, thereby strengthening their long-term influence within the region's social fabric.

Beyond finance, Gulf States use security cooperation and high-level investment forums to present themselves as stable and pragmatic partners. However, concerns persist over the opaque nature of some Gulf-backed religious charities, particularly around potential links to extremist networks, though no confirmed direct involvement has been established.

Unlike Russia or China, Gulf actors do not engage in disinformation or media manipulation. Instead, they rely on elite diplomacy and religious legitimacy to shape influence. While this model avoids direct political interference, it may reinforce conservative social norms and support regimes with limited democratic accountability.



Algeria and Morocco are emerging as influential external actors in West Africa, leveraging historical ties, economic interests, and diplomatic engagement to shape the region's political and security dynamics.

Algeria's influence is rooted in its legacy of anti-colonial solidarity and a security-driven approach. It prioritizes **counterterrorism, military cooperation, and peacekeeping**, particularly in the Sahel. The North African country positions itself as a stabilizing force while defending its geopolitical interests, including support for the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, an issue that continues to fuel tensions with Morocco.

Morocco, on the other hand, focuses on **economic diplomacy** and **political reintegration** into African institutions. It has invested in various sectors, including agriculture, banking, infrastructure, and renewable energy. Morocco's re-entry into the African Union (AU) in 2017 and its bid to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) signal its intent to deepen engagement in West Africa and counterbalance Algeria's influence. The Kingdom also acts as a diplomatic intermediary between Western actors and military-led regimes in the Sahel.

Although both countries pursue their influence largely through State-to-State and elite diplomacy, their engagement strategy varies significantly in scope and objectives.

Their growing rivalry adds complexity to regional geopolitics, especially as West Africa contends with insecurity, democratic fragility, and shifting alliances.

Section 2: Impact on Governance and Regional Stability

2.1. Implications for the Quality of Governance

A. Economic and Political Implications

Foreign powers are significantly shaping West Africa's economic landscape through large-scale infrastructure projects and regional integration efforts.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is central to this push, with the financing railways, roads, and power plants, most notably in Nigeria. Projects like the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Highway aim to improve cross-border trade by connecting key coastal economies.

The European Union's (EU) Global Gateway and Türkiye's infrastructure investments are also contributing to the region's development. These efforts have helped attract foreign direct investment, expand connectivity, and stimulate growth in transport, energy, and construction sectors.

Dependency on foreign powers brings clear risks alongside economic benefits. Investments from China, Türkiye, and the Gulf States often bypass political conditionalities tied to Western aid. This can weaken transparency and accountability. In Guinea, for example, China's large-scale infrastructure deals have faced criticism for operating without sufficient oversight, raising concerns about elite capture and public debt.

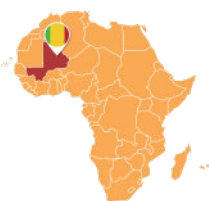
The influx of foreign capital from China, Türkiye, and the Gulf States, which often comes without conditionalities and is shrouded in opacity, also creates opportunities for corruption.

Funds intended for development are frequently diverted to political elites, reinforcing patronage networks and undermining democratic institutions. This pattern risks normalizing opaque governance and reducing incentives for reform, especially in contexts where public institutions are already fragile.

B. Security Implications

Spotlight on the three Sahelian military States: Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso

Security-related interventions by external actors in the Sahel (including France, the EU, the U.S., and Russia) have had mixed outcomes, with both positive and negative consequences for governance and democratic norms.



Mali's pivot toward Russia and the Wagner Group marks a major shift in its foreign policy following strained ties with France.

While Russian forces have enhanced the military's operational capacity through personnel, arms, and training, this partnership comes with serious trade-offs.

There are increasing concerns about human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, and increasing civilian casualties.

At the same time, Mali's ruling junta has continued to extend its rule, postponing elections and cracking down on media freedom, which raises concerns about autocratic consolidation and the weakening of democratic institutions.



Burkina Faso shares a similar trajectory. Following the 2022 military coup, the junta has shifted its focus away from French security partnerships and has aligned more closely with Russia. The presence of the Africa Corps (linked to Wagner) in the country reflects its growing shift toward Moscow. This alignment is accompanied by increasing restrictions on civil liberties, media crackdowns, and the extension of the military-led transition period.

These developments demonstrate a decline in democratic prospects, as civil society is stifled, political activities are banned, media freedoms are restricted and censored, while opposition voices are silenced and people who are critical of the government are conscripted to the war front to fight jihadists.



In **Niger**, the influence of France has waned, with the junta increasingly turning to Russia. The strategic location of Niger, along with its rich natural resources, makes it a highly important player in the region. The shift away from France to Russia, following the junta's severing of ties with some countries from the West, complicates the options for traditional Western actors. Russian engagement, through military support and information campaigns, is positioned as a counterbalance to Western dominance, further entrenching authoritarianism in the Sahel.

Russia's Shadow in West Africa

Russia's expanding footprint in West Africa, most notably through the Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger marks a deliberate and dangerous recalibration of influence. These security partnerships are often secured through opaque concessions in natural resources, bypassing institutional oversight and deepening elite entrenchment. In return, Russia offers regime protection and military support without any pretence of democratic accountability.

This model accelerates democratic erosion. By aligning with military juntas, Russia shields them from international pressure and amplifies anti-Western sentiment. Its disinformation campaigns, often AI-generated and pushed through local proxies and State media, manipulate public opinion and frame Western democracies as neo-imperial aggressors.

As Western engagement falters, Russia fills the void with a narrative of non-interference and partnership. But this approach undermines democratic recovery, legitimizes authoritarian rule, and weakens regional bodies like ECOWAS.

The result is a shrinking civic space, delayed electoral processes, and fragile rule of law. Russia's influence in West Africa is not just opportunistic, it is systematically destabilizing.

Spotlight on coastal West African countries: Guinea, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Ghana

The geopolitical landscape in West Africa, particularly in the coastal countries, is being significantly shaped by the involvement of global powers, including France, Russia, China, and the United States (U.S.). These countries have diverse and complex impacts on the region's stability and democratic governance, as seen in Guinea, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and other nations.



In **Guinea**, the 2021 military coup marked a shift in foreign relations. France, historically influential as Guinea's former colonial power, has seen its influence wane, with growing anti-French policy sentiment across the region. In contrast, Russia has stepped in, providing diplomatic and military support to the junta, positioning itself as an alternative to Western influence.

However, Russia's backing of authoritarian regimes raises concerns about the country's democratic future, particularly with restrictions on media and civil liberties, undermining political pluralism.



Nigeria faces growing security threats due to instability in neighboring Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, worsened by the rise of armed non-state actors. Russia's support for authoritarian regimes in the region risks deepening this instability and undermining regional coordination.

While Nigeria maintains strong ties with Western powers, tensions over issues like the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill have strained these relationships. The increasing influence of Russian-backed actors could further destabilize Nigeria by fueling internal conflicts and complicating its foreign policy position.



Côte d'Ivoire faces increasing pressure as regional instability spreads, with potential implications for internal cohesion and democratic governance. France continues to support President Ouattara's government, which has come under criticism for state interference, particularly during electoral periods.

Meanwhile, Russia's growing influence in neighboring Burkina Faso, now a key partner of the military-led regime - has contributed to an emerging geopolitical divide in the region. The strained relations between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, compounded by their alignment with rival external powers, risk inflaming tensions and complicating efforts at regional cooperation.

The rising anti-French policy sentiment and its spillover effect in Cote d'Ivoire, fueled in part by regional disinformation and the shifting allegiances of neighboring states, could deepen political polarization and challenge the stability of its democratic institutions



Senegal, historically a model of democratic stability, is now experiencing a shift under President Bassirou Diomaye Faye. His government has distanced itself from French influence, especially after announcing plans to close French military bases in 2024.

Although Senegal remains cautious about Russia, regional instability and the presence of Russian-backed mercenaries raise security risks. These pressures could force Senegal to reassess its foreign policy and security partnerships, potentially impacting its democratic trajectory.



Ghana, long seen as a beacon of democratic stability in West Africa, now faces mounting pressures from the intensifying great power competition in the Sahel. As Russia deepens its partnerships with military regimes in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, the risk of insecurity and ideological spillover across Ghana's northern borders is rising.

Although the country has maintained a principled, multilateral stance rooted in democratic norms, growing threats from jihadist groups, arms trafficking, and regional instability may force a shift toward more securitized partnerships, potentially at odds with its democratic values. Ghana's position as a regional anchor could also be strained by a widening geopolitical divide between Western-aligned coastal States and Russian-backed transitional regimes.

To preserve its democratic trajectory and leadership role, Ghana must strengthen internal resilience through enhanced border security, democratic oversight of the security sector, and active support for coordinated regional responses grounded in inclusive governance and strategic autonomy.

Coastal West Africa Democracy Index Trends

The 2023 Democracy Index reveals a measurable decline in democracy across coastal West African countries, influenced in part by foreign engagement and internal dynamics.

Guinea, categorized as an authoritarian regime, saw its score fall from 2.32 in 2022 to 2.21 in 2023, ranking 145th globally and 37th in Africa.

Ghana, long seen as a democratic leader, scored 6.30 in 2023, down from 6.43 the previous year. It ranked 65th globally and 6th regionally, maintaining its classification as a "flawed democracy" despite its strong record of peaceful transitions since 1992.

Nigeria retained a score of 4.23 but improved slightly in rank, moving from 105th to 104th globally. Its 2023 elections, however, were marred by credibility issues and low turnout—just 26.72% of registered voters participated.

Senegal scored 5.48, dropping from 5.72 in 2022, and ranked 83rd globally and 11th regionally. Recent constitutional and political tensions point to a gradual erosion of its democratic standing.

Côte d'Ivoire's score held at 4.22, but its global rank slipped from 102nd to 105th, indicating stagnation in democratic development.

Citizens' Perceptions of Democracy in West Africa

The Afrobarometer Round 9 and 10 surveys show complex and shifting attitudes toward democracy in West Africa:

Support for democracy has declined in several countries. Between 2014–15 and 2021–22, preference for democracy dropped by

- 36% in Mali
- 26% in Burkina Faso
- 15% in Guinea

■■■➡ Côte d'Ivoire shows a small decrease in rejection of one-party rule—down from 88% in 2013 to 84% in 2024.

■■■➡ In contrast, rejection of one-party rule has slightly increased in Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana.

■■■➡ Overall, democracy remains the preferred system. In 2023, nearly 70% of respondents across 34 African countries said they favor democracy.

■■■➡ Even in military-ruled States like Niger and Mali, support for democracy persists, though there's a growing willingness to accept alternative forms of leadership due to frustrations with poor governance.

■■■➡ Military rule is still broadly rejected, except in some cases:

- In Burkina Faso, support for military rule now exceeds opposition.
- In Mali, rejection dropped from 62% in 2020 to 18% in 2022.
- In Niger, rejection fell from 65% to 44% over the same period.

■■■➡ In Guinea, which is under military rule, 63.8% of the population disagrees with the military government, and 72% oppose the suppression of elections and parliament.

One expert interviewed in this study suggests that Africa's democratic backsliding is more about disillusionment with the West's election-focused model than it is about foreign influence.

A key insight from these findings Citizens are frustrated with corruption, insecurity, and ineffective leadership. Military regimes may seem appealing in the short-term, but data from Guinea and Mali shows that their popularity fades, especially when they restrict civil freedoms.

For democracy to survive, governments must deliver on security, accountability, and justice, not just elections.

2.2. Implications for West African Regional Stability

Foreign engagement in West Africa presents a dual reality for regional stability. On one hand, infrastructure investments by China, Türkiye, and others contribute to economic development, poverty reduction, and integration. On the other, the security dynamics generated by these relationships are more complex and often destabilizing.

Security cooperation with external powers has enabled States like Mali and Burkina Faso to acquire advanced military capabilities, including Turkish drones and Russian weapons, which have strengthened their tactical responses to insurgencies. However, these gains are often offset by the fragmentation produced by overlapping foreign interests.

The proliferation of actors, including Russia, China, France, the U.S., and Gulf States, has created a crowded security arena where rival powers support competing political and military factions. This has deepened polarization and fueled proxy rivalries, as seen in Mali's shift from French to Russian backing.

Such alignments undermine regional organizations like ECOWAS, which has historically promoted democratic governance and stability. As member states in the Sahel move away from ECOWAS and closer to alternative partners, regional cohesion erodes. The weakening of ECOWAS reduces its ability to respond effectively to emerging crises, with spillover effects threatening coastal democracies such as Ghana.

The increase in military assistance from global powers, while addressing immediate security threats, fails to tackle the core drivers of instability, such as ethnic tensions, economic inequality, and governance deficits. Also, ideological influences from Gulf States have further complicated internal dynamics, introducing religious tensions that intersect with local grievances.

The reliance on foreign military assistance also causes structural dependency. For example, the withdrawal of French forces from Mali and Burkina Faso left local security forces ill-equipped to handle the insurgency, highlighting the dangers of relying too heavily on external powers.

Russian Propaganda

Russia has increasingly relied on disinformation and information warfare as key tools to expand its influence in West Africa, particularly in states facing governance or security crises.

Through online media campaigns, proxy outlets, and local influencers, Russian-linked actors promote anti-Western, anti-democratic, and pro-authoritarian narratives, often framing Russia as a more reliable and sovereign-friendly partner compared to Western powers.

These campaigns have been especially potent in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where they fuel anti-French sentiment, and in coastal West Africa, delegitimizing regional organizations like ECOWAS, and eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

By exploiting local grievances and amplifying conspiracy theories, such disinformation efforts not only distort public discourse but also create fertile ground for authoritarian consolidation and external manipulation.

In sum, while foreign powers fill strategic vacuums and offer tactical advantages, their competitive presence undermines regional institutions, empowers illiberal actors, and often exacerbates the structural vulnerabilities they claim to address. The cumulative effect is a fragmented security environment where short-term gains come at the cost of long-term stability.

Section 3: Recommendations

Western External Partners

Support African-led security initiatives and Prevent Power Vacuums

Western powers must avoid abrupt disengagements that create openings for malign actors like Russia. Instead of substituting African agency, they should invest in African-led security efforts through targeted training, resources, and intelligence sharing while addressing the root causes of poverty, poor governance, and inequality. A strategic, locally anchored approach is key to sustainable peace and democratic stability.

Promote Inclusive Governance Beyond Elections

Democracy promotion must go beyond periodic elections. Western partners should support long-term governance reforms, equity, and public service delivery tailored to local needs. Conditionalities must be coherent and country-specific, fostering trust and genuine democratic resilience through collaboration with civil society and reform-minded leaders.

Rebalancing Western Engagement

As authoritarian powers gain ground, Western engagement must be reoriented around inclusive, multilateral diplomacy that respects African sovereignty. Countries like Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands among others which are unburdened by colonial legacies should be invited to play a major role in supporting democratic entrenchment in West Africa.

Their principled engagement can counter autocratic influence and reinforce democratic norms across the region.

Pro-democracy Organizations

Deepen Civic Engagement, Democracy Education & Grassroots Mobilization

As democratic space narrows under growing external influence, pro-democracy groups must prioritize sustained civic engagement and democracy education. By expanding grassroots mobilization and leveraging digital tools and community platforms, they can raise public awareness of democratic principles, citizen rights, and the dangers of authoritarianism.

Building democratic consciousness from the ground up is essential to fostering long-term democratic resilience.

Promote Regional Cooperation and Peer Accountability

Stronger alliances with regional bodies like ECOWAS and the African Union are essential to uphold democratic norms. Pro-democracy networks should advocate for the revitalization and effective use of regional mechanisms for democratic monitoring and enforcement.

Institutions such as the ECOWAS Parliament, the ECOWAS Court of Justice, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the African Peer Review Mechanism must be empowered to hold governments accountable.

Civil society platforms, such as WADEMOS, should be leveraged to amplify regional solidarity, coordinate responses to democratic backsliding, and sustain pressure for adherence to constitutional rule and democratic governance.

Advocate for Democracy-Centered Foreign Policy

Civil society must push governments to prioritize democratic values in foreign relations. By engaging both African and external actors, they can help shape foreign policy that safeguards national sovereignty, human rights, and transparency over external geopolitical agendas.

Domestic pro-democracy organizations working within the subregion should be encouraged to work to ensure that their governments' foreign policies prioritize the interests of African citizens and the promotion of democracy, rather than the geopolitical objectives of external powers.

These organizations may collaborate with national governments and regional policymakers to advocate for foreign policies that focus on human rights, democracy, and transparency.

By engaging both African and Western powers diplomatically, pro-democracy groups can help shape policies that safeguard the region's democratic institutions from undue external influence. This balanced foreign policy approach will enable cooperation with external powers while ensuring that African nations maintain control over their own democratic futures.

Counter Disinformation and Anti-Democracy Narratives

Pro-democracy organizations must proactively confront the surge in disinformation, including AI-generated content and propaganda campaigns that erode public trust in democratic institutions. These narratives promote authoritarianism and delegitimize democratic processes.

Civil society groups should invest in digital literacy campaigns, real-time fact-checking, and community-based counter-narratives that uphold democratic values. Partnerships with independent media, tech platforms, and international watchdogs are essential to detect, expose, and neutralize false narratives. Safeguarding the information space is now central to defending democracy in West Africa.

Rethink International Democracy Support

Amid growing uncertainty in global democracy assistance, exacerbated by the scaling down of USAID and wavering commitments from traditional donors, there is an urgent need to recalibrate international support for democracy in West Africa. Democracy promotion efforts must adapt to this shifting landscape by expanding beyond legacy actors and focusing more deliberately on fragile and transitioning contexts. Greater investment from a broader array of partners, such as Open Society Foundations, Sida, NORAD, and other emerging donors, can help sustain democratic resilience and ensure that support is better aligned with regional needs and realities.

Conclusion

The increasing presence of foreign powers in West and Central Africa is reshaping regional geopolitics, with mixed consequences for governance, peace, and sovereignty. While some engagements support State capacity and development, others empower authoritarian actors, fragment regional cooperation, and undermine democratic norms.

Addressing these challenges require a coordinated regional response that upholds transparency, accountability, and democratic values. By strengthening institutions, civil society, and regional norms, West Africa can assert greater agency in shaping foreign engagements that advance inclusive development and lasting stability.



About the Author

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He coordinates the Center's International Desk activities and leads the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network's (WADEMOS) Sahel and Political Transitions Initiative. Yeboah also produces the Eye on West Africa (EWA), a bi-weekly bulletin tracking political and governance trends across the region.

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