

STATEMENT OF
CHIDI BLYDEN
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
FOR AFRICAN AFFAIRS
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
SAHEL POLICY
July 12, 2022

Thank you Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and Members of the Committee. It is an honor to testify before you today, alongside Assistant Secretary Phee, to discuss the Department of Defense (DoD) Sahel Policy and how DoD is working to align its activities within the United States' whole-of-government Sahel Strategy.

The National Defense Strategy (NDS) outlines three high-level security priorities in Africa, namely: (1) countering violent extremist organizations (VEOs) that pose a threat to the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests; (2) strengthening allies and partners to support mutual security objectives; and, (3) addressing targeted strategic competition concerns that present a military risk to the United States. In the Sahel, these three priorities intersect in a manner that requires not only an *integrated* approach, but a *whole-of-government* approach.

Over the past six months we have seen the intersection of these three challenges in the Sahel has resulted in military coups, armed coup attempts, unconstitutional political transitions, and democratic backsliding in West Africa; the spread of VEOs and an exponential increase in their attacks; the destabilizing presence of Russia's Wagner Group; and the withdrawal of French and other allied forces from Mali. These challenges transcend national borders, and therefore require

a coordinated regional approach. As such, it would behoove us to address them together with our African partners.

VEOs

VEOs are increasingly exploiting power vacuums, instability, local tensions, and weak government institutions and governing practices. These groups jeopardize stability, democracy, and peace, which further provides opportunities for extremism to proliferate, creating a vicious feedback loop that is fueled by a lack of good governance and human rights accountability.

When governments struggle to maintain security, deliver essential services, uphold humanitarian principles, or provide economic opportunities in conflict environments, and neglect or actively press communities, conditions are ripe for VEOs to exploit and appeal to vulnerable and unprotected marginalized populations, thus enabling their recruitment efforts to be more effective.

Further, illicit networks that traffic drugs, weapons, and persons across the continent create the conditions that empower VEOs and serve as lucrative sources of revenue for these groups and which allows for their expansion across the continent. There are over a dozen active ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates on the continent, from the Sahel to the Lake Chad Basin, from Somalia to the DRC, from northern Mozambique to southern Libya. These groups vary in their intent and capability to attack U.S. interests, with those in the Sahel among the most capable.

In the Sahel we have seen the rapid expansion and open movement of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) within Mali, into neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, and southward to West African littoral states with attacks in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Togo. VEOs continue to spread towards coastal West Africa, and if

left unchecked, will add to the already existing security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea. DoD is working with State and USAID to develop programs for Coastal West Africa countries as part of the Global Fragility Act (GFA) and the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. Strategy implementation in Coastal West Africa will help bolster coastal states against the encroachment of VEOs from the Sahel. An already complex situation in Mali has been exacerbated by the presence of Russia-backed Wagner Group. Additionally, the withdrawal of forces under the French Operation BARKHANE, including Task Force TAKUBA, and the critical enablers Operation BARKHANE provides to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), pose increased challenges for the region. Given these new and increasing challenges, we – the U.S., allies, and especially our African partners – need to consider the future of our counterterrorism efforts. As we have seen in other key theaters, failing to understand root causes at local levels and understand our partners, and especially their will to fight, can have significant consequences. We need to integrate our entire approach in the Sahel with our African partners or risk undermining our own efforts, providing additional opportunities for VEOs and strategic competitors to gain access and influence.

Niger is one of our most crucial security partners in the Sahel, and continues to set the example of democracy in the region. We need to continue to support the Government of Niger as our partnership with them is critical to success in the region.

In Mauritania we hope to increase engagement in professionalization engagements with Sahel partners. Given its lengthy border with Mali, and with Nouakchott hosting the G5 Sahel Defense College, bringing Mauritania into a more active role as part of the broader Sahel strategy is important.

While Chad remains one of the most capable partners in the region and N'Djamena is the new host of the G5 Sahel Headquarters, ending U.S. security cooperation has affected our bilateral engagement. As the Transitional Military Council works towards a return to democratically elected and civilian-led government, we remain committed to supporting the Chadian people. Chad was one of only six countries on the African continent to endorse Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council. Chad is faced by terrorist threats, humanitarian crises, and malign Russian influence in its own region. The United States has the potential to provide meaningful security cooperation to train Chad's military and civilian services, especially given its role as a troop contributor in UN and regional peace operations.

U.S. Relationships in the Sahel

We are encouraging our European allies operating in the Sahel to adopt a similar approach – one that seeks solutions that are integrated, whole-of-government and, African-led. We assess that unilateral military action is insufficient to address the scope of threats we face on the continent. And although the continent is awash in new initiatives, it would truly benefit from better management of the international communities' support to our partners and their locally supported efforts.

To this end, we continue to work to better understand our partners' security needs, designing and implementing our programs and engagements along mutual priorities. Through improved management of these processes, and with Africans in the lead, together we can tackle VEOs, support the growth of good governance, and reduce instability on the continent.

As we examine a new approach in the Sahel, it is critical for us to work with our African partners in order to implement a shared vision for the future of African security. Our role is to enable our

African partners to be successful in owning their own security, for their benefit and ours. And the best way to help them own their own security is to allow them to lead, shaping our support to their efforts.

Strategic Competition

People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia

Our adversaries are well aware of Africa's strategic potential and are devoting resources and time to strengthen their partnerships on the continent. As part of its engagement, Russia and the PRC routinely provide training and defense articles to African nations. While our African partners have stated repeatedly they prefer our training and defense articles, they turn to our competitors when we are not responsive to their requests. We must work to be more responsive and more present if we are to succeed in this space.

Let us not forget the PRC seeks to expand its access, and PRC basing on the continent remains a key concern. As this committee is probably aware, the PRC seeks to open additional bases, tying their commercial seaport investments in East, West and Southern Africa closely with involvement by Chinese military forces in order to further their geo-strategic interests.

PRC and Russian security investments in Africa are also largely unencumbered by international norms. These investments pose a significant challenge to our own security investments, which must meet rigorous standards in accordance with U.S. values, including democracy, human rights, and internationally accepted legal constructs. Furthermore, PRC and Russian security assistance often prioritizes regime preservation over long-term institutional capacity building, which undermines stability as well as good governance and respect for human rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sahel is a region where our three NDS priorities in Africa intersect, requiring an integrated, whole-of-government approach that leverages other allies and partners, but puts our African partners in the lead with respect to restoring and preserving security on the continent.

Thank you.