

## Competing in the Sahel Today Part I by MAJ Vernon Logan



Photo from: UN.org

In the new age of Great Power Competition the most important thing to understand is that the world is going through a dramatic shift. The present U.S. Presidential Administration concurs with the idea. Growth in competition across nation-state and non-state actors over the past few decades has become more prevalent through the advent of easily accessible and inexpensive technology. This fact coupled with the multilayered instability, makes the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin region a prime area of opportunity for competition. The current guidance in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (NSSG) has laid new groundwork for the United States' ability to continue planning and continue to move forward in a deliberate manner for Africa, but only broad strokes. What may be being overlooked or still downplayed is the long-term importance of the Sahel Region of Africa in this new age of competition. In order to be successful in three of its' lines of effort, the United States must make additional strides and invest in the strengthening of partner networks, contain instability by building partner capacity, and improve support for partners in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin to set the theater. With that, the criticality of being able to communicate safely, securely, and consistently in the Sahel is a necessity (Posture Statement to Congress, 2021).



Photo by: SETAF-Africa Public Affairs

U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) remains aligned to the National Security Strategy (NSS) primarily through nested Lines of Effort (1) Strengthen Partner Networks, (2) Enhance Partner Capability, (5) Support Partners in the Sahel & Lake Chad Region, and (6) Set the Theater. It is imperative that, as stated in the NSSCG, “we will partner with dynamic and fast-growing African economies, even as we provide assistance to countries suffering from poor governance, economic distress, health, and food insecurity exacerbated by the pandemic” (The United States Government, 2021). Strains on governments and resources are serious challenges across Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. The challenges of COVID-19, climate change, and economic growth create opportunities for state and non-state actors to insert and promote their agendas as an alternative. The U.S. and its allies seeking to support partners in this distressed environment where almost 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and another 3 million estimated internally displaced people (IDPs) are also competing against other armed groups (OAGs) (The United States Government, 2021).

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In a September 2020 report, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), identified worsening security conditions, supported by the Government of Chad (GoC) declaring a state of emergency in Foully and Kaya departments. In April of this year it was reported that the five-term President of Chad, Idriss Deby, died from wounds sustained in battle with rebels. At the time, USAFRICOM could not confirm exactly how President Deby was killed. This is just one example of the growing instability in the region as governments face the increasing presence of Boko Haram and segments and affiliates of the Islamic State operating in West Africa. The International Crisis Group reported in May of 2021 that one of the key triggers of mass displacement was driven by continued attacks on civilians. Well-armed groups like the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to attack villages as neighboring governments attempt to determine a way head. Instability has been so persistent in the area, that this past May French President Emmanuel Macron suggested that the French are considering removing their roughly 5,000 troops currently supporting the region. These are just a few of the most recent and high profile security incidents related to the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin.



Photo by: ISIS West Africa photo

According to the World Health Organization the Sahel have had relatively low numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths. The already strained governments and infrastructure are still struggling to contain the spread of the disease and treat the infected. Across the six countries of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria there have been a total of 4,330 deaths among 272,667 confirmed cases. With a combined population of around 300 million people, the mostly rural countries have fared well considering that virtually no vaccines have yet made it to some of these countries, who are partnering through the African Union with other countries to establish a vaccine pipeline as soon as possible. New cases are holding near zero. The complexity of caring for the citizenry or the appearance thereof, only emboldens the recruitment efforts of violent extremists in the region as individuals and small groups struggle for stability and survival. This is also a recipe for others, to include U.S. peers and near-peer competitors, to gain additional footing and influence in the region, thus enabling adversaries to stand up anti-Western, anti-American proxies, and potentially paramilitary forces. The best case study that has been referenced consistently during the past decade is still the Russian use of emerging hybrid threat tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) against the country of Georgia. According to the Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, “from the day Georgia regained its independence, it has been subjected to economic, energy and trade blockades, cyberattacks, informational warfare and other types of nonconventional as well as conventional warfare” (Georgian PM Talks, 2021).

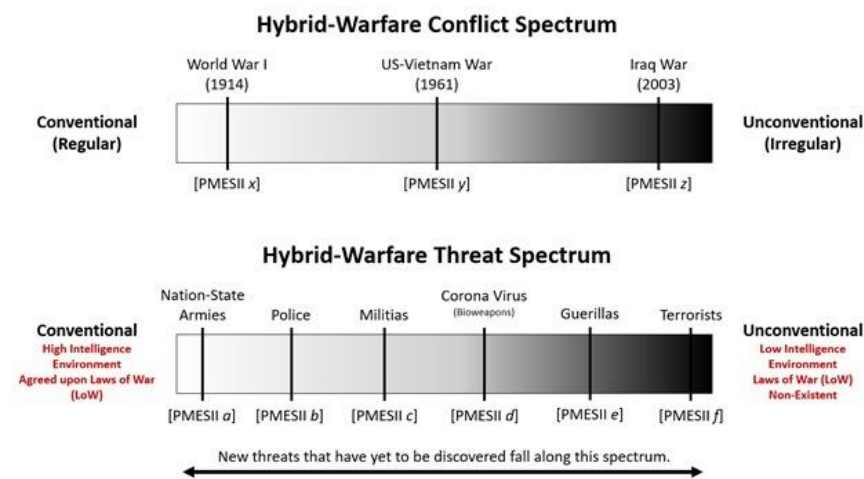
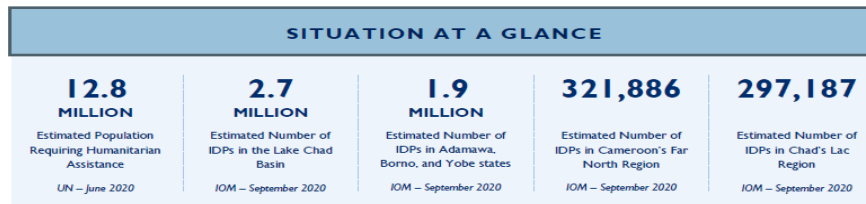


Photo from: Small Wars Journal

The United States ability to work by, with, and through partner forces will require effective communication if success in the Sahel is to be realized. Any Joint Task Force Commander’s ability to direct forces to shoot, move, communicate, and decisively engage the adversary in any battlespace is the only way to be successful in the Sahel. This cannot be limited to kinetic activities. In this region it will be a challenge due to the austere environment, limited communications infrastructure, but also that this area could prove to be a contested environment unlike U.S. Forces have encountered before. Primary, secondary and tertiary communications could all be tested and dependence on satellite communications could become a significant vulnerability.

Commercial cellular and satellite communications have become more essential to United States defense, intelligence, and communications. This would be no different for operating in the Sahel. The challenge here is that competitors like China and Russia have been investing heavily in support of African infrastructure. In the long-term, this could present significant challenges to Western interest on

the continent and in the Sahel. Planners, academics, policymakers and business leaders have not just taken notice of China's involvement in Africa and the Sahel. Recent data estimates Chinese investment in 2018 to have been \$25.7B of the total \$100.8B committed toward African infrastructure development projects. This fact is supported by the number of critical infrastructure projects like major construction, power generation, communications, and roadways financed and executed by Chinese entities and even Chinese personnel. One could make assumptions regarding security concerns associated with any of that infrastructure (Lake Chad Basin, 2020).



- OAGs continue to target civilian populations, as well as humanitarian staff and facilities, particularly in northeastern Nigeria and Cameroon's Far North Region
- Heavy rains since August have led to widespread flooding, exacerbating humanitarian needs throughout the region and causing further displacement
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity and limited humanitarian access to communities in need



Image from: USAID

For USAFRICOM and the Southern European Task Force-Africa (SETAF-AF) to be successful in three of its key lines of effort, additional strides need to be made regarding strengthening partner networks, containing instability through building partner capacity, and improving support for partners in the Sahel & Lake Chad Basin to set the theater. To do this, it is evident that not only training and equipping partners in African, and in the Sahel in particular is necessary, but things that improve the quality of life of the populace and communications infrastructure, will be value-added in capacity building to support established governments and partners. This is a must in order for infrastructure networks and partner networks to mature effectively. Providing or aiding in enabling partners to better plan is critical for their longevity, which is virtually impossible in a constant state of uncertainty. Failing to do this will only further entrench our adversaries, their proxies and supporters in the region, while increasing risks to U.S. Trans-Africa efforts. These risks are reflected in the current instability in countries like Chad, Mali, and Niger as examples. Coups, abrupt and often violent transitions in the leadership or governments in the Sahel create cascading effects of instability across the region. Improving support for partners in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin to set the theater will cost. At the end of the day, China and other adversaries have been able to support their efforts with significant allocations of manpower and financing. Until the United States does the same in a more effective manner, valuable ground will continue to be lost in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, and more so the continent.

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