

The Entanglement of Internal and External Dynamics in Francophone West Africa: Some Perspectives on Near Future Developments

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Abstract

Francophone West African states are undergoing significant transformations. Internal changes are evident in the political sphere. To look ahead to the region's near future, we have sought to decipher current dynamics and determine their likely longevity or potential configuration in the short and medium term. These internal processes seem to be fueled by international issues that, in turn, shape local concerns. Two key factors stand out in defining this near future: the youthfulness of the region's majority population and the rivalries between major global powers. This is a cautious exercise in foresight that does not seek to establish an infallible linear progression, but simply to gather elements in an attempt to outline the contours of the very near future. By examining the implications of these two major factors, we have concluded that this region is set for a turbulent near future, characterized by a strong emphasis on symbolism and political spectacle. It will also be marked by the repercussions of power struggles between major international powers.

Keywords

Nationalisms, Sovereignty, West Africa, Youth, China-Africa

1. Introduction

Francophone West Africa, including Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Benin, and Togo¹, has become one of the world's most contested

¹Mauritania is not included in this study. Furthermore, the region is not treated here as a homogeneous bloc. While the constituent countries share certain similarities in their relations with foreign powers, significant distinctions have recently emerged, as mentioned, particularly with the creation of sub-blocs. The analysis will focus on this at times.

geopolitical arenas. The region is undergoing an historic realignment, marked by the erosion of French influence, the rise of Russia and China, and a recalibrated American presence.

For decades, France maintained dominance through the “*Françafrique*” system with military bases, the *Communauté Financière Africaine* (CFA) franc currency, economic networks, and close ties with local elites (Verschave, 1998). This arrangement has started to collapse in the Sahel. Following coups in Mali (2020–2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), military regimes expelled French troops and ambassadors, ending operations like Barkhane. The region recently split into two blocs, the pro-Russian, sovereigntist *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES) regimes, and coastal states (Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Benin) maintaining diversified Western ties while also asserting greater autonomy. The trend is multi-alignment, African governments increasingly play powers against each other to maximize sovereignty and benefits, ending the era of exclusive Western dominance.

For the past several years, Francophone West Africa has been swept by a wave of nationalist fervor, often described as a “sovereigntist” or “pan-Africanist” moment, whose intensity recalls the independence era of the late 1950s and 1960s. Its epicenter lies in the central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), but its echoes reach Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, and beyond. This fever is mainly above all young and urban, carried by a generation with no memory of colonization but a sense of blocked horizons like unemployment, insecurity, and elites perceived as extraverted (Kouangain, 2015). It is amplified by social media and a transnational network of pan-Africanist influencers, whose discourse blends legitimate grievance, historical memory, and, at times, disinformation.

We appear to be in a situation where internal dynamics strongly impact relations between these states and foreign powers. In turn, the posture of these foreign powers contributes to fueling these internal dynamics within these states. The political evolution of Francophone West African states cannot be interpreted independently of these realities. The transformations are both very profound and constantly evolving, with internal and external dynamics intertwined. Despite the rapid pace of these complex changes, we can attempt to probe the future political landscape of this part of the world. Such work inevitably requires mapping and taking into account the internal dynamics of these states and the trends observed in the attitudes of external powers. The article operationalizes the logic of this reflection through the methods of prospective analysis pioneered by Berger (1964) and formalized by Godet (1997), and through the scenario-planning tradition of Schwartz (1991). The aim is not prediction but the disciplined exploration of plausible near futures for foreign powers—Francophone West Africa relations.

To what extent, and through which combinations of internal renewal and exogenous shock, will foreign powers—West-Francophone Africa relations be transformed in the next future and which variable ultimately carries the greatest causal

weight in determining the final configuration?

We will primarily explore two avenues that appear to us as major variables to consider regarding the evolution of this region. The youth who are the vast majority of the population in Francophone West Africa and China's positioning within the rivalry among major powers appear to us to be fundamental factors that must be taken into account.

In a society predominantly dominated by young people, the logic of political governance should take this major variable into account, or risk being subject to it. The propensity to resort to unconventional forms of political participation, the taste for political spectacle, and the very strong susceptibility to nationalist or sovereigntist tendencies seem to clearly characterize the political orientation of young people in an African society where they constitute the majority. Young people are portrayed to be "impulsive", "impatient" and "imperious", based on research on political generations. Young people need to "burn off their energy", according to the generational life-cycle approach (Braungart & Braungart, 1989). Barnes and Kaase (1979) also empirically demonstrate that younger age cohorts are significantly more likely to approve of and engage in unconventional actions. They framed this as part of a broader cultural shift where younger citizens possess a larger political action repertoire, unlike much older generations. These elements appear to foster a predisposition among young people toward unconventional forms of political participation and action. Viewing politics as a spectacle characterized by dramatic staging that seems to resonate with young people's aspirations plays a part in this dynamic.

In international relations, China has become a dominant player and is growing stronger both globally and in francophone West Africa. The internal dynamics currently observed within Francophone West African states appear favorable to China, and it is taking advantage of this to strengthen its influence there. China deliberately frames its diplomatic presence in direct contrast to the historical baggage of *Françafrique*. Chinese state media and diplomats amplify local anti-Western narratives, positioning Beijing as a respectful, peer-to-peer alternative. By treating West Africa French speaking countries regimes as equal, legitimate sovereign actors on the international stage, Beijing aligns itself directly with the sovereigntist and nationalist demand for strategic autonomy. In their collaborative volume tracking anti-Western narratives in Africa, Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2021) analyze how China deploys narrative warfare. They argue that China skillfully positions itself inside the information ecosystems of Francophone states like Mali, Senegal, and Burkina Faso. By systematically amplifying local grievances against Western military interventions and financial structural adjustments, China shapes an alternative vision of global governance where it stands as the champion of the Global South. Kumar (2026) suggests that the reduction of traditional Western influence facilitates an expanded role for Beijing, as China aligns its state-financed infrastructure projects with domestic demands for material development and sovereignty independent of Western financial conditionalities.

The figures below are aggregated from the UN World Population Prospects 2024 (medium variant) projections in Francophone West Africa².

Year	Total Population (Approx.)	Young People Aged 15 - 35 (Approx.)	Youth Share of Total
2025	~167 - 168 million	~56 - 58 million	~34%
2030	~187 - 189 million	~64 - 66 million	~34% - 35%
2035	~209 - 212 million	~73 - 75 million	~35%
2040	~231 - 235 million	~82 - 85 million	~35% - 36%

The region's population is projected to grow by roughly 40% between 2025 and 2040, one of the fastest growth rates globally. The youth share remains high and relatively stable, reflecting a very young age structure, the median age in most of these countries is between 15 and 19 years. By 2040, young people aged 15 - 35 in the region will roughly equal the entire population of the region in the early 1990s³.

The figures below are approximate reconstructions about China-Francophone West Africa Trade: 2021-2025⁴.

Year	Estimated Total Trade (China French Speaking Countries in W.A.)	Trend/Notes
2021	~US\$19 - 22 billion	Post-COVID rebound; record China-Africa trade year (US\$254 bn continent-wide)
2022	~US\$22 - 25 billion	Commodity price surge (bauxite, cotton, cocoa); China-Africa total hit ~US\$282 bn
2023	~US\$24 - 27 billion	Guinea bauxite exports kept rising; Sahel coups disrupted some flows
2024	~US\$26 - 30 billion	Niger-Benin oil pipeline exports to China began; China-Africa total ~US\$295 bn
2025	~US\$28 - 32 billion (estimate)	Extrapolation; Simandou (Guinea) start-up expected to lift exports further

To develop this work, theoretical approaches that address politics based on symbolism or spectacle seem very useful to us. The same is true of theses that discuss

²These are estimation, the youth (15 - 35) figures in particular are derived from age-structure projections and should be treated as approximations (rounded values). Countries included: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo.

³Data Sources: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division; world Population Prospects 2024.

⁴Data Sources: General Administration of Customs of China (GACC). Bilateral trade figures often differ between Chinese and African national sources by 10% - 20% (due to re-exports, transshipment via Togo/Benin, and valuation methods). Countries included: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo.

the dynamics of rivalries between great powers in the world.

Guriev and Treisman (2022) worked on the functioning of political regimes, particularly those exhibiting authoritarian features. The dominant form of autocracy has shifted from “fear dictatorship” to “spin dictatorship” (rule through manipulation of information, manufactured popularity, and the simulation of democracy). The new form pretends to be democratic with elections, permission of some media, and maintaining constitutional façades. It rules through popularity, engineered by media control and propaganda rather than terror. The new toolkit involves information manipulation as the master tool. Control of television, co-optation of media owners, flooding rather than silencing, and sophisticated framing over crude lies are the new tools. We will attempt to draw inspiration from these theories to analyze the current dynamics taking place in the Francophone West African region.

Related to the rivalries between the major powers in this region, particularly the weakening of the West and the rise of China, we will find inspiration on the work of the neo-realist school of international relations. More specifically, we will focus on the offensive dimension of this school. Offensive realism, developed by Mearsheimer (2014), is an international relations theory arguing that great powers are inherently driven to maximize their power and influence rather than merely maintain security. In an anarchic international system with no overarching authority, states can never be certain of others’ intentions, so they seek dominance to ensure their survival. Mearsheimer’s framework suggests the US-China rivalry is not driven by ideology or misunderstanding, but by the structure of the international system itself. Rising powers expand, and established powers push back. This is why Mearsheimer famously argues that China “cannot rise peacefully”. His thesis will shed light on the game of rivalries observed in Francophone West Africa between Western powers dominated by the United States of America and China.

Our methodology uses specific tools to analyze these complex systems, identify key variables, and build scenarios. As mentioned above, prospective analysis assumes the future is not pre-determined and can be deliberately shaped. We have identified two main drivers as the main internal and external forces: young people demographic weight and China’s influence. Quantitative data concerning the demographic weight of young people in Francophone West Africa and China’s positioning shown above illustrate the respective significance of these variables. It appears to us that there is an interaction between the demographic weight of the youth population and the reconfiguration of international alliances. The demographic weight influences domestic political dynamics, which are shaped by unresolved colonial legacies involving certain international powers. The propensity of young people for unconventional forms of political action is well-established and appears to be fueling current dynamics. The second factor, China’s positioning, capitalizes on this situation; without it, establishing a foothold in its rivals’ former “backyard” would have been far more difficult. These interactions play out

through periods of internal surging nationalist and sovereigntist sentiment and new diplomatic realities in international relations. These dynamics feed off one another, in the sense that internal dynamics feed on international attitudes, whether past or present, and the latter, in turn, are fueled by the former.

As these internal and external dynamics evolve within the sub-region, we may observe the strengthening or weakening of certain mechanisms. The nationalist and sovereigntist sentiments well-documented in academic literature follow specific life cycles: they emerge, gain momentum, and eventually lose steam. This process of decreasing appears inevitable and could be anticipated in the near future, given the dynamics observable in the states concerned. The same applies to the struggles for influence among major global powers. Such rivalries are not new in human history and appear to follow specific cycles and underlying dynamics. We can therefore draw upon historical lessons and the tangible strategies employed by major powers in this competitive arena to gain insight into China's position in Francophone West Africa. Empirical observation and a review of the academic literature make it possible to formulate these projections.

The first part of our article will be focused on the internal dynamics in Francophone West Africa and the second part of our work will focus on new international realities.

2. Nationalism Exacerbation Context and Prospects for Development over the Near Future

The exacerbation of nationalism in West Africa seems to reflect some kind of popular demand for dignity and control after decades of dependency and unmet promises, seized upon by military leaders who need legitimacy and by external powers seeking influence. Its durability in the near future will likely depend on whether sovereigntist governments can deliver security and economic gains, which may either deepen the nationalist mood or eventually erode it.

2.1. The Politics of Symbolism and Spectacle

The socio-political situation in francophone West Africa was very complex during the near past. The early 1980s were dominated by single-party states and military regimes across the region. Côte d'Ivoire under Houphouët-Boigny, Togo under Eyadéma, and Mali under Moussa Traoré. Burkina Faso experienced Thomas Sankara's revolutionary government (1983-1987), which ended with his assassination and Blaise Compaoré's seizure of power. The end of the Cold War triggered a wave of political liberalization. National Conferences in Benin (1990), Mali, and Niger dismantled one-party systems. Benin became a democratic model with peaceful power transfers, while Mali's 1991 revolution ousted Traoré and installed democracy under Alpha Oumar Konaré. However, progress was uneven. Togo's Eyadéma manipulated the process to stay in power, and Niger suffered repeated coups.

This decade following 2000 brought severe security deterioration. The 2011

Libyan collapse and the 2012 Tuareg/jihadist takeover of northern Mali triggered French military intervention. Jihadist violence spread to central Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, killing thousands and displacing millions in the Sahel. Nowadays, the region presented a paradox. Some democratic gains (Senegal, Benin's earlier model, vibrant civil societies) coexisted with democratic backsliding, entrenched poverty, youth unemployment, rapid population growth, and an escalating Sahelian security crisis that increasingly threatened state survival in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

The coup wave in West Francophone Africa is best understood as the delayed collapse of the 1990s democratic settlement. This settlement was externally prompted, economically undermined from birth, captured by elites (Gyimah-Boadi & van de Walle, 2004), and finally broken by an insecurity crisis it could not manage. The 1980-2020 period contributed to the military regimes' rise. These military regimes, and even those democratically elected, thus incorporate the prospect of correcting these past weaknesses. This leads to an intensification of symbolism aimed to mark a very pronounced break with the past. The implementation of this symbolism is accompanied by some kind of "spectacle" policy intended for both domestic and international consumption.

Spectacle politics refers to a form of political practice in which imagery, performance, and dramatic media events take precedence over substantive policy debate and democratic deliberation (Edelman, 1988; Debord, 1994). Politics becomes primarily something to be *watched* rather than *participated in*. It describes the reduction of political life to staged, image-driven performances designed for mass consumption, often at the expense of democratic engagement and policy substance. The instrumentalization of nationalist logics is part of it. According to some academic authors, national identity is manufactured, and therefore is manipulable. Eric Hobsbawm showed how rituals and symbols are deliberately fabricated to naturalize political authority (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990). This is an insight for understanding how contemporary leaders could use national myths. This seems to make a sense in societies that are dominated by young people who prefer non-conventional and spectacular ways of political manifestation or participation.

Since the military coups in Mali (2020-2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), the regimes leading these countries have built their legitimacy on a powerful narrative of sovereignty, pan-Africanism, and anti-colonial liberation. Lacking electoral legitimacy, they seem to substitute it with some kind of revolutionary legitimacy, presenting themselves as liberators from French neocolonialism, Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) interference, and Western exploitation. Expelling French troops, leaving ECOWAS, and denouncing foreign media are framed as sovereign acts.

But this could also be viewed as a removing of external pressure for democratic transitions. The sovereignty discourse also allows these regimes to dismiss criticism as foreign interference or imperialist propaganda. Domestic opponents, journal-

ists, and civil society actors are branded traitors or agents of France, effectively criminalizing dissent in the name of national unity. As we will explain further below, the argument does not deny that anti-French sentiment and demands for real sovereignty reflect legitimate historical grievances. The critique is that these authentic popular aspirations have been captured and weaponized by military elites. Even within states that accept and practice democratic rituals, such as Ivory Coast and Senegal, the propensity to follow this nationalist dynamic is strong. We have thus seen these countries close French military bases on their soil. We maintain that this dynamic seems to resonate positively with the young segment of their populations, which constitutes a large majority and is very sensitive to nationalist and sovereignist sentiments.

The evolution of this nationalist trend presents some complexities. Hannah Arendt's traced how, in their evolution, pan-nationalist movements dissolved citizenship into tribal belonging, preparing populations for mass politics shifting from truth (Arendt, 1951). Robert Paxton's identified the mobilizing passions like victimhood, purity and the cult of the leader through which nationalist grievance becomes authoritarian practice (Paxton, 2004). In this perspective, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have undergone a profound geopolitical and ideological reorientation. A discourse of accusation is addressed to Western powers, held responsible for terrorism, underdevelopment, and neo-colonial domination.

During public speaking engagements, the three governments have repeatedly accused Western powers of sustaining, or even sponsoring, jihadist groups in the Sahel. In August 2022 and again at the United Nations (UN) Security Council in 2023-2024, Malian authorities formally accused France of providing intelligence, weapons, and logistical support to terrorist groups, demanding a special session of the Security Council⁵. After the July 2023 coup in Niger, General Abdourahamane Tiani's CNSP accused France of destabilizing the country, of planning a military intervention (via ECOWAS), and of releasing or protecting terrorist elements⁶. Niamey denounced French military agreements and demanded the departure of French troops, completed in December 2023. Captain Ibrahim Traoré has developed a systematic rhetoric portraying jihadism as an instrument of imperialism, arguing that terrorism appeared in the Sahel only after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Libya in 2011 and that Western powers benefit from the chaos to maintain military presence and access to resources⁷. Beyond security, official discourse attributes poverty and underdevelopment to structural mechanisms of domination. Mining contracts are described as unequal⁸. The development aid is denounced as a tool of dependency and interfer-

⁵<https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/le-mali-saisit-lonu-et-accuse-la-france-d-informer-et-d-armer-des-groupes-terroristes/2663172> (accessed on August 1, 2026)

⁶<https://www.bbc.com/afrique/articles/cgewgdz9v4yo> (accessed on August 1, 2026)

⁷<https://www.dw.com/fr/burkina-faso-les-nouvelles-autorit%C3%A9s-accusent-la-france/a-63308705> (accessed on August 1, 2026)

⁸<https://www.agencecofin.com/actualites-industries/1905-138590-le-niger-annule-une-concession-d-uranium-appartenant-au-francais-orano> (accessed on August 1, 2026)

ence⁹. The three countries have expelled or suspended numerous Western NGOs, media outlets (RFI, France 24, LCI, BBC broadcasts), and diplomats.

Cultural, memorial, and educational institutions are also concerned. Mali removed French as an official language in its new constitution in June 2023, reclassifying it as a working language and elevating national languages. Burkina Faso followed with constitutional revision in December 2023 that made national languages official. Niger adopted Hausa as national language and demoted French in 2025 Charter of Refoundation. We also observed the renaming of streets, avenues, and monuments bearing colonial names, the exaltation of Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso and the commemoration of anti-colonial resistance. These regimes promote traditional and religious values as the promotion of customary authorities, the criticism of “imported Western values”. Thus, Burkina Faso and Mali adopted or announced legislation criminalizing relationships between people of other sexual identities in 2024-2025, presented as a defense of African values.

All of this seems to be part of the symbols of a reconquest of sovereignty and the assertion of nationalism. Frustrations fueled by resentments stemming from past relations between these countries and foreign powers serve as a catalyst for this policy, which is presented as a form of rupture. The Francophone West African states are all affected by this trend, to varying degrees, whether they are governed by military regimes or democratically elected. However, during the process of evolution, weaknesses appear to be emerging and could undermine the mechanism in the short or medium term.

2.2. Performative Exhaustion with the Diminishing Returns of Spectacle

Staging through symbols relies on novelty and shock value. As audiences are repeatedly exposed to dramatic performances, staged crises, and sensational rhetoric, the emotional impact diminishes. What once mobilized attention becomes background noise. This seems to be a dynamic similar to what media scholars call “compassion fatigue” or attention decay (Moeller, 1999; Kinnick et al., 1996). Research on media dynamics reinforces this point. The attention economy literature shows that outrage-based communication suffers from desensitization and outrage fatigue among audiences (Crockett, 2017). While studies about the permanent campaign find that continuous mobilization crowds needed to renew legitimacy (Blumenthal, 1980). Symbolism and spectacle politics are structurally self-undermining. It consumes the very resource it depends on, notably attention and emotional arousal, while failing to deliver the substantive outcomes that sustain long-term legitimacy. Its appeal fades because excitement habituates, staging becomes transparent, and reality eventually demands its due.

Benjamin Moffitt shows that populist performance depends on the perpetual staging of crisis. But crisis rhetoric is subject to escalation dynamics and audience

⁹<https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article123422> (accessed on August 1, 2026)

habituation. Each performance must outbid the last, until dramaturgy becomes noise (Moffitt, 2015, 2016). Murray Edelman anticipated this saturation effect. Political spectacle functions by arousal, and arousal decays with repetition, forcing regimes toward ever more extreme symbolic production (Edelman, 1988). In short, spectacle is a depreciating asset. It consumes attention faster than it can regenerate it. We can see that support rallies for these leaders in francophone West African countries in general and in Sahel in particular have become recurrent phenomena. But this deserves nuanced critical analysis. These meetings reflect a complex reality. They seem to combine authentic popular support based on legitimate aspirations (sovereignty, security, dignity) with political orchestration mechanisms in contexts where free expression is constrained. Taking these demonstrations as a spontaneous and unanimous expression of the popular will could be not exact. But it is also not exact of denying any authenticity to sovereigntist sentiment and reducing these movements to mere manipulations. Anti-French resentment, frustration with decades of failed governance, and pride in assertive leadership are authentic and widespread, particularly among urban youth throughout the French-speaking countries in West Africa. But the mobilizations seem to be structured. Recurring organizers like Yerewolo, M62 and Veille Citoyenne in AES countries enjoy privileged access to state media, logistics, and tolerance from security forces, while opposition gatherings are banned, and parties suspended or dissolved. Support rallies occur in a space where counter-mobilization is criminalized.

There is a significant interaction between international and local dynamics, especially within the AES states. Indeed, rallies surge at moments of regime vulnerability, such as coup-plot allegations, ECOWAS sanctions, and Africa Command (AFRICOM) criticism in April 2025 and subside when pressure eases. This suggests their primary function is defensive consolidation. This seems to be a demonstration to internal rivals (especially within the armies) and external actors that the leader cannot be removed cheaply. Thus, crowds in stadiums and streets are presented as proof of “popular will”. This is a classic pattern of plebiscitary politics where acclamation replaces the ballot box (Schmitt, 2008). In this sense, rallies are less about the population addressing the world than about the regime signaling to potential challengers.

Within the dynamics in the near future of politics based on symbolism, another problem could concern the matter of loyalty over the real competence. In the name of the claim to bring about a break, leaders could appoint loyal mediocrities over able technocrats, progressively degrading the quality of governance (Egorov & Sonin, 2011). Anti-elite movements purge “deep state” expertise, politicize bureaucracies, and substitute communication for administration (Peters & Pierre, 2019; Bauer et al., 2021). All these consequences accumulate. Fukuyama’s work on political decay argues that when patronage recolonizes a merit-based state, institutional performance declines in ways that are slow, compounding, and hard to reverse (Fukuyama, 2014). Effectiveness is thus lost not through dramatic collapse but through the quiet attrition of administrative competence. Then, spectacle governance cor-

rodes the regime's own knowledge of reality (Wintrobe, 1998). Timur shows that when citizens and officials publicly conform, regimes systematically overestimate their support. This explains why such systems appear stable until they suddenly fall (Kuran, 1991, 1995). Manipulation of the reality in every country of the world works only while the informed elite is small and the propaganda budget outpaces reality (Guriev & Treisman, 2019, 2022). Studies of propaganda saturation find, similarly, that beyond a threshold, heavy-handed messaging backfires and signals weakness rather than strength (Huang, 2015).

To illustrate our point, we maintain that crisis episodes accelerate the reckoning. Comparative studies of the COVID-19 pandemic found that governments prioritizing performative reassurance over technical response suffered measurably worse outcomes, and that the gap between spectacle and delivery became publicly legible (Kavaklı, 2021; Bayerlein et al., 2021). Kurt Weyland's argues that these regimes' survival depends on windfalls (commodity booms, honeymoon effects). When conjunctural luck runs out, the absence of institutionalized problem-solving capacity is exposed (Weyland, 2020, 2022). The convergent finding is that nationalist-spectacle governance contains the seeds of its own ineffectiveness. It substitutes attention for capacity, loyalty for information, and drama for delivery. Its decline is non-linear, with long apparent stability followed by rapid unravelling, precisely because the mechanisms above conceal decay until a shock renders it visible (Kuran, 1991; Guriev & Treisman, 2022).

Even before the near future, we can already see shifts in the attitudes of the leaders of these countries. Several examples illustrate this dynamic, which will strengthen even further in the coming years. We are not suggesting that this path of correction is linear and irreversible. Upheavals in all directions are always possible. However, the constraints inherent in these forms of political functioning present structural weaknesses that ultimately necessitate a kind of return to political realism.

Recently, Russia's foreign ministry has urged AES countries to develop ties with ECOWAS¹⁰. Russia has become the primary security partner of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Prolonged confrontation between AES and ECOWAS creates economic instability that ultimately threatens the viability of Russia's client regimes. By publicly encouraging dialogue, Russia positions itself as a constructive stakeholder rather than a spoiler. If AES states become economically isolated, Russia risks being expected to fill the gap (food, fuel, finance), something its sanctioned economy is not well positioned to do. Normalized AES-ECOWAS trade relieves that pressure.

We can also note the de-escalation between Bamako and Algiers, after strong diplomatic crisis with the recent visit of the Malian Prime Minister to Algeria that took place on August 24, 2026. Indeed, a 1400 km shared border cannot be ignored.

¹⁰Sergey Lavrov participated in the second session of ministerial consultations between Russia and the member countries of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), comprising Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, on July 8, 2026. This invitation to get closer to ECOWAS was made during this meeting.

Fuel, trade, and border-community lifelines in the north depend partly on Algeria. The fight against Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State (IS)-Sahel is going poorly and alienating a powerful neighbor with deep intelligence networks in the Sahara is costly. This visit looks like pragmatism catching up with rhetoric. But the structural disagreement over the Tuareg question and Mali's alliance with Russia, which Algeria views warily on its own doorstep, must be carefully observed.

The new Beninese President's visit to Niamey represents pragmatism like the broader pattern with Mali and Algeria. The recent visit of Benin's new president, Romuald Wadagni, to Niamey took place on June 2, 2026. The Benin-Niger diplomatic crisis was one of the most economically irrational disputes in the region. Two deeply interdependent neighbors were strangling a pipeline, a port corridor, and border trade over political grievances. A new Beninese president traveling to Niamey, rather than summoning Niger's leaders, is a smart protocol concession, acknowledging Niamey's sensitivity about sovereignty and respect. Despite the military crisis at the end of August 2026 with the accusations against Benin, we maintain that in the long run, political realism dictates an improvement in diplomatic relations between these two countries.

Apart from these concrete actions observed recently, which weaken the mechanisms of the primacy of political symbolism in favor of political reality, in the near future, prolonged military rule could inevitably politicize and factionalize armies, degrade operational forces, and expose officers to the corruption and blame previously borne by civilians. Many within the ranks could understand that governing erodes the institution, a lesson seen from Latin American and earlier African experiences. Military regimes in Francophone West Africa all promise transitions, draft constitutions, and organize (or endlessly postpone) elections. None claims military rule as a permanent model. Several logics could explain this compulsion to return, at least formally, to democratic mechanisms.

Indeed, since the 1990s, no alternative ideology of governance has achieved normative status in the region. Unlike the Cold War era, when Marxism-Leninism or revolutionary military rule offered coherent legitimating doctrines, today's military regimes have no ideological framework that justifies indefinite rule. Even their own rhetoric, such as restoring the state, refounding the nation, and protecting the people's will, borrows democratic vocabulary. A coup can be justified as a correction of democracy, never as its replacement. Popular support for the coups was conditional. Crowds celebrated soldiers as liberators from failed civilian elites, not as permanent rulers. The military regimes' own justification that civilians betrayed democracy through third terms and rigged elections logically obliges them to restore it. Overstaying could transform the savior into precisely the illegitimate power-clinger he overthrew. Burkina Faso's internal coup (Damiba ousted by Traoré after eight months) shows how fragile junta legitimacy is even within the military.

The return to democratic forms is often less a surrender of power than a strat-

egy for keeping it more securely. Doumbouya's playbook in Guinea with 2024-2025 constitutional referendum permitting his candidacy follows a well-worn path. The officer resigns from army, founds or co-opts a party, and wins a managed election. This democratization delivers international recognition and restored aid, provides a veneer of popular mandate and legal protection like constitutional immunities and amnesty clauses written into transition charters. It resolves the succession problem that pure military rule cannot solve peacefully. The return to democracy reflects the convergence of normative hegemony that democracy is the only game whose rules confer legitimacy. The real question for the region in the near future is therefore not whether militaries regimes will organize elections, but whether those elections will constitute democratization or merely the civilianization of military power, reproducing the hollow democracy whose failure caused the coups in the first place.

As we have just seen, internal dynamics in Francophone West Africa currently appear to be dominated by symbolic measures aimed at regaining sovereignty and asserting an uninhibited nationalism, a stance much appreciated by the young majority of their population. These dynamics fuel the international posture of these countries and are also influenced by international powers. Among them, China seems to reinforce its presence in this region in the near future.

3. China and Francophone West Africa Relations in the Next Future

China's political ascent in Francophone West Africa is best explained by a convergence. The collapse of French legitimacy, a regional elite that needs non-judgmental partners, Beijing's willingness to convert economic presence into diplomatic, security and normative influence, and the absence of any credible competitor operating at the same scale. The main brake will be whether Chinese engagement avoids reproducing the extractive, asymmetric relationship that discredited France in the first place and the obstacles placed in its path by its rivals.

3.1. The Weakening Western Countries' Presence in West Africa

Empirical research shows that trust toward Western countries declined through a combination of unresolved colonial grievances, failed security promises, perceived economic exploitation, and Western paternalism, all amplified by rival powers' influence campaigns and a new generation demanding full sovereignty. The tables below show us the different popularity ratings of several major powers among the populations of French-speaking West Africa.

Perceptions of China's influence are strongly positive¹¹

In Rounds 7 and 8 (~2016-2021), the share of respondents saying China's influence is "somewhat" or "very" positive was **above the continental average (~60% - 63%)** in most francophone West African states:

¹¹<https://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/> (accessed on July 15, 2026)

Country	Positive Views of China's Influence (Approx.)	Notes
Mali	~70% - 80%	Among the highest on the continent
Niger	~70% - 80%	Consistently very favorable
Burkina Faso	~75% - 85%	Surveyed after switching recognition from Taiwan region to Beijing (2018)
Guinea	~65% - 75%	High despite mining-related grievances
Benin	~60% - 70%	Solidly positive
Senegal	~55% - 65%	Positive but among the more measured publics
Côte d'Ivoire	~60% - 70%	Pragmatic, infrastructure-linked views
Togo	~55% - 65%	Favorable, lower salience

USA are broadly positive—close behind China¹²

Across most francophone West African countries, majorities view US influence positively, typically at levels **similar to or slightly below China**, and **well above France**:

Country	Positive Views of US Influence (Approx., R7 - R9)	Notes
Mali	~55% - 70%	Positive but declining somewhat amid the junta's anti-Western turn
Burkina Faso	~55% - 70%	Positive; less hostility than toward France, though Western partners generally lost ground after the coups
Niger	~60% - 70%	Historically favorable (large US aid presence, drone base at Agadez); likely dropped after the 2023 coup and US troop expulsion (2024)—mostly post-dating available survey rounds
Senegal	~60% - 70%	Consistently favorable; USA often the top-choice development model
Côte d'Ivoire	~60% - 70%	Solidly positive, pragmatic views
Benin	~60% - 70%	Favorable; visible US presence via MCC compacts
Guinea	~55% - 65%	Positive, moderate salience
Togo	~55% - 65%	Favorable, low salience

France's image is markedly weaker than China's—especially in the Sahel¹³

While China's influence is viewed positively by strong majorities across the re-

¹²<https://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/> (accessed on July 16, 2026)

¹³<https://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/> (accessed on July 17, 2026)

gion, views of France are **more divided and have deteriorated sharply**, above all in the central Sahel:

Country	Positive Views of France's Influence (Approx., R8 - R9)	Trend/Notes
Mali	Low—minority (~30% - 40% or below by R9)	Steep decline amid the Barkhane withdrawal, junta rhetoric, and pivot to Russia
Burkina Faso	Low and falling (~30% - 45%)	Strong anti-French mobilization after 2022 coups
Niger	Falling (~40% - 50% before the 2023 coup; lower after)	2023 coup and expulsion of French troops accelerated the decline
Senegal	Mixed (~45% - 55%)	More measured, but youth and urban publics increasingly critical (visible in 2021-2024 protest movements)
Côte d'Ivoire	Moderately positive (~50% - 60%)	Government maintains close ties with Paris; opinion less hostile than in the Sahel
Benin	Mixed to positive (~50% - 60%)	Lower salience of the France question
Guinea	Mixed (~45% - 55%)	Sékou Touré's legacy of early rupture with France colors attitudes
Togo	Mixed (~45% - 55%)	Relatively low politicization

The relationship between the People's Republic of China and Francophone West Africa constitutes a distinctive subsystem within broader Sino-African relations. Historically peripheral to Beijing's African strategy, which prioritized Anglophone and Lusophone resource economies, the Francophone space has become a theatre of accelerated Chinese engagement. Precisely because of the retrenchment of French influence, the crisis of regional security architectures, and the reconfiguration of West African sovereignty claims. Francophone states are increasingly leveraging great-power competition to diversify partnerships.

The main element of the rising of China in this region is the accelerating erosion of the French politico-military and monetary order. The expulsion of French forces from Mali (2022), Burkina Faso (2023), and Niger (2023), followed by drawdowns in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, dealt a very severe blow to the "*pré carré*" that structured the region since decolonization. We seem to observe the terminal crisis of the French-centred order. Bayart's (1993) concept of extraversion and his analyses of the Franco-African complex illuminate how the "*pré carré*" rested on personalized networks, military basing agreements, and monetary tutelage. Over the near future, France faces a choice between managed retrenchment toward a normalized bilateral relationship, as recommended by the Jean-Marie Bockel report (2024), and

residual neo-colonial reflexes that could accelerate exclusion. The European Union, less burdened by colonial stigma, and Canada, perceived as a non-imperial Franco-phone partner, possess reputational assets France has forfeited.

In this region, China's approach diverges from Western countries (military forces) and Russia's securitized model (Wagner/Africa Corps). Beijing offers a partnership without conditionality, infrastructure, party-to-party diplomacy through the International Liaison Department, and diplomatic cover at the United Nations Security Council. Over the near future horizon, the key question is whether China will remain a reluctant security actor or move toward deeper politico-military engagement, building on precedents such as its Djibouti base and peacekeeping in Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, until 2023). The AES explicitly courts Chinese partnership as part of its sovereignist repositioning, and Beijing's willingness to engage these regimes without normative preconditions gives it structural advantages over Western actors constrained by democratic conditionality.

Another important element is monetary. The legitimacy crisis of the CFA franc intersects with China's long-term renminbi internationalization strategy. Should AES states or a reformed West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) move toward monetary sovereignty, China possesses instruments like the swap lines through the People's Bank of China, yuan-denominated trade settlement, and the Cross-border Interbank Payment System to position itself as a partner in any post-CFA architecture. This is not primarily an economic question but a diplomatic one. Monetary partnership creates durable political dependencies and could symbolize the definitive end of the *Françafrique* system. Beijing could likely proceed cautiously, given its aversion to destabilizing existing arrangements, but in the near future, partial yuan-ization of trade settlement in the region is plausible, particularly for commodity exports (Nigerien uranium, Malian lithium and gold, Guinean bauxite).

3.2. The Reinforcement of China Presence and Counter-Attack Measures by Rival Powers

Alden (2007) identifies China's need for energy security and raw materials, the search for new markets, and diplomatic aims including isolating the Taiwan region and building coalitions in multilateral institutions as the main motivations behind Beijing's Africa policy. This through Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), concessional loans, infrastructure-for-resources deals, state-owned enterprise investment, and the growing presence of Chinese migrants and small traders. Rather than portraying Africa as a passive recipient, Alden stresses that outcomes hinge on the capacity of African governments and societies to negotiate, regulate, and channel Chinese engagement toward developmental ends.

The FOCAC 2024 Beijing summit pledges (approximately \$51 billion over three years) emphasize projects, trade facilitation, and private investment rather than sovereign lending. For Francophone West Africa, this recalibration has political

implications. Chinese engagement will increasingly flow through commercial actors, special economic zones, and resource-backed arrangements, reducing the state-to-state visibility of the relationship in a context of nationalist fervor in this region. These material relations are embedded in relational diplomacy with training programs, party schools, and media partnerships that build long-term elite networks. Francophone West Africa's fourteen-plus United Nations' votes also matter to Beijing's multilateral strategy like the support on Taiwan region, Xinjiang, human rights resolutions, and Chinese candidacies in international organizations. Burkina Faso's 2018 switch of so-called "diplomatic ties" with the Taiwan region to China completed the region's adherence to the One-China principle. Over the next future, China will deepen efforts to enroll these states in its alternative normative architecture, aiming to legitimize a post-liberal international order grounded in sovereignty, non-interference, and developmentalism.

Below is a table that presents the progressive empowerment, on the diplomatic level, of French-speaking West African countries at the United Nations General Assembly. These countries appear to be asserting their independence from their former mentors, the Western powers.

UN voting patterns—a broader diplomatic indicator¹⁴

Beyond bilateral ruptures, UN General Assembly votes on Ukraine (2022-2023) revealed West African reluctance to align with the West:

Country	Vote on Res. ES-11/1 (March 2022, Condemning Invasion)
Mali	Abstained (later voted against subsequent resolutions)
Guinea	Abstained
Senegal	Abstained
Burkina Faso	Absent
Togo	Voted in favor (later abstentions on some resolutions)
Guinea-Bissau	Abstained/Absent on several votes

Senegal's abstention was particularly notable given its reputation as a Western democratic partner; President Macky Sall (then African Union chair) subsequently traveled to Sochi to meet Putin (June 2022), and the AU resisted Western pressure to isolate Moscow.

Togo: While not rupturing with the West, Togo has drawn closer to the AES regimes, served as a mediator sympathetic to their positions, signaled interest in joining the AES, and expanded security cooperation with Russia (2024-2025). Togo also abstained on Ukraine-related UN votes.

China's posture resonates powerfully with the current sovereigntist turn in the Sahel and with broader African frustration over Western double standards. However, Francophone elites practice strategic extraversion by instrumentalizing Chi-

¹⁴ <https://una.org.uk/ukraine-un-general-assembly-votes-for-peace-on-anniversary-of-invasion/> (accessed on June 15, 2026)

nese partnership to extract concessions from all sides rather than aligning ideologically. Senegal under Bassirou Diomaye Faye and Ousmane Sonko exemplifies this. Sovereigntist rhetoric toward Paris coexists with pragmatic multi-alignment including Beijing, Washington, Ankara, and the Gulf countries.

Some factors could influence the trajectory of this rising of China in French-speaking West African countries. Jihadist expansion toward the Gulf of Guinea littoral threatens Chinese nationals and assets like kidnappings of Chinese workers have occurred in Mali and Niger, forcing Beijing into security involvements it has historically avoided. Afrobarometer data also show generally positive but not unconditional perceptions of China. Labor practices, environmental damage (fishing fleets off Senegal), and import competition with local commerce generate friction that populist actors could weaponize. Indeed, African leaders instrumentalize rivalries between major global powers, rather than passively submitting to them. In her research on Africa-China relations, [Soulé \(2021\)](#) argues that African bureaucrats and leaders are highly skilled at playing one rival against the other. She shows how governments leverage alternative options, like threatening to sign an infrastructure contract with China if Western donors impose too many conditions, to maximize their bargaining power and extract better terms. Still, regarding the risks that could curb the rise of its power in this region, China's own economic deceleration and demographic contraction may constrain outward finance, making FOCAC pledges progressively harder to sustain and pushing the relationship toward extraction-focused pragmatism.

This strengthening of China in this region of the world is being tested by Western powers, which are deploying counter-initiatives to weaken it. Indeed, Western countries develop strategies to counter Chinese influence in francophone West Africa. European Union Global Gateway launched in 2021 offers €300 billion global initiative positioned explicitly as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with significant allocations for African infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity. The G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment is mobilizing private and public capital for infrastructure, emphasizing transparency and debt sustainability in contrast to alleged Chinese debt-trap practices. United States of America International Development Finance Corporation expanded lending capacity to compete with Chinese state banks in financing projects in countries like Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.

They are also promoting what could be called debt-trap diplomacy narrative to caution African governments about opaque Chinese lending terms and support debt restructuring frameworks that pressure China to participate in multilateral debt relief on Western-aligned terms. Western countries are advocating for International Monetary Fund and World Bank conditionality as a transparent alternative to bilateral Chinese loans. Below are some complaints from Western leaders against China's growing influence in Africa.

"We saw that during colonial times it is easy to come in, take out natural resources, pay off leaders and leave... We don't want to see a new colonialism in

*Africa.*¹⁵

*China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands. Its investment ventures are riddled with corruption, and do not meet the same environmental or ethical standards as United States of America developmental programs*¹⁶.

*"I wouldn't want a new generation of international investments to encroach on our historical partners' sovereignty or weaken their economies... What can look good in the short term can often end up being bad over the medium to long term."*¹⁷

The deployment of Western military forces in Francophone West Africa, even if it does not appear to be primarily directed against China's influence, nevertheless reveals some hints of criticism against this major global geopolitical rival. As can be seen, several strategic documents in the military field, for example those of the United States of America, cite the prospect of containing China in Africa as an ambition.

Official strategic documents statements linking African military posture to competition with China:

Source	Statements
United States of America National Defense Strategy (2018, 2022)	Explicit shift to "great-power competition" with China as the "pacing challenge", framing all regional postures accordingly
AFRICOM Posture Statements to Congress (Annual)	Commanders (e.g., Gen. Townsend, Gen. Langley) have repeatedly cited Chinese port ambitions on the Atlantic coast (notably in Equatorial Guinea, and concerns about Gabon, Benin) as a strategic concern justifying United States presence
French White Papers/Revue Nationale Stratégique	References to "strategic competitors" and protecting spheres of influence
EU Strategic Compass (2022)	Framing of China as a "systemic rival" alongside African engagement priorities

The United States of America withdrawal from Niger was completed in September 2024. The post-withdrawal posture remains deliberately low-profile, partially classified, and still in negotiation in several countries. But Africa Command testimony has explicitly tied United States of America Gulf of Guinea presence to

¹⁵<https://www.arabnews.com/archive/380394> (accessed on July 10, 2026)

¹⁶<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/> (John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy, 13 December 2018. Accessed on July 11, 2026)

¹⁷<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/macron-warns-of-chinese-risk-to-african-sovereignty-idUSKBN1QS2QP/> (Macron warns of Chinese investment risks in Africa, 12 March 2019. Accessed on June 15, 2026)

preventing a Chinese naval facility on the Atlantic coast, making the coastal pivot one of the few areas where the counter-China military project seems to be explicit.

The Coastal Pivot: Key Country Nodes

Country	Nature of United States of America Engagement (Confirmed/Reported)
Côte d'Ivoire	Emerging as the principal Francophone hub. Expanded security cooperation, training support to Ivorian forces confronting jihadist spillover in the north; reported discussions on access arrangements and ISR/drone operations (locations such as Odienné). Regular port calls and exercise hosting (co-hosted Flintlock 2024).
Benin	Reported negotiations on drone basing/ISR access to monitor Sahelian threats; stepped-up training and equipment support for Beninese forces fighting incursions in the north (Alibori/Atacora).
Ghana (Anglophone but central to the architecture)	Existing Defense Cooperation Agreement (2018) provides access to Accra airport facilities; logistics and staging hub; Flintlock host.
Togo	Security assistance and intelligence-sharing focused on the northern Savanes region; smaller-scale cooperation.
Senegal	Longstanding partner (hosted Flintlock previously; African Lion components); however, the post-2024 government under Bassirou Diomaye Faye has signaled sovereignty-oriented recalibration, notably demanding the departure of French forces, creating uncertainty about the depth of future United States of America arrangements.

All these initiatives of Western powers aim to moderate, or even halt, China's influence in this region of the world, which they perceive as their natural sphere of influence. We have not compiled an exhaustive list. There could undoubtedly be many more, and other measures could emerge in the near future if the previous approaches fail to substantially weaken China's influence in Francophone West Africa.

4. Conclusion

The Francophone states of West Africa are going through a very particular period in their political dynamics. Internal issues have been influenced by external factors and are now being used by some regimes in Francophone West Africa to fuel new stances regarding international relations. In predominantly young people societies, the consideration of nationalist and sovereignty issues aligns with the propensity of young people to prefer unconventional, even spectacular, forms of political

participation or action. But this cult of symbolism through the use of political spectacle has inherent weaknesses that will ultimately necessitate a return to a form of political realism.

It is in this context that China's rising in this region takes place. Its political logic coincides with the exacerbation of nationalist and sovereignty tensions in this area. It is therefore taking advantage of a climate unfavorable to Western powers to strengthen its influence. However, this process is hampered by rivalries and counter-initiatives from the former dominant powers in Francophone West Africa, which are deploying measures to counter China's rise. The strategies deployed in this perspective are multifaceted and evolving, with prospects of confrontation between major international powers that could be more abrupt in this region.

The region is therefore highly volatile, with the multifaceted interplay of these internal and external dynamics. Even focusing on the short term seems arduous, given the rapid pace of change, both locally and internationally. An exercise in long-term perspective for this region of the world appears to us to be inextricably linked to a much broader reflection that will encompass the dynamics of the world itself, as the local and international spheres become increasingly intertwined and indistinguishable.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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