

**INSTABILITY AND THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY
IN THE SAHEL AND THE U.S. POLICY RESPONSE**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

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C O N T E N T S

	Page
Menendez, Hon. Robert, U.S. Senator From New Jersey	1
Rounds, Hon. Mike, U.S. Senator From South Dakota	2
Phee, Hon. Molly, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC	5
Prepared Statement	7
Jenkins, Robert, Assistant to the Administrator, Bureau for Conflict Preven- tion and Stabilization, United States Agency for International Development, Washington, DC	9
Prepared Statement	10
Blyden, Chidi, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, DC	13
Prepared Statement	15

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Responses of Ms. Molly Phee to Questions Submitted by Senator Robert Menendez	31
Responses of Mr. Robert Jenkins to Questions Submitted by Senator Robert Menendez	33
Responses of Ms. Chidi Blyden to Questions Submitted by Senator Robert Menendez	35
Responses of Ms. Molly Phee to Questions Submitted by Senator James E. Risch	35
Responses of Mr. Robert Jenkins to Questions Submitted by Senator James E. Risch	39
Responses of Ms. Chidi Blyden to Questions Submitted by Senator James E. Risch	45
Responses of Ms. Chidi Blyden to Questions Submitted by Senator Tim Kaine	46

INSTABILITY AND THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE SAHEL AND THE U.S. POLICY RESPONSE

TUESDAY, JULY 12, 2022

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:30 a.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Coons, Murphy, Kaine, Van Hollen, Johnson, Romney, Portman, Young, and Rounds.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing will come to order. Let me thank our witnesses for joining us today to discuss the turmoil and instability plaguing the Sahel. While the region may not often make front page news, millions of people continue to face threats from militaries that are supposed to protect them, ethnically-based militias, and dire food insecurity. These threats had displaced 2.4 million people in the central Sahel by this May and more than 30 million people in the Sahel will need lifesaving assistance and protection this year, nearly 2 million more than last year, according to the U.N. Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs.

Unfortunately, some of the militaries in the subregion, militaries which we trained and equipped, by the way, have contributed to the problems that have been a stabilizing force. They have undertaken coups in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and attempted one in Niger. Particularly in Mali, the military has committed gross human rights abuses in the course of counterterrorism operations with little to no accountability.

Making matters worse, Russia has established a foothold in Mali through the Wagner Group and is also involved in human rights violations including extrajudicial killings of civilians.

In the wake of the coup in Chad, the junta fired live ammunition at peaceful protesters, killing seven, wounding dozens more, and it has yet to commit to the transition timeline the African Union articulated a ago.

For two decades, the United States and our partners have spent billions of dollars to aid stability efforts by supporting military operations against terrorist actors and by strengthening the military capacity of countries in the Sahel to counter the threat of violent

extremists. Successive administrations have used both State and Defense Department programs to provide equipment and train militaries, including deploying U.S. forces to assist African soldiers at the devastating cost of American lives.

All of us remember the tragic deaths of four American Special Operations soldiers who were killed in Niger in 2017, when they were ambushed by militants belonging to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and our partners have suffered casualties as well. Scores of soldiers from Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and France have deployed in successive operations and have lost their lives.

The U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali is the deadliest in the world. Just last month, two more peacekeepers were killed by an improvised explosive. Despite all of our efforts, we have little positive to show. In 2019, the head of Special Operations in Africa, General Marcus Hicks, told *Voice of America* with regard to the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, and I quote, “I would tell you at this time we are not winning.”

Clearly the situation has only deteriorated. While we invested billions in the security sector, our diplomatic and development efforts have been undercut by a lack of resources and presence. Significant staffing shortages at our embassies and lack of a robust USAID presence in the Sahel are limiting our ability to balance our security programs with tackling the root causes of extremism in the Sahel.

I appreciate the engagement from the Administration with regard to the requirement to consult with this committee on that strategy, and in the wake of this hearing I and other members will provide you with feedback on your approach.

Yesterday, I introduced a resolution calling for a democratic transition in the Republic of Chad. It demands General Déby release those arrested during the protests this spring, it supports the African Union’s push to organize elections by October 22, it calls on the military junta to abide by the African Union’s transition timeline, and it asks the Secretary of State to identify coup leaders and their accomplices in order to target them with visa restrictions and financial sanctions.

In addition to this, in March, Congress passed the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program Act of 2021, which I sponsored in the Senate. This legislation aims to ensure that we have a strategy to address the political, governance, and development challenges in North and West Africa.

At today’s hearing I expect our witnesses to share their frank assessments of whether the U.S. approach over the years have yielded the results that we expected, and if not, what do we need to change.

With that let me turn to the Ranking Member, both on the subcommittee and for this hearing, Senator Rounds.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MIKE ROUNDS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM SOUTH DAKOTA**

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to serve as the Ranking Member for this hearing on U.S. policy toward the Sahel. This topic is an important one, and I appreciate

the Chairman prioritizing it for a full committee hearing today. It is also good to see that we have essential leaders working on Africa policy for DoD, State, and USAID to have this critical discussion.

During this hearing we have a lot to cover regarding the myriad challenges to regional security and development in the Sahel, including many vital issues creating a humanitarian crisis and impacting U.S. national security. The Sahel has been a region of significant insecurity and underdevelopment for decades, owing to a profound lack of development. Niger is ranked last on the U.N. Human Development Index. Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso also feature in the bottom 10.

The people of the Sahel are among the poorest in the world and face acute hardships, from desert terrain, isolation, and an increasing threat from violent extremist groups affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State. I am concerned that U.S. foreign policy toward the Sahel has been challenged to keep pace with the threat or level of need. Deficits in our policy and approach and those of our allies seem to have allowed the situation in the Sahel to worsen.

Despite the initial success of France's military intervention in Mali in 2013, these violent extremist groups have only grown in capacity and expanded their areas of control, such as they now directly threaten our partners south of the Sahel on the coast of West Africa. I am concerned Africa has not received the U.S. diplomatic focus it deserves.

Congress continues to follow closely the wave of military coups that have affected sub-Saharan Africa in the last 2 years. The majority of these recent coups have occurred in the Sahel. I look forward to hearing about the Administration's assessment of what is driving these coups and how it plans to address them in a manner that promote our interests while working behind the scenes with these regimes to promote our interests and values.

In this context, Mali is worthy of emphasis. I look forward to a clear vision from the Administration about how to enable the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali to make a positive contribution to regional stability and not just soak up resources.

The entrance of the Russia-backed Wagner Group in Mali last year and the subsequent hasty withdrawal of French troops only compound the challenges faced by the U.S. and our European allies in the region. Concurrently, these developments create an opportunity for a renewed U.S. focus on Niger, which has been for some time the most promising partner in the region for the United States.

Two weeks ago, the NSC shared the Biden administration's strategy in the Sahel with this Committee. The strategy reflects the Biden administration's aspirational view of its plans to approach the region. It will hopefully drive important policy and resource discussions that need to occur. While the interagency approval and rollout of the Sahel strategy is a welcome development, I look forward to the Administration's ability to implement such a strategy.

My concerns focus on two main areas. First is concerning regarding interagency coordination to implement the strategy, including vital coordination between the State Department and Department

of Defense, and second, the personnel deficit at many State Department posts across the Sahel. We must place qualified personnel with professional experience working on African policy and issues critical in Africa in the Sahel if it is indeed a region of strategic priority. Senior leaders at our diplomatic posts in the Sahel should have essential qualifications, the least of which should be previous Africa experience and the ability to speak French. For junior-level positions, the State Department urgently needs to figure out creative ways to incentivize service in this complex part of Africa. In the event that this requires additional resources, I look forward to the interagency providing these need requests to Congress.

We have built up a great deal of goodwill through security cooperation and programs like PEPFAR. However, it is increasingly clear, in this renewed age of strategic competition, that what we have been doing in the past may not be enough. Losing influence in Africa to authoritarian competitors, whether their origin is African or from outside of the continent, has increased the likelihood that if we do not give our Africa policy the resources it deserves we will lose influence to these competitors.

Finally, I would be interested to hear your thoughts on whether the ways the State Department and DoD have organized themselves on Africa policy optimally supports U.S. diplomatic and security objectives. In particular, I am curious as to how the decision to depose Libya's Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 may have played a role in sparking the negative, unintended consequences for the Sahel that we are discussing today.

My interest stems from the fact that Libya was located within the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs while Sahel policy was governed by the State Department Bureau of African Affairs. Meanwhile, the African Union included all of Africa within its mandate, and AFRICOM included all of Africa except for Egypt. With an eye towards the future, I am interested in how these differences may have impeded information flows and policy coordination for the Sahel.

I look forward to today's conversation. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Rounds.

With us today on behalf of the Administration is Ambassador Molly Phee, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Ambassador Phee is a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, who most recently served as the Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. Ambassador Phee was U.S. Ambassador to South Sudan from 2015 to 2017, Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia, and as Chief of Staff in the Office of the Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan. So she has extensive experience in this regard.

Mr. Robert Jenkins serves as Assistant to the Administrator for the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization. A career member of the Senior Executive Service, Mr. Jenkins was previously a Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance and the Director of USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives. Prior to joining USAID in 1998, Mr. Jenkins designed and implemented emergency relief and recovery programs with World Vision International in southern Sudan and Sierra Leone.

Our final witness today is Ms. Chidi Blyden, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs. Ms. Blyden is an expert on Africa's conflict security development issues. She served in the Obama administration as a Special Assistant to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs from 2013 to 2017. She managed several functional and regional responsibilities including U.S.-Africa defense policy for East and Central Africa. She served as the African Peacekeeping Advisor to the Stability and Humanitarian Affairs Office and was the department's lead on the President's Africa Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership Initiative.

So again, welcome to all of you. Your full statements will be included for the record, without objection. We would ask you to summarize them in about 5 minutes so the Committee and its members can have a conversation with you on these issues. We thank you for your service and we ask that you proceed with your testimonies in the order in which I introduced you. So Ambassador Phee, you will start.

STATEMENT OF HON. MOLLY PHEE, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AFRICAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. PHEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator Rounds, and other colleagues of the Committee. I want to start by thanking you for your longstanding interest and engagement in the Sahel.

Instability in the Sahel is a security problem with a governance solution. A decade of a security-focused approach has underscored this lesson as armed groups continue to expand their presence and capabilities despite French counterterrorism operations and significant western investments in African national security capabilities.

Mr. Chairman, you mentioned the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program. I think it is clear that that progress, to put it nicely, has not been linear, and increasingly inadequate given the expanding number of terrorist incidents and civilian casualties, but our efforts have afforded us numerous lessons learned that we continue to take into account as we revise our approach to the Sahel.

As we have found in the Middle East and in Southwest Asia, we must address the underlying drivers of insecurity to effectively support efforts by African partners to turn the tide. First, we must be realistic about the daunting social, environmental, political, and economic conditions that overwhelm the Sahel. In order to contend with violent extremist groups, governments in the region must dramatically reform and improve. We can best encourage this required change by investing in governance. The new interagency Sahel strategy seeks to build the capacity of governments in the Sahel to provide equitable delivery of government services and to adapt measures to improve accountability, anti-corruption, and dialogue between capitals and the periphery and among communities. These are the keys to winning the support of civilian populations.

The 5-year strategy is sufficiently broad to withstand the blows of the kinds of crises and shifts we have seen recently. It allows U.S. embassies the flexibility to implement to greatest effect at the local level. I tell you frankly, however, that neither our African partners nor we will transform the Sahel within the first 5 years

of the strategy. The goals we have identified call for action to promote fundamental policy and governance reforms that will take many years to undertake and implement. These are societal endeavors which by their very nature are incremental, but the reorientation explicit in the strategy is an essential first step.

Recent extraconstitutional changes of government in three of the five Sahelian countries have complicated the task. We need greater investment in democracy and governance programming as well as more development assistance that targets underlying social, environmental, and economic deficiencies.

In Mali, we welcome the recent agreement to a 24-month timeline between the regional bloc known as ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, and the transition government. We join ECOWAS in insisting that the transition government turn its full attention to implementing the reforms necessary to set Mali on the path to democracy. We stand ready to assist as long as the transition government moves towards a constitutional referendum and elections, as envisioned. We are committed to the Malian people and their aspiration for responsive democratic governance.

We know the Malian people also want security. The civilian casualties resulting from the reported tactics used by the Wagner Group, alongside Malian Armed Forces will only serve to sow further divisions in Malian society, undermine the credibility of those armed forces, and drive communities into the hands of violent extremists.

The U.N. mission, known as MINUSMA, shares our goal of protecting civilians. We will be watching closely to see how the mission operates without French reassurance flights from Operation Barkhane. We also welcome to review envisioned in the new mandate to see how we can strengthen the mission's operations.

We are very concerned by the statement made by Mali's transition government expressing its intent to deny MINUSMA the freedom of movement it needs to fulfill its mandate. We will be working closely to make sure that MINUSMA can carry out its mandate, despite these verbal threats.

In Burkina Faso, we are encouraged by the transition government's proposal to shorten the timeline to return Burkina to democratically elected, civilian-led governance by 6 months. While the January 24 military coup d'état triggered restrictions on U.S. assistance, we remain committed to helping the country under available authorities in order to address instability, prevent the spread of violent extremism, and support reforms to advance accountable democratic rule.

Chad has an historic opportunity to change direction after decades of authoritarian rule. To capitalize on this opportunity, we have emphasized the importance of a peaceful, timely political transition, in line with the principles outlined by the African Union 2021 Communiqué. These include peaceful resolution of negotiations with the country's insurgent groups now taking place in Doha, hosting a national dialogue that is inclusive of all voices, and holding free and fair elections that lead to a democratically elected and civilian-led government.

Mauritania remains one of our most stable partners in the Sahel. We continue to support the president's leadership in tackling terrorism and improving governance.

The same is true in Niger, one of our most reliable and most willing partners in the Sahel. We value their partnership and are committed to supporting the leadership of the president.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, the new Sahel strategy identifies the threat to border countries in Coastal West Africa which are most at risk from violent extremist spillover from the Sahel as well as vulnerable to internal factors that mirror the governance challenges in the Sahel. We will use the lessons learned from the innovative approach outlined in the Global Fragility Act in Coastal West Africa to inform and reinvigorate our programming and coordination in the Sahel.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Phee follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Molly Phee

Mr. Chairman, Senator Rounds and Senator Van Hollen, other Committee members, allow me to begin by thanking the committee for your longstanding interest and engagement in the Sahel. We share your concern about surging instability and democratic backsliding in the region.

Instability in the Sahel is a security problem with a governance solution. A decade of a security-focused approach has underscored this lesson as armed groups continue to expand their presence and capabilities despite French counterterrorism operations and significant western investments in African national security capabilities.

The Department of State, together with our colleagues from DoD and USAID, have previously provided substantial counterterrorism support across the Sahel through the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). While progress has not proved linear, and increasingly inadequate given the expanding number of terrorist incidents and civilian casualties, our efforts have afforded us numerous lessons learned that we continue to take into account as we revise our approach to the Sahel.

As we have found in the Middle East and in Southwest Asia, we must address the underlying drivers of insecurity to effectively support efforts by African partners to turn the tide. First, we must be realistic about the daunting social, environmental, political and economic conditions that overwhelm the Sahel. In order to contend with violent extremist groups, governments in the region must dramatically reform and improve. We can best encourage this required change by investing in governance. The new interagency Sahel strategy seeks to build the capacity of governments in the Sahel to regain public confidence at the national and local levels by providing the equitable delivery of government services, law enforcement, and justice. In other words, we will provide the resources and guidance to encourage accountability, anti-corruption measures, and dialogue between capitals and the periphery and among communities. These are the keys to winning the support of civilian populations.

The 5-year strategy is sufficiently broad to withstand the blows of the kinds of crises and shifts we have seen in the Sahel in recent years. It allows U.S. embassies the flexibility to implement to greatest effect at the local level. I tell you frankly, however, that neither our African partners nor we will transform the Sahel within the first 5 years of the strategy. The goals we have identified call for action to promote fundamental policy and governance reforms that will take many years to undertake and implement. These are societal endeavors which by their nature are incremental, but the reorientation explicit in the strategy is an essential first step.

Recent extraconstitutional changes of government in three of the five Sahelian countries political degradations that illustrate the pressures of governance in this volatile region have complicated the task. We need greater investment in democracy and governance programing, as well as more development assistance that targets underlying social, environmental and economic deficiencies—so that the United States is positioned to assist these transitions in moving toward a more stable democratic future.

In Mali, we welcome the agreement to a 24-month timeline between the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) and the transition government. We

will join ECOWAS in insisting that the transition government turn its full attention to implementing the key reforms necessary to set Mali on the path to restore its democracy. The United States provided technical assistance for the creation of the electoral law. We stand ready to assist as long as the transition government moves towards a constitutional referendum and elections. We are committed to the Malian people and their aspiration for responsive democratic governance.

We know the Malian people also want security. The civilian casualties resulting from the reported tactics used by the Wagner Group, alongside Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), will only serve to sow further divisions in Malian society, undermine the credibility of the FAMA, and drive communities into the hands of violent extremist groups.

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) shares our goal of protecting civilians. We will be watching closely to see how the mission operates without French reassurance flights from Operation Barkhane. The United States is deeply concerned by the statement made by Mali's transition government expressing its intent to deny MINUSMA the freedom of movement necessary to fulfill its mandate. To act in this contrary manner would be a blatant violation of the status of forces agreement (SOFA) that the transition government is obligated to uphold.

In Burkina Faso, we are encouraged by the transition government's proposal to shorten the timeline to return Burkina Faso to democratically elected civilian-led governance by 6 months. While the January 24 military coup d'état triggered restrictions on U.S. assistance for the Government of Burkina Faso, we remain committed to assistance to the country under available authorities in order to address instability, prevent the spread of violent extremism, and support reforms to advance accountable democratic rule. The installation of a democratically elected government would open the door for deeper cooperation.

Chad has an historic opportunity to change direction after decades of authoritarian rule. To capitalize on this moment, we have emphasized the importance of a peaceful, timely political transition. It is the responsibility of the Transitional Military Council to fulfill its commitments to Chadian citizens, and to the principles outlined in the African Union 2021 Communiqué. These include peaceful resolution of negotiations with the country's insurgent groups—known as politico-military groups—that have been underway in Doha for 6 months, hosting a national dialogue that is inclusive of all voices, and holding free and fair elections that lead to a democratically elected and civilian-led government.

Mauritania remains one of our most stable partners in the Sahel. The country's 2019 election was a watershed moment which saw the country's first transition from one democratically elected president to another. President Ghazouani is tackling long-standing human rights issues. We applaud Mauritania's internal reforms to its security sector which have strengthened its capability in responding to violent extremist groups. Mauritania has not suffered a terrorist attack on its soil since 2011. The United States appreciates Mauritania's efforts to combat terrorism within its borders and its partnership with the United States in countering terrorism in the region.

Niger continues to be our most reliable and willing partner in the Sahel and a country with a firm commitment to democratic processes, as demonstrated in 2021 by the nation's first peaceful democratic transition of power. We applaud President Bazoum's forward-leaning pledge to strengthen and expand the High Authority Against Corruption and Related Crimes to counter corruption and impunity. The United States values Niger's partnership and the country's contributions to regional peace and security.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, the new Sahel strategy identifies the threat to border countries in coastal West Africa which are most at risk from violent extremist spill-over from the Sahel as well as vulnerable to internal factors that mirror the governance challenges in the Sahel. We are grateful for the resources and flexibilities provided by the Global Fragility Act. We are taking advantage of the GFA to forge a holistic approach to bolstering resiliencies and mitigating risks in marginalized communities. We are seeking to strengthen social cohesion between and among communities along the border, with a focus on improving access to livelihoods for unemployed youth. We also intend to strengthen civilian-security force relations through training to professionalize security forces and enhance their capacity to protect civilians. We will use the lessons learned from the innovative GFA approach in coastal West Africa to inform and reinvigorate our programming and coordination in the Sahel.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Administrator Jenkins.

STATEMENT OF ROBERT JENKINS, ASSISTANT TO THE ADMINISTRATOR, BUREAU FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION AND STABILIZATION, UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. JENKINS. Chairman Menendez, thank you. Senator Rounds, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today and for bringing attention to the urgent needs of this critically important region.

I am particularly glad to be testifying with my colleagues from the State and Defense Departments, as we are actively working to prevent the Sahel's problems from creeping into West African countries as we implement the Global Fragility Act and the U.S. strategy to prevent conflict and promote stability.

Looking across the Sahel, we see a region where the confluences of U.S. national security interests means we must devote attention and resources to supporting key partners. We also see a region that is particularly fragile, with weak governments characterized by corruption and lack of accountability, unprofessional security forces, limited services and opportunities for citizens, intercommunal conflicts, large gender inequalities, and armed groups looking to recruit.

The Sahel is beset by problems, many problems all exacerbating each other. It is a region where decades of undelivered promises have continuously eroded what were never strong, thriving democracies. It is a region where we have seen young people dancing in support of military takeovers, waving Russian flags, and repeating the disinformation that targets them relentlessly. It is a region where violent extremists prey on a generation that sees little promise, holds little hope, feels little agency, and is desperate for many of life's most basic needs.

Add the effects of climate change, like desertification and multi-seasonal drought, the impact of the pandemic on fragile political and public health systems, and the global food security crisis brought on by Putin's invasion of Ukraine and you have a region in crisis. Each factor exacerbates the other, fragility begetting fragility.

So what is to be done? U.S. foreign assistance has an important role to play in supporting partner governments to manage threats and improve stability and security. We need to bring fresh thinking and new tools to bear in reducing democratic backsliding, corruption, and other drivers of illegitimacy, combatting disinformation and limiting openings from malign external influence in the countries of the Sahel. We must support timely democratic transitions in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali, and critical political, social, economic, and governance reforms across the region to reduce corruption and prevent further democratic erosion.

We should enable governments to enhance their presence in underserved areas and decentralize their service delivery, foster increased citizen trust in their governments, mitigate the risk of intercommunal conflict, improve business-enabling environments, and reduce cycles of political instability by demonstrating that democracy can deliver tangible benefits for all.

We must help our partners adapt and manage consequences of ongoing climate change and displacement. This will require close

and genuine partnerships with local actors, including governments, civil society, and the private sector. None of this will take root without strengthening and expanding the role of African institutions and balancing regional threats and opportunities with underlying macroeconomic conditions.

We will have to get better at shifting more leadership, ownership, decision-making, and implementation to the people and institutions who possess the capability, connectedness, and credibility to drive change in their own countries and communities.

How can Congress help us? We cannot do this important work without the resources you generously provide every year. USAID and other partners of the U.S. Government working this problem set cannot know with certainty the shape of the conflict years out. We ask you to consider granting more flexibility to allow us to adapt as the facts and needs on the ground change quickly. It is a model that has succeeded and one USAID wants to scale to the size of the problem.

Similarly, USAID sees great utility in further conversation on flexible hiring mechanisms and better incentivizing our people to fill positions in the field where they are needed, often side-by-side with the Department of Defense and Department of State colleagues. Our missions and offices in the region are chronically understaffed, even though the work is critical to our national security. For all the enthusiasm of an integrated approach between departments and agencies here in Washington, the greatest difference comes in the field, alongside colleagues and international partners tackling these complex challenges together.

Thank you again for convening this important hearing. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jenkins follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Robert W. Jenkins

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for bringing attention to the urgent needs of this critically important region.

Looking across the Sahel, USAID sees a region where the confluence of U.S. national security interests means that we must devote attention and resources to supporting key partners. We also see a region that is particularly fragile, with weak governments characterized by corruption and lack of accountability, unprofessional security forces, limited services and opportunities for citizens, intercommunal conflicts, large gender inequalities, and armed groups looking to recruit.

Each country has a youth bulge, which presents tremendous opportunities, but could prove dangerous if other issues are not addressed. In addition, countries are still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not only placed already weak health systems under strain, but also reduced the overall presence of states, exacerbated social fragmentation, created economic hardship, and opened spaces for armed groups to exploit. Climate change is taking a particularly strong toll on countries across the Sahel, prompting increased competition and opening fissures between communities. Putin's war on Ukraine is harming food security and economic growth in the region. Meanwhile, democratic governance—the best mechanism to identify peaceful solutions to political problems, including those underpinning much of this violence—is under assault, with several extra-constitutional changes in governments in recent years.

These diverse conflicts and societal fractures in turn give violent extremist organizations, both international and local, opportunities to exploit, recruit, and perpetuate existing conflict. While our development and humanitarian assistance programs—from the fight against COVID-19 to education to a variety of life saving interventions—are achieving positive results for people in the Sahel, we cannot ignore the growing violence and instability threatening the progress we hope to achieve in the region.

The Sahel provides a striking example of the threats and challenges posed by violent extremists and conflict. In Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad, armed groups have challenged states' authority and legitimacy, recruited disaffected youth into their ranks, exacerbated ethnic tensions, aligned themselves with groups like Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Boko Haram, and used an extended period of simmering war and violence to grow and expand their influence. According to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index, 48 percent of terrorism deaths worldwide occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, and three countries in the Sahel—Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—suffered some of the largest annual increases. Since 2007, terrorism deaths in the region have increased by more than 1,000 percent, and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Al Qaeda's branch in the Sahel, is the world's fastest growing terrorist organization. This violence has caused widespread displacement, including more than 2 million people in Burkina Faso—10 percent of its population. Worryingly, several extremist groups have evolved beyond simply carrying out attacks; they now look to fill roles of the state, whether collecting revenue, administering so-called justice, or expanding their recruitment pool, including not just fighters, but also their families.

The governments of the Sahel are ill-equipped to manage and respond to these unprecedented threats to security, despite substantial support from the United States and its allies. Recent coups in Mali and Burkina Faso are both a symptom of the ineffectiveness of their civilian governments and a barrier to continued U.S. security assistance. Niger, with its democratically elected government and more capable security forces, remains a linchpin in our efforts to promote stability in the region, but it too is vulnerable as it has four separate violent extremist groups active in its borders. Many of the grievances that have led to increasing vulnerability to extremist influence in neighboring countries are also present in Niger, including poor service delivery, lack of economic opportunity, and an ill-functioning justice system. We must therefore reinforce our partnership with the Government of Niger to help it withstand the threat posed by terrorist organizations; our support must also include strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities against the influence of violent extremists. We should also continue to support Mauritania, particularly as an example of how democratic governments can deliver for their people. Meanwhile, we must think creatively about how the United States can work with military-led governments to support their return to democracy while also tackling the grave security challenges that threaten U.S. interests.

Other developments in the region—most notably the ongoing withdrawal of French forces from Mali—are shifting the landscape and necessitating a recalibration about how to address the threat posed by violent extremist groups in concert with our international partners. Continued support for and coordination with regional political and security organizations, like the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), will need to play a more prominent role in our strategic approach going forward. We appreciate, for instance, recent efforts by ECOWAS to encourage timely democratic transitions in Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as Guinea. We can also leverage our new membership in the Sahel Alliance to influence other like-minded donors active in the region.

Violent extremist groups are not, however, the only threat to U.S. interests in the Sahel. Our strategic rivals also seek to exploit the situation to pursue their own nefarious interests. Most notably, the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group has deployed to Mali, among other countries on the continent and throughout the world, and is credibly accused of atrocities against civilians. In April, Human Rights Watch reported that Malian armed forces and “associated foreign soldiers” executed 300 civilians in the town of Moura. Meanwhile, disinformation campaigns have targeted Western governments and promoted Russia as a more suitable security partner for countries in the region.

Compounding the deterioration of conditions in the Sahel is the territorial spread of violent extremist groups. Countries like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo must now grapple with the risk of attacks and recruitment from violent extremist groups. A decade ago, many of us would not have imagined these scenarios for a place like Ghana. In light of this risk, USAID is investing people and resources in Coastal West African countries as part of an integrated U.S. Government effort through the Global Fragility Act (GFA) and the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability with the goal of weakening violent extremist groups' appeal, curbing their opportunities to make inroads in these places, and building the resilience of governments and societies. Part of how we will define success in West Africa is keeping violent extremist groups from challenging governments, recruiting disaffected citizens, and carrying out attacks in coastal states the way they have elsewhere in the region. Complementary to that effort will be tackling instability in the Sahel.

On top of the security challenges facing the Sahel, the region is also experiencing a food security emergency. The combined effects of Russia's war on Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, long-term complex emergencies, and multiseason droughts and other effects of climate change have created an unprecedented crisis. The United Nations estimates that more than 40 million people will face food shortages during the upcoming lean season in West Africa. In the Sahel, this is exacerbated by an existing poor harvest and the effects of conflict that continue to deplete household food stocks and resources. Countries across the Sahel are also struggling to secure imports of fertilizer, grains, and other critical commodities. For example, the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) estimates that Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have less than half of their typical fertilizer stocks. Shortfalls of this scale could significantly reduce crop yields, food availability, and household incomes. Lessons learned from severe food security emergencies in 2017 indicate that incidence of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, early and forced marriage, child labor, family separation, and other negative coping strategies increase sharply during periods of acute food insecurity.

The human toll of these overlapping crises is enough to give us pause, but the proliferation of violent extremist activity in the Sahel—on top of ongoing conflicts already stressing under-capacitated governments with competing interests—has implications for American security. While USAID supports a rebalanced approach to counterterrorism, a number of increasingly experienced armed violent extremist groups with links to international terrorist groups still presents risks to Americans, the United States, and our interests, allies, and partners. As violent extremist groups grow, recruit, network, and become more emboldened, so too do the risks to our overseas facilities and personnel. The United States must prepare to confront future threats, but in our recalibration, we must continue to pay attention to the threat posed by violent extremist groups in places like the Sahel.

I firmly believe U.S. foreign assistance has a role to play in promoting stability and preventing the expansion of violent extremism in the Sahel, supporting partner governments to manage and transform conflict and violence, and ensuring communities are more resilient to recurrent threats. U.S. policy and our approach to advancing our strategic objectives in the years ahead requires fresh thinking and a new set of tools. Our approach must entail elevating policies and programs that simultaneously limit or reduce democratic backsliding, corruption, and other drivers of illegitimacy, combat disinformation, and limit openings for malign external influence in the five Sahelian states and their neighbors. In particular, we will need to work with the region's military-led governments to achieve timely and credible transitions to democracy. To counter disinformation campaigns by malign actors, we must improve our public outreach to better convey the benefits of partnering with the United States and the generosity of the American people. We will build on our excellent development programs that are delivering results and we must strengthen coordination across the interagency and cooperation with like-minded allies and partners to build institutional capacity across sectors. In addition, our work will require close, genuine partnerships with local actors, including governments and civil society, to shift more leadership, ownership, decision making, and implementation to the people and institutions who possess the capability, connectedness, and credibility to drive change in their own countries and communities.

It will be important for U.S. foreign assistance to the Sahel to include bolstering national institutions and policy reforms; promoting local-level civilian protection, service delivery, and development; improving partner coordination; optimizing coordination around food security and humanitarian assistance; and countering unhelpful external actors and disinformation campaigns. We must support timely democratic transitions in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali, and critical political, social, economic, and governance reforms across the region to reduce corruption and prevent further democratic erosion. U.S. assistance should also enable governments to enhance their presence in underserved areas and decentralize their service delivery, foster increased citizen trust in their governments, mitigate the risk of inter-communal conflict, improve business-enabling environments, and reduce cycles of political instability by demonstrating that democracy can deliver tangible benefits to all. We must also help our partners adapt to and manage consequences of ongoing climate change and displacement in the Sahel. None of this work will take root without strengthening and expanding the role of African institutions in balancing regional threats and opportunities with underlying macroeconomic conditions. The United States must similarly improve its coordination with other donors and allies to increase synchronization across development, humanitarian, and peace-building programming, and burden sharing while also countering the propaganda and disinformation generated by strategic competitors.

Finally, I appreciate this opportunity to share my views on what more Congress could do to help USAID and the rest of the U.S. Government protect its interests and advance its objectives in the Sahel. The scale of the challenges facing the region and the ever-changing nature of conflicts there have and would continue to benefit from increased flexibility in appropriated funding. These flexible contingency resources have allowed us to adapt as fast as the facts and needs on the ground change. It is a model that has succeeded and one USAID wants to scale to the size of the problem; we appreciate your continued consideration of flexible funds. Similarly, USAID sees great utility in a further conversation on flexible hiring mechanisms and better incentivizing our people to fill positions in the field where they are needed, often side-by-side with Department of Defense and the Department of State colleagues. Our Missions and offices in the region are chronically understaffed even though the work is critical to our national security. For all the enthusiasm of an integrated approach between departments and agencies here in Washington, the greatest difference comes in the field, alongside colleagues and international partners tackling these complex challenges together.

Thank you again for convening this important hearing.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Secretary Blyden.

STATEMENT OF CHIDI BLYDEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR AFRICAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. BLYDEN. Thank you, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, Senator Rounds, 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’s Sahel policy and how DoD is working to align its activities within the United States’ whole-of-government Sahel Strategy.

The National Defense Strategy outlines three high-level security priorities in Africa, namely: countering violent extremist organizations—VEOs—that pose a threat to the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests; strengthening allies and partnership to support mutual security objectives; and 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 6 months we have seen the intersection of these three challenges in the Sahel has resulted in military coups, unconstitutional political transitions, democratic backsliding in West Africa, the inherent 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 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 even provide economic opportunities in conflict environments, conditions are ripe for VEOs to exploit and appeal to vulnerable and unprotected marginalized populations,

Furthermore, 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 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. 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, otherwise known as JNIM, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, ISGS, within Mali, into neighboring Burkina Faso, Niger, and southward to the West African littoral countries. VEOs continue to spread towards coastal West Africa, and if left unchecked, will add to existing security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea and Coastal West Africa.

DoD is working closely with State and USAID to develop programs for Coastal West Africa countries as part of the Global Fragility Act, as mentioned by my colleague, and the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. The 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, and additionally, the withdrawal of forces under the French Operation BARKHANE have also created challenges to allowing the MINUSMA, or the United Nations mission in Mali, to continue its operations.

Given these new and increasing challenges, we—the U.S., our allies, and especially our African partners—need to consider the root of our counterterrorism efforts. As we have experienced in other key theaters, failing to understand the root causes at the local levels and understand our partners, their will to fight can have significant consequences. We need to integrate our entire approach in the Sahel with our African partners or we risk undermining our own efforts, and providing additional opportunities for VEOs and strategic competitors to gain access and influence.

Niger is one of our most critical and crucial security partners in the Sahel, and they continue 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 professionalization engagements with Sahel partners. Given its lengthy border with Mali, and hosting the G5 Sahel Defense College, enabling 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, 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 will of the Chadian people. Chad was one of only six countries on the African continent to endorse Russia's suspension from the U.N. 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 U.N. and regional peace operations.

We are encouraging our European allies and African partners operating in the Sahel to adopt a similar approach to what you will hear about from the Sahel strategy, 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. Although the continent is awash in new initiatives, it would truly benefit from management of the international communities' support to our partners and their locally supported efforts.

To this end, we continue to better understand our partners' security needs, designing and implementing our programs and engagements along mutual priorities.

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

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 that 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 arena.

Let us not forget the PRC seeks to expand its access, and the 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.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Blyden, you have been about 7 minutes, so if you can summarize for us.

Ms. BLYDEN. I will wrap up.

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

I apologize for taking a little extra time.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Blyden follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Chidi Blyden

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 6 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. 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. 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.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much. I will start a round of 5 minutes.

I am pleased to know that the Administration is on track to deliver a strategy for the Sahel in keeping with the requirements of the Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Partnership Program Act of 2021, which I sponsored. I appreciate the consultations that have occurred today on the staff level, and I consider this hearing a continuation of those consultations.

As I mentioned during my opening statement, I will have input into the strategy as a result of our conversations today and those that have taken place, but I would like each of our witnesses to elaborate on the following question. For two decades, successive administrations have focused heavily on security in the Sahel. I agree that security must be one element of our approach, but I also think

we need to balance defense assistance with our development and diplomatic efforts. How does the draft strategy differ from the approach of previous administrations with respect to balancing these so-called three D's?

Ms. PHEE. Mr. Chairman, you will recall a year ago when I came before this Committee for my confirmation hearing, I reviewed the testimony of the confirmation hearing of my predecessor in 2017, and at that time you asked him for a Sahel strategy, and when I assumed office we still did not have a Sahel strategy. So that was one of the first tasks I took on.

The CHAIRMAN. For the record, that is 5 years.

Ms. PHEE. Yes. I know. I tried to bring the lessons we have learned collectively, as a nation, from other theaters that are reflected in the Global Fragility Act. So you will see, as your staff has looked at the new strategy, an explicit shift away from a security-dominated focus to a diplomatic and development emphasis. Those, of course, are difficult tasks, as I mentioned in my initial statement, that will take some time.

As my colleagues have said and as I have said, we could use more resources to help us implement those tasks. In the current budget discussions underway in the Administration, there is an effort to address the allocation of resources to reinforce the outcomes and the strategy.

So I would say we absolutely have taken the lessons that we have learned, again, as a nation over the past 20 years, specifically in the Sahel in the past 10 years, and reoriented the strategy to reflect the concerns and the lessons we have learned.

The CHAIRMAN. Administrator Jenkins, any observations on that?

Mr. JENKINS. Thank you, Senator. I have seen a lot of these strategies before, and for many of them you can cut and paste the name of the country and the same objectives are in there. This is not like that. This is a real, clear-eyed, honest assessment of where things are in the Sahel. It is not a pretty picture. What we have to do first, let's get these three countries back on democratic rails, and how do we help them address the problems that they find themselves in?

As Assistant Secretary Phee said, these are generational problems. They will not be fixed in 5 years, but we have to start now, and we now have a new strategy to do that, that emphasizes not killing terrorists, but addressing the root causes. It is hard work. It is slow work. It needs to be resourced, but now we have a strategy and we can get on with it.

The CHAIRMAN. Secretary Blyden.

Ms. BLYDEN. I would offer that we have learned that the counterterrorism approach that we have employed in the Sahel in working with our allies and partners is not the only solution to addressing the growing insecurity. I think we are shifting our approach from solely only focusing on the CT approach to being more inclusive of not just the whole-of-government approach, but also addressing things at the local level, so ensuring that African initiatives and initiatives that are led by African institutions and frameworks are being enabled to be able to address the security concerns on their own. That, alongside with what we are doing on the governance end and what we are doing from a diplomatic end is helping pro-

vide a more holistic approach to addressing these. I think as both of my colleagues have said, this takes time, and allowing the African partners to give us what they know will work is also key.

The CHAIRMAN. Well let me follow up with you. In your written testimony you mentioned, and I am quoting you, "Ending U.S. security cooperation has affected our bilateral engagement with Chad." So did the coup affect our relationship at all? Are you suggesting that we engage in business as usual with a military junta? How would doing so reflect U.S. values, in your view, and what message would that send throughout the region, and for that fact, throughout the world, by continuing to support a junta as though the coup had not taken place?

Ms. BLYDEN. Senator, I would not suggest that we should support a junta. I would say that in our pulling back and not engaging regularly with the militaries and many of the governments, our absence and our ability to be able to provide influence, whether it be at the governance structure or even training, where we emphasize human rights values, where we emphasize a democratic approach, has inhibited our ability to be able to have access. Our influence, I think, is one of the key things that the U.S. has been able to provide.

So while I do not necessarily propose that we should continue to work with juntas, I do think having an ability to be able to work and talk to them, to be able to report our influence, is key.

The CHAIRMAN. Well talking to them is different than engaging in security cooperation with them, in which we are providing potentially resources, right? So one of the Committee's jurisdictions is the question of arms sales. It is very difficult to be engaged in selling arms to a junta that has upended constitutional order in a country. That is one of the challenges that I believe we have here, and it seems to me that our focus in the region has been, for some time, on a purely counterterrorism—and I understand that that is an important function, but when it becomes the sole driver, and when our engagement with the military entities that are not under civilian control ultimately continues and perpetuates them, that is a problem.

Let me ask one final question. I know that the draft strategy is a 5-year strategy. How will the Administration implement this strategy if three of the five countries in the Sahel are governed by illegitimate military juntas with shifting timelines for yielding power back to civilian authorities?

Ms. PHEE. Mr. Chairman, as we saw recently with the engagement by the regional bloc ECOWAS, with each of the governments in the region, excluding Chad which I can address separately, there is now a path to restore the transition to a stronger and more stable democracy. We can use—7008 does not deny us the use of resources to non-government entities to support the practices and policies of, for example, civil society, to encourage those successful transitions.

In Chad, which is not a member of ECOWAS, the Government of Qatar has been hosting, for the past 5 to 6 months, talks between the government and their traditional insurgent rivals, known as the political-military groups. Those talks, they are now

down to a final draft, which again would lay out milestones to have a national dialogue, to draft a constitution, to have an election.

So our proposal is that we would use the resources that are available to us and any increase in resources to help consolidate these plans to move towards democratic rule.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Rounds.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to follow up quickly with Ms. Blyden. How is the Department of Defense adjusting its approach to training military personnel of countries in the Sahel, given the four coups that have affected the region in just the last 2 years? I know that it is one of the really important things that we are able to do in terms of providing assistance is training military officers. What has changed within this region due to those four coups?

Ms. BLYDEN. We now have less partners to be able to work with. I think as Ambassador Phee noted, the G5 partners, which included five of the Sahelian partners, we are now down to two that we can actively work with, and that training, in our absence, of being able to provide our influence through security cooperation and human rights training and values that we typically put forth is now absent from the larger force borders. I think what we are hoping to do, how I mentioned in my statement, is work with those two partners that we still can work with, to increase their involvement.

We are also doubling down, I think, on other African partners who are willing and are capable and are interested in providing additional support to the Sahel. So we have partners in other regions, as you mentioned in the onset, North African partners who have been doing training in the Sahel already with Sahel partners, and we are asking actively for them to take a stronger role in being able to provide what they have already learned from us in a secondary or tertiary training, a security model, if you will.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Ambassador Phee, challenges with staffing at U.S. embassy posts in the Sahel is currently a significant challenge in implementing U.S. policy in the Sahel, and will be a major constraint to implementing the new interagency approved Sahel strategy. How is the State Department making certain that President Biden's nominees for ambassadorial posts in the Sahel are well qualified, with prior experience, serving in the region?

Ms. PHEE. Thank you, Senator. The challenge in staffing our posts goes from ambassadors down to the most entry-level officers, and it is something that consumes our time. We are working to give the State Department [inaudible] to overcome challenges from the previous era, where there was a freeze on hiring and we did not hire [inaudible] attrition. The Administration has put forward a strategic staffing initiative to help build up from that deficit and to help with the phenomenon affecting all of Americans, the sort of Great Resignation feature. Within the Africa Bureau, where it has been historically a difficult post to staff, we are undertaking critical reforms in how we hire. I am working with the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources and the Under Secretary for Management on options for new incentives. We are looking at new ways of handling our bidding process, what if somebody cyclical

goes out first, to offer handshakes first on the job. We are also developing a [inaudible] to reach out to members of the Foreign Service.

So it is a big problem which has many elements, and in terms of not having sufficient staff in the entire State Department as well as specific challenges for the Africa Bureau.

As you are aware, what is known as the D Committee, the Deputies Committee, handles the selection of nominees for Chief of Mission, and they look for diversity and background in all ways in making those nominations that they present to the Secretary and to the President.

Senator ROUNDS. Let me ask one more question with regards to the State Department and how it is organized and how that may very well bear on the issues taking place in the Sahel today.

In my opening statement I laid out the differences between different organizations as to how we treat different geographical parts of Africa. If you go back to 2011, when NATO began its campaign against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Mali's government warned that Gaddafi's removal would destabilize Mali. Shortly after Gaddafi's fall in 2011, ethnic Tuaregs who had served in Gaddafi's military, returned to Mali, joining an insurgency against Mali's government, in January of 2012, that was eventually co-opted by Islamist groups.

Does this experience provide any lessons learned with regard to how our North African policy can affect the Sahel?

Ms. PHEE. Senator, as I mentioned when I spoke to the Chairman, I did a lot of research before I took this position, and I found that AF, the Africa Bureau, used to be part of the NEA Bureau, the Near Eastern and African Affairs Bureau, and it was broken apart about the time of decolonization to reflect the interests and priorities of sub-Saharan African nations.

Absolutely, the overthrow of Gaddafi resulted in dramatic and negative impacts in the Sahel and in North Africa. So I absolutely agree with your concern about those outcomes.

However, I think we have a very strong relationship with the NEA Bureau, and we are able to work together to look at the cross-cutting issues. I meet regularly with the newly confirmed Assistant Secretary of State, Barbara Leaf, for Near Eastern Affairs, and our embassies are in regular contact, including travel back and forth to coordinate and collaborate on issues. In Mali, specifically, we are looking at the implementation of the Algiers Accord, which resulted from the Tuareg Rebellion.

So it is absolutely important that we work together, and I think this issue of how we organize ourselves has been under discussion in different ways for decades, but it is important that those of us in positions now work together continuously. Thank you.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Senator Kaine.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to the witnesses. Ms. Blyden, I think I am going to focus on you because I am an Armed Services Committee member and these are questions that might be more appropriate there, but I am curious.

The French have been doing counterterrorism operations in Mali since 2013. They have about 2,000 troops there. They have an-

nounced this year that they are going to withdraw those troops because of conflicts between their operations there and the Government of Mali. They are likely to redeploy some of those troops in Niger, where we have about 800 troops.

How is the withdrawal of French and EU forces from Mali likely to affect U.S. military operations in the region?

Ms. BLYDEN. The shift in the French location and the repositioning is seen both as a challenge, but I think it is also a positive. I think, as we have talked about, we see the spread moving towards the Coastal West Africa countries, and we are seeing an opportunity with the French repositioning to really rethink where it is that we might need bolstering of African partners to be able to continue to counter the violent extremist threat.

So the French are thinking through that with us. They are working with us, and the positioning of where we have our troops, to make sure that there is enough coverage between the African partners, the French operations that they are doing, as well as looking at where the peacekeeping mission is in Mali and where African partners have provided their own initiatives, to be able to, as I said, ensure we have coverage across the Sahel to try and prevent and counter what we see as a spread towards the littorals.

I think our operations and the support that we provide will continue in a way, but it will be spread more widely, I think, across the number of partners who will be doing the work that they do.

I did not want to take too long with this answer, but I do think it is important to note that there are other partners besides the French, who we have been working with as well in this region, Task Force Takuba, which has had some European allies as well. They are also thinking about how we can ensure that we have enough coverage to prevent the spread.

Senator Kaine. The second of the three goals you mentioned in terms of the National Defense Strategy was shoring up partners, and you testified that Niger is the most solid partner in the region. So if we take the U.S. forces, about 800, which is, I think, second-highest, only following Djibouti, we take those 800 forces, and if some of the French forces come there too that can serve both goals one and two of the three goals that you mentioned.

I am interested in following up on the deadly ambush that happened in Niger in 2017. Four U.S. Army Green Berets lost their lives. Four troops from Niger were killed. It was an unusual mission. It was an advise-and-assist training mission. There was not an expectation that it would be kind of in a conflict zone. A conflict developed. The group that killed our troops in Niger was not a group that the U.S. had designated as a terrorist group at that time.

What has been the assessment or alteration or reassessment of the advise-and-assist missions in the Sahel following the death of these Green Berets?

Ms. BLYDEN. Senator, I would have to come back to you on an answer on that. As you know, the Tongo Tongo incident has been researched and widely investigated to ensure that there has been accountability for the challenges that happened and occurred during that particular mission. I would be remiss if I told you I knew

exactly what the details of that were. So I would like to take that question for the record, if I can.

Senator Kaine. We will submit it in writing, and in particular, I am aware of some of the analysis of what happened, but I am particularly interested in whether the DoD has done adjustments or alterations to the advise-and-assist missions in the region as a result of those lessons learned. So we will do a written question for the record that is specifically on that point.

With that, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

The Chairman. So let me ask another question since I have the opportunity. There is no other member seeking recognition at this point.

I want to follow on on the Ranking Member's comments about hiring. Numerous State Department direct-hire positions at U.S. embassies in the Sahel remain unfilled. In Niger, for instance, more than 40 percent of State Department direct-hire jobs in our embassy are vacant. Overall in the Sahel, 22 percent of U.S. direct-hire positions remain unfilled.

So how is it that regardless of the strategy that we put together and that hopefully we will mutually agree upon, we will be able to implement such a strategy in the absence of that many direct-hires and the absence of full USAID missions in Chad, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, in terms of implementing the strategy? Isn't a call for a real commitment to beef up and to ensure that these direct-hires and other important positions get staffed in order to implement the strategy? Otherwise, we have a strategy on paper, but not an implementation.

Ms. Phee. Mr. Chairman, we agree with you wholeheartedly. I simply cannot do my job if we do not have people in the field, and that is where I expect the fingertip confidence to understand what is going on and to make recommendations and to implement U.S. policy effectively.

I think there are many components to this problem set. I talked about the general insufficient staffing for the State Department. We have talked about what the Administration is trying to do to compensate for previous years that led us to that deficit. I have talked about the challenges. Some of those percentages you are referring to are specific specialties like medical personnel or IT personnel, very hard to compete in the current environment. We also lost a lot of consular officers because we have tied the staffing of our consular's cone to visa fees, and visa fees went down during the COVID era.

We are missing Chiefs of Mission in a lot of posts, as you know. Chiefs of Mission are one way to attract and invigorate a post's staffing morale. Then there are steps we can take, that I have talked to you about, that we are working on to increase incentives and to adjust the way in which we recruit for those positions. So it is a multi-pronged approach.

The Chairman. It seems there needs to be a commitment from the top to ensure that this happens. Administrator, how about at USAID?

Mr. Jenkins. Thank you very much. As the Secretary alluded to, it is a complex problem. Those vacancies are partly due, that we have many more positions around the world than we actually have

Foreign Service Officers to fill those positions, for a variety of reasons. So it is not as though they are not in the Sahel, but they are somewhere else. There just are not enough qualified staff.

Senator, as you mentioned, it is not just having the people in those places. We want the right people in those places. So that is where we are excited to be having a conversation about possible additional hiring authorities, other mechanisms. We are doing everything we can to hire more Foreign Service Officers after what was a hiring freeze in the last administration. That affected the entire throughput at various levels.

So I could not agree more that we want the right people and more of them in the region to implement this strategy.

The CHAIRMAN. It seems to me that when you have difficulty in finding the right people and the people necessary that you create some type of incentive to attract the right people that maybe you normally do not do.

One other question. I am deeply concerned about the negative influence of Russian mercenaries and the Wagner Group in Mali and across the Sahel. The draft strategy acknowledges the seriousness of this problem, but in the most recent State Department budget request there does not appear to be a line item for countering Russia's malign influence in the Sahel.

So what actions are each of your agencies taking to counter Russia propaganda and the Wagner Group's influence in Mali? Is there a specific fund to support countering malign influence in Africa in the budget request? I am trying to understand how we are going to do this. We recognize there is a problem, though. What are we going to do about it?

Ms. PHEE. Mr. Chairman, some of the steps that are under consideration and actual planning include trying to dry up the source of financing, so looking at possible sanctions, looking at possible nontraditional measures such as the illegal export of gold, which is something that is of great interest to Wagner. How can we address those concerns?

We are looking at deepening our exchange of information with African governments to make sure they understand fully what we understand about the impact of Wagner.

A third element, which our Bureau of Political and Military Affairs is undertaking is trying to develop other options for security assistance. We are the best, but we are expensive and we are slow, and sometimes quite rightly, as has been illustrated in this hearing, we suspend security assistance to reflect our values. So we want to deter governments in the region from turning to Wagner to fill their security needs. So we are looking to see what we can do in terms of developing alternative sources of security assistance.

Those are some of the three areas in which we are trying to work to address the problem.

The CHAIRMAN. Secretary Blyden.

Ms. BLYDEN. For the Department of Defense we have had Legislation 1332, which was in this year's NDAA, which provides funding to both SOUTHCOM and AFRICOM to counter strategic competition on the continent, and specifically we're looking at China and also the Wagner Group in Mali and across the Sahel.

Mr. JENKINS. We have global resources towards disinformation, but in the Sahel specifically, where disinformation, including pro-Russia disinformation, was a problem for some time, in Mali that problem became exponentially larger once Wagner group arrived and once the French left.

I would never have thought I would see the day where people in Burkina Faso and Mali were waving pictures of Richard Wagner, a German composer who died in 1883, as some sort of hero.

So we immediately pivoted some of our civil society programs, programs working with youth and working with civil society on elections, towards disinformation. We are about to send a CN up to you all for an additional \$5.5 million, Mali specific. It is for tracking disinformation, the production of responsible consumption of information, and also a very robust monitoring and evaluation and learning component so we can learn from this project as we go to other countries and spread that out, because unfortunately I think we are stuck with disinformation problems for quite some time.

The CHAIRMAN. I look forward to the CN. Senator Coons.

Senator COONS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Rounds. I am very encouraged by the level of engagement and persistence here and by the engagement by the Administration, the release of the strategy by the Administration for how to deal with this region. As each of you referenced in your testimony, the Global Fragility Act, which I worked on for a number of years with members of this Committee, calls for a coordinated strategic approach to challenges very similar to what we see in the Sahel, on challenges of fragility where we need to work across the silos of defense, development, diplomacy and bring in other partners, not just European partners, regional partners to work with nations on the ground who are having challenges, to deliver not just the right strategy, but the right people from the United States, and to bring in NGOs and other partners.

So I would be interested in your view. The Global Fragility Act did not identify the Sahel. It identified other countries of the—the Global Fragility Act, based on Plan Columbia and the experience of many who served before me, of investing in stabilizing, at one point one of the most fragile countries in the Western Hemisphere and gradually moving through a coordinated strategy towards a less conflict-ridden country. There are already ways in which the conflict and the instability in the Sahel are leeching into each of the coastal countries of West Africa.

Taking that general approach, hearing the questions of the members of the Committee, how are we going to work better together as a country in addressing the pressing, the critical governance development and security needs of countries like Mali and Burkina? How are we sustaining any coordinated regional strategy, and what do you most need from us? I happen to also chair an Appropriations subcommittee, and spoke as recently as last night to the Administrator of USAID about some of these hiring flexibilities. We want to make sure that you are communicating effectively with this Committee and with other committees about exactly what do you need to deliver to meet this moment.

If you would, please, in order. I would just be interested in hearing, what is our strategy for engagement with our partners and allies in the region and the other donors and the other countries that are capable of delivering development, diplomacy, and security assistance?

Ms. PHEE. Senator, thank you for your leadership and interest in innovating our policy in this area. One of the other components of the Sahel strategy, as I described when I first took on this task and started looking at it, is I recommended that USAID join the Sahel Alliance, which is a grouping of donors, to make sure that we were working in partnership, as this Committee has directed us to do, particularly with our European partners in the Sahel.

I do not know if you have been informed, but we recently had a Global Chiefs of Mission Conference, and we had a seminar with all of us involved in implementing the Global Fragility Act in Coastal West Africa. Everyone is extremely excited about the new flexibilities and the new resources, and there are detailed plans that have been set forward.

One of the key components of the conversation was how to make sure that we stay coordinated and knit it up and how we can demonstrate that we are using those resources and flexibilities not only to good effect in the Sahel, but perhaps to come back to you to recommend maybe how to carry over that approach to other problem sets.

Of course, the Sahel is in a different place than Coastal West Africa, regrettably in a worse place. We have, frankly, a little bit more to work with in terms of partners and capabilities in Coastal West Africa. So I think it is a good first, if you will, demonstration effect of the approach.

I have joked with Rob that I wish State had an OTI. I have been looking very hard at the challenges we have faced in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa in terms of military coups, and how can we respond. Are we agile enough? Do we have the right staff? Do we have the right resources to go in and help governments put things back on track to take actions, like the ones Rob referred to with regard to countering disinformation?

It is hard for me, for example, to predict. Chad, it looks to me like they may get to this agreement, but I cannot really tell you where they will be in 3 months or 6 months. So sometimes it is hard, given our budget planning cycle, to be adequately prepared for a very fluid and dynamic environment. Thank you.

Senator COONS. I would be happy to talk with you about that in more detail. Mr. Chairman, can the other two answer? If you could, briefly.

Mr. JENKINS. Senator, first thank you so much for your leadership on the Global Fragility Act. My team is on point at USAID for working with our regional bureaus on implementation of the strategy. I can talk for a long time. You do not have a lot of time. We would love to spend time getting into detail on exactly what we are doing, how we are doing it, what we are looking to do, and what we need.

We do need additional flexibility. Thank you so much, all of you, for the flexibility we have been given, not just under the terms of GFA, but lately, but we could always use more, much more. We

need to do more to get your trust so that we can have more flexible resources and keep that communication going. That is something we would like to have from you, that partnership.

We need your patience. Ten years is a long time, but we are still 23½—10-year plans in our own country, and we are not sure what the Constitution always means when we are in agreement with each other.

So I love that you referenced Plan Columbia. Columbia is an example I often use because once security was there and the political will was there and the strategic patience was there, our government worked in an interagency fashion that is extremely rare. That is what we need to do and have to do if we are going to make the Global Fragility Act succeed the way we need it to be. Thank you.

Ms. BLYDEN. I will be even briefer. Flexibility of funding and resources, I think also giving a little bit of latitude on time. I had the privilege of working on Plan Columbia when I sat on the Hill, and used that to work with a number of congressional members on the House Armed Services and HVAC to develop an Africa Act that I think mirrored what Plan Columbia did. I think the interagency coordination and the ability to be able to look out over a period of time is something that is needed for Africa as well. I would encourage to maybe revisit that legislation that was introduced a few years ago to see if it could be something that could be employed in the Africa context as well.

I think from a security side, coordination. The U.S. Department of Defense has an ability, and the U.S. in general has an ability to be able to convene partners together, and that is a strength that we have that I think will enable us to be able to be more successful in the Africa context.

Senator COONS. Thank you all very much. I am very concerned about Russian disinformation, particularly around Ukraine and whether or not it is their aggression or our sanctions that are causing significant hunger and development disruptions around the world. I look forward to working with all of you and your agencies around that challenge.

Thank you very much for your forbearance, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Just a comment before I turn to Senator Rounds. There is always the friction—I am sorry. I turn to Senator Van Hollen first. There is always the friction of you want flexibility, but we need justification because we are responsible for the fiduciary responsibilities here to the American people, as well as understanding the policies. So if you help us understand what you are going to do with the flexibility and give us some universe of what it is, the type of thing you are going to do, it will be far more helpful to achieve the goal.

Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank all of you for your testimony and for your service. I know there has been a lot of focus, at least conceptually, on the new strategy, and I have long been concerned that we do not strike the adequate balance between going after terrorists and investing in long-term stability in terms of democracy and development. So I am pleased to see this strategy being unfolded.

I would like to get a little more granularity. Maybe, Assistant Secretary Phee, you could give me an example, whether it is Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, how we are doing something different because of this new strategy in one of those countries, or pick another example. Just a little bit of meat on the bone would be helpful, I think, in terms of aligning resources with the new strategy.

Ms. PHEE. Great. What we are trying to do right now in discussions about FY22, is work within the Administration to reallocate resources into the democracy and governance space. We have talked a little bit here about the difficulty of working with military-led governments, but there are many components of a society that support a transition—women, NGO activists, constitution-drafting exercises, those types of things. We are looking to apply those resources to implementing partners that have a long track record, like NDI, IRI, IFES and whatnot. Also, working with the regional organization, ECOWAS, to support technical advisors that they might provide.

I mentioned also that we are discussing how we can identify resources, targeted personnel resources, to go out and help advise on how to move out of a military-run government to a democratic government.

So that is, I think, the first priority that we are looking to reshift our allocation into those types of programs.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Got it. We can expect to see that in the allocation of USAID resources, principally? Or what other resources are we talking about?

Ms. PHEE. I have a very, very tiny budget, and I have worked hard to befriend “F” in the State Department, but seriously, I support, from our leadership, to try and implement the strategy, and we are doing that in partnership with USAID.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Assistant Administrator Jenkins, so that is an area that you continue to brief this Committee and subcommittees with respect to—as you said, there is a long list and it gets in detail. I would be interested in seeing how exactly you are implementing this.

Mr. JENKINS. We would be very happy to start that conversation and have that an active conversation.

I will just add the way we got to the strategy was new as well, with development, USAID as a full partner at the table, working on this together, and stressing the need for the development work we do, not just the counterterrorism thing. That in itself—in fact, we have this now strategy that is a shared strategy that we all are committed to, is something that is a great innovation.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Got it. Ms. Blyden, I know that Senator Rounds asked you about the number of countries where we have seen recent coups, and I think you responded that, well, that does mean we have fewer partners going forward. I guess I want to back that up, because what we have seen over time is a lot of the coup leaders, in many cases, are organizations, individuals that we have had a previous relationship with. I think that is probably what drove some of the new strategy is trying to rethink how we go about doing that.

Congresswoman Sara Jacobs and I today are introducing legislation that would—it is called the Upholding Human Rights Abroad

Act, and what it would do is expand the Leahy Law requirements to also include a couple other DoD-based programs that are not currently included. This is not an effort to tie people's hands, but it is an effort to accomplish what I think is the goal of this new strategy, to make sure that we are not unwittingly supporting and funding those who turn around and undermine democracy and development.

So could you talk a little bit about lessons we learned in some of these countries where despite what we thought were our best efforts, we ended up having the boomerang come around and hit us in the head?

Ms. BLYDEN. Absolutely. I think maybe to answer part of your last question and then transition into this one, what we are doing differently, even though we have always had a by-with-and-through approach, and you will hear AFRICOM talk about that, it has been by, with, and through a number of different partners. We are really focusing now on the African partners and looking at the multiple levels of where it is that we see engagement has been successful and where we maybe have lacked in providing additional support.

For us, and our support to the Sahel strategy, we are looking at investing more in our civilian-led defense institutions. So regional centers like the Africa Center for Strategic Studies that focuses on institutional capacity building when it comes to governance and parliamentary and managing security resources. We are doing more to invest in that area. We are also working more with our Institute for Security Governance, which is under the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, to provide additional training at the multiple level. So whether it is senior leaders, emerging security sector leaders, or at the training and sort of foot soldier level, we are ensuring that we are giving the entire holistic approach to what it means to have security assistance and security cooperation from both a governance standpoint as well as the train, advise, and assist, which we are typically known for.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Rounds.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I know we are getting down close to the end of this particular meeting. I have one question. I would like it to go to each of you, and perhaps in less than a minute you could respond back. Whether it be in our diplomatic efforts or our economic development efforts or our national defense efforts, we have to recognize that there is a great powers competition going on. Russia and China are both very actively engaged on the African continent, and they are also very actively engaged within the Sahel.

What is it that we are doing that perhaps China and Russia are not doing, and vice versa, what is it that Russia and China are doing that we are not doing with regard to this particular area, in your specific areas of expertise? I would begin with the Ambassador, please.

Ms. PHEE. Thank you, Senator. That is almost an easy question because I think, generally speaking, we are the preferred partner in every sector for Africans. We care about humans. We care about civilians. We care about unleashing their potential. Those are not areas of focus for Russia or China. So that, I think, is the biggest

difference, that we work beyond governments, with all sectors of society, to encourage governance that is inclusive, and unleashes the potential of society.

Senator ROUNDS. Mr. Jenkins.

Mr. JENKINS. I agree wholeheartedly. I would sum it up as partnership. Russia and China enter into transactional relationships. We, if we are doing what we should be doing, is listening, partnering, and working not just at a national level, but localization, working with local people, finding them where they are, helping them with what they want help on, and working in true partnership.

Senator ROUNDS. Ms. Blyden.

Ms. BLYDEN. I agree with both of my colleagues and would say that we stand on the foundations of democracy, human rights, and governance. I think the other thing that we offer is civil-military relations and the understanding of how this works symbiotically to ensure that there is good governance in a country. I think the transactional approach that both Russia and China take have resonated with our partners. They understand that we care and they understand that we are there to enable them for the long haul and that we understand that organic African solutions are critical to the success of security in the region.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Rounds.

One final question, and the rest I will submit for the record. Following the 2012 military coup in Mali we imposed travel bans on more than 80 individuals responsible for orchestrating or supporting the coup. We imposed similar travel bans on military coup leaders in Mauritania in 2008, Guinea in 2009, Guinea-Bissau in 2012, and the Central African Republic in 2013. Both ECOWAS as the European Union have imposed personal, targeted sanctions on the leaders of the latest military coup in Mali. The United States, however, has yet to take such actions in response to recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Guinea for that matter.

So, Ambassador, how do you explain this break with precedent? Shouldn't we have a consistent policy for imposing travel bans or other sanctions on military officers who seize power unconstitutionally?

Ms. PHEE. Mr. Chairman, such sanctions authority is an important tool that we can apply, and we should continuously review when are the appropriate circumstances to apply, in partnership, in particular, with ECOWAS, so that our actions are reinforcing.

I think these particular changes in government, while very unwelcome, reflected complex circumstances, and there was an effort underway to see if we could encourage these leaders to get back on track. I think we have seen, with the recent ECOWAS negotiations, at least a stated commitment to get back on track, and so we should keep that tool in mind, but the objective was to drive the parties back towards democratic transition.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, I would just say that both ECOWAS and the European Union have imposed those type of sanctions. So if we want to be in concert with them, I do not understand why we have not. I understand it is a powerful tool. I get the sense that the Bureau is adverse to sanctions use and reticent about doing it, and

I do not understand, the limited tools of peaceful diplomacy that we have, why we refrain from it when other elements are not pursuing our interests, and when we would be in synchrony with those entities in Africa that saw it important to go ahead and do.

So we would love to hear from you on that, and I would like you to more fully respond for me in the record.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for coming before the Committee to give their testimonies. While ultimately our African partners must lead the way in addressing the problems in the Sahel, the least we can do is ensure that the assistance we provide is as impactful as possible. I look forward to continuing to dialogue with the Administration on the strategy as it is finalized.

The record for this hearing will remain open until the close of business on Thursday, July 14, 2022. Please ensure that questions for the record are submitted no later than that date. Please be as responsive as you can, as fully as you can, when you receive them.

Thanks to the Committee for your testimony. This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:58 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF MS. MOLLY PHEE TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROBERT MENENDEZ

Question. Have our embassies in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso made similar public statements making it clear that the leaders of military juntas cannot double as candidates in elections organized to restore democratic governance? If not, why not? If the Administration's new Sahel strategy entails a more unified approach to coup leaders and military juntas across the Sahel, shouldn't this be standard language?

Answer. Regarding Mali, we insisted that the MINUSMA mandate state that "the Head of the Transition and the Prime Minister of the Transition should not under any circumstances be candidates for the forthcoming presidential election." We also publicly reiterated the Economic Community of West African States' position that senior members of the transition government may not run for election in our 2021 explanation of the vote which followed the May 2021 military takeover. We further noted in various public statements that Mali must return to a democratic, civilian-led government.

Guinea's Transition Charter prohibits the Transition President, Transition Prime Minister, and National Transition Council members from running in national and local elections. The U.S. Ambassador to Guinea has publicly commended the charter's prohibition of transition government candidates. Burkina Faso's transition charter prohibits the Transition President and the president of the legislative assembly from running for office. For this reason, the United States has not publicly called on the Transition Government to stand-down from running in their country's next Presidential elections.

Regarding all three, we continuously espouse our support for the positions of ECOWAS and African Union, which have maintained from the outset that the transition leaders may not run for office.

Question. Does France agree with the AU principle that junta leader Gen. Mahamat Déby and other members of the transitional government in Chad cannot run in elections they are supposed to organize? If not, what diplomatic efforts do we need to take to garner French agreement and support?

Answer. The United States and France share interest in seeing concrete and consistent progress toward long-term stability in Chad and in the region, and believe that civilian-led and democratically elected government and increased economic opportunity is the best path to long-term stability. Chad is a critical security partner for France, and a longtime center of gravity for the French military in West/Central Africa. In the past, France has intervened in Chad's leadership contests and believes that security in the Sahel has a direct impact on the French homeland. As such, France has shown some restraint recently in public messaging around this topic;

however, they have supported the AU position in the past. The U.S. Embassy in N'Djamena continues to coordinate with France and other likeminded partners in the region on joint public messaging to emphasize the importance of a peaceful, inclusive, democratic transition.

Question. Following the 2012 military coup in Mali, we imposed travel bans on more than 80 individuals responsible for orchestrating or supporting the coup. We imposed similar travel bans on military coup leaders in Mauritania in 2008, Guinea in 2009, Guinea Bissau in 2012, and the Central African Republic in 2013. Both ECOWAS and the European Union have imposed personal, targeted sanctions on the leaders of the latest military coup in Mali. The United States, however, has yet to take such actions in response to recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, or Guinea, for that matter. Ambassador Phee:

How do you explain this break with precedent? Shouldn't we have a consistent policy for imposing travel bans or other sanctions on military officers who seize power unconstitutionally?

Answer. Our policy objective has been to work with the transition governments to get the countries back on the path to democracy. We continually review all tools available to us to determine what is the best tool to use to advance foreign policy goals. Imposing visa restrictions or financial sanctions as a blanket response to adverse political activity may be incongruent with the task of working with these transition governments to undertake reforms that are demanded by their people to form the foundation of a more responsive democratic system. In Mali, following the May 2021 military takeover, the United States immediately suspended security assistance that had continued under available authorities, ultimately cutting programs amounting to \$9.1 million. Following Guinea's September 2021 military coup d'état, security assistance for the Government of Guinea was restricted under section 7008 of the annual appropriations act. Ending security assistance, which the Mali and Guinea coup leaders monitor closely as military officers, had a significant impact and advanced foreign policy goals in country.

Likewise, in Burkina Faso, our Embassy is working to advance our mutually shared priorities focused on ensuring a democratic transition, development, and security. While we remain open to all available tools, we want to keep the door open with our Burkinabe partners to allow us the space to collaborate on supporting the country's democratic transition.

The Department carefully reviewed the events in Chad and concluded that the military coup restriction in section 7008 of the annual appropriations act had not been triggered with respect to Chad. Separately, the African Union carefully examined the events in Chad and did not assess that the actions that led to the formation of a Transitional Military Council taking power in the aftermath of the battlefield death of the former president was a military coup d'état.

Question. There are credible reports that the Malian military and Russian mercenaries hired by the Malian junta have massacred hundreds of civilians and perpetrated gross violations of human rights. Assistant Secretary Phee: Has the Administration taken any steps to support accountability for these killings?

Answer. We have repeatedly called for MINUSMA to have freedom of movement to investigate the allegations of human rights violations and abuses perpetrated by the Malian Armed Forces in conjunction with the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group. We have publicly raised our concerns over these reports, noting that such violence perpetrated by state security forces will only result in more Malian citizens enlisting in the ranks of violent extremist organizations. The Administration is reviewing the allegations of human rights violations and abuses by the Malian Armed Forces.

Question. When the military junta in Guinea in 2009 massacred more than 150 pro-democracy demonstrators in Conakry, we imposed sanctions in the form of travel bans. Shouldn't we now do the same for senior Malian junta leaders responsible for extra judicial killings and other gross violations of human rights against civilians Mali?

Answer. The Department will consider using all tools at its disposal to respond to reports that senior Malian transition government leaders are responsible for human rights violations and abuses against civilians.

Question. How will the Administration work with the EU and France in particular to ensure that international support for democracy, development, and defense in the Sahel is more equally balanced given France's predominately security-focused approach?

Answer. The Department engages regularly with the EU and France at various levels—both in capitals and in the field—and has good working relationships with

their respective Sahel Special Envoys and Assistant Secretaries for African Affairs equivalents. The Bureau of African Affairs consulted with the EU and France as well as other likeminded partners when crafting the new Sahel strategy, which focuses on diplomacy, development, and cross-sector institutional capacity building, in addition to operational and tactical defense requirements. Many of our partners share our view that the Sahel requires a governance-first approach. We strengthened our cooperation with our likeminded partners by joining the development-focused Sahel Alliance in March 2022.

Question. What do you assess will be the impact of the French military withdrawal on the security situation in Mali? Are there implications for the security of U.S. personnel, and if so, what steps are we taking to mitigate such impacts? What will be the impact on the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali? Will a significant deterioration in the security situation impact the Administration's approach in the Sahel? If so, how?

Answer. The security situation is already worsening pending the French withdrawal. Mali experienced a 340 percent increase in conflict fatalities in the first quarter of 2022 as compared to the previous year. ISIS–Greater Sahara (ISIS–GS) is gaining ground in eastern Mali. In the first quarter of 2022 ISIS–GS was responsible for 455 civilian fatalities, two-thirds of which occurred in Mali against mainly Tuareg communities. The al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) continues to dominate the militant milieu, staging complex attacks on security forces and exercising control over populations. The absence of French reassurance flights for MINUSMA and the loss of the hospital in Gao, which European troop-contributing countries rely on, could affect MINUSMA's security and effectiveness. French repositioning of Operation Barkhane and Task Force Takuba has complicated efforts to maintain a secure posture and to pursue discreet counter-terrorism goals in the region.

We are preparing for a deterioration of the security situation by increasing resilience efforts in coastal West Africa, including through implementation of the Global Fragility Act strategy, shoring up Niger and Mauritania, focusing on keeping Kremlin-backed Wagner Group forces out of Burkina Faso, and maintaining a forward-leaning posture using available authorities on security assistance while we have a willing partner in the Burkinabe transition government.

Question. How is the Administration adjusting to the relocation of French troops to Niger? What steps are we taking to ensure that a substantial increase in the number of French troops in Niger does not cause a backlash against western governments perceived to be closer to national militaries than to local populations, or against the already fragile government in Niamey?

Answer. The United States maintains an excellent relationship across the board with the Government of Niger, and we are continuing that close collaboration as France increases its presence in Niger. We are currently working with the Government of France to enhance our coordination specific to Niger in order to support our shared interest in bolstering security, governance, and development, prioritizing first and foremost the needs of the Nigerien Government and people in alignment with U.S. priorities.

RESPONSES OF MR. ROBERT JENKINS TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROBERT MENENDEZ

Question. Mr. Jenkins, you mention in your written testimony that “we must think creatively about how the United States can work with military-led governments to support their return to democracy while also tackling the grave security challenges that threaten U.S. interests.” Presumably you are speaking of Chad.

Shouldn't we also—and perhaps primarily—be working with civil society actors, multilateral and local and international non-governmental organizations to, as you put it, “achieve timely and credible transitions to democracy”?

Answer. USAID programming in Chad is limited, but with the small amount of funding available, the team is very focused on working with civil society actors and local non-governmental organizations. One such program is the Chad Civil Society Strengthening Activity (CCSSA), which primarily works with civilian actors to advocate for a civil society voice in the National Dialogue process. USAID grant-funded civil society organizations (CSOs) are working to raise awareness on peace and social cohesion through online and traditional media, and public assembly points equipped with loudspeakers in the capital with a focus on raising women's voices to ensure a more inclusive and robust dialogue and reconciliation process.

In Chad, USAID also supports civic education in schools where children learn their rights and responsibilities, including updating civics education textbooks for primary and secondary school, and developing a teachers' manual and teaching modules to improve the quality of civics instruction.

Supporting civil society organizations is one tool of many that the entire U.S. Government response can employ while advocating for a timely and credible transition to democracy. USAID, and others, development interventions are positioned to raise awareness of transparent, inclusive and fair elections. USAID civil society efforts in Chad, through the CCSSA, are working on furthering these pillars of democracy.

Question. Mr. Jenkins, you also mention the need to “build on our excellent development programs” in the Sahel.

What programs are we building on in Chad that will help foster the outcomes we are hoping for?

Answer. The multi-year Chad Civil Society Strengthening Activity (CCSSA), launched in 2019, is managed by USAID's Sahel Regional Office (SRO) in Dakar. The activity will run through 2024, has a ceiling of \$8.5 million, and received \$3 million for fiscal year 2020. This activity is the only bilateral-funded USAID activity in Chad.

Over the course of decades, Chadians have been denied opportunities to engage with government institutions and witnessed the arrest and repression of civil society actors throughout the country. CCSSA aims to rebuild Chadians' interest in such engagement and provide training, workshops, and networking opportunities for Chadian civil society organizations (CSOs) to better equip them with tools to productively and effectively engage Chadian institutions and citizens.

The activity's focus on civil society capacity building creates flexibility for the activity to pivot from priority area to priority area by working with specialized CSOs, as needed. This has been extremely helpful in the ever-changing circumstances over the last 3 years in Chad. The activity started out with a diverse portfolio, doing things like contributing to tech and innovation or entrepreneurship hubs in Chad as well as cultural associations advocating for unity and peace messages.

The activity pivoted at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic to work with civil society to both build capacity and trust between CSOs and communities while also doing important work in the midst of the pandemic such as spreading health-related information and fighting COVID-19 disinformation.

USAID has further built on this foundational work by turning the focus of CCSSA to the upcoming National Dialogue and ongoing reconciliation efforts. USAID is utilizing Complex Crisis Funds in the wake of the unconstitutional leadership transition in Chad to enable CCSSA to take on this expanded role. Recently, grant-funded CSOs are currently working on efforts to raise awareness on peace and social cohesion through the web, the media, and seven public assembly points equipped with loudspeakers in the capital. There are also efforts to identify and amplify women's voices to ensure a more inclusive and robust dialogue and reconciliation process.

Question. In your testimony, you indicate that “missions and offices in the region are chronically understaffed even though the work is critical to our national security.”

Is it possible to increase what we are doing in Chad to the degree envisioned in the strategy in the absence of a USAID mission? Does USAID have any direct hire positions in Chad? If so how many? What about Burkina Faso and Mauritania—how are there missions there? How many USAID direct hires are in each country?

Answer. USAID does not have any direct-hire positions in Chad. USAID employs one U.S. Personal Services Contractor as our Country Program Manager, overseeing USAID bilateral funding and program implementation. USAID's Sahel Regional Office, in Senegal, provides additional assistance as needed to ensure our programs are executed to their full potential.

In 2019, USAID launched the Chad Civil Society Strengthening Activity (CCSSA). CCSSA is a 5-year, \$8.5 million project that aims to rebuild Chadians' interest in engaging with government institutions by providing training and networking opportunities for Chadian civil society organizations (CSOs) to better equip them with tools to productively and effectively engage Chadian institutions. USAID has been able to start this activity as well as add new activities in health and implement humanitarian response funding in Chad without a Mission or Office designation.

USAID does not have missions in Mauritania or Burkina Faso. USAID has a U.S. Personal Services Contractor as our Country Program Manager and a Foreign Service National in Mauritania to support our program implementation there. In addition to these two staff, USAID's Sahel Regional Office provides additional help as necessary, similar to Chad, to ensure that our programs are well executed.

Burkina Faso hosts an Office of the USAID Representative. This office has an organization chart with 25 positions, of which 20 are currently filled. This includes five U.S. Direct Hire positions, two of which are currently filled, two of which have been assigned and will be arriving next month and early 2023, and one that is unassigned and will be recruited for in the upcoming bidding cycle.

RESPONSES OF MS. CHIDI BLYDEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROBERT MENENDEZ

Question. Ms. Blyden, in your written testimony you mention that “ending U.S. security cooperation has affected our bilateral engagement” with Chad. Do you agree that the junta must make space for an inclusive national dialogue, hold elections according to the timeline endorsed by the African Union, and, as our Chargé d’ Affaires in N’Djamena said in her July 4th speech, that members of the junta must commit publicly not to run as candidates?

Answer. The U.S. Government desires a peaceful transition to democracy in Chad. I believe the U.S. should support democracy, governance, and human rights, especially in countries where coups or other unconstitutional transitions have occurred. I also believe we should leverage all bilateral relationships, especially military-to-military relationships, in order to underscore that civilian control of the military is part of U.S. doctrine and is fundamental to democracy. This message carried to coup leaders through the U.S. military can have a significant positive impact and reinforces our values through demonstrated action.

Question. Does DoD maintain a database of individuals who have received training under Title 10 programs? Is the U.S. Government aware of whether or not individuals who are part of the juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, or Chad are the beneficiaries of U.S. training under Title 10? Which junta members in the three aforementioned countries have received U.S. training? What did that training entail?

Answer. All foreign recipients of U.S. security assistance are vetted in accordance with U.S. law, to include human rights vetting conducted in accordance with 10 U.S.C. 362 (“Leahy vetting”), local screenings conducted by U.S. Embassy personnel, and biometric data collection when required. DoD and DoS strictly adhere to vetting laws and requirements for military partners. All individuals that have been Leahy vetted for training are in a database maintained by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA). We are aware that the individuals who are part of the juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso are the beneficiaries of U.S. training under Title 10. Colonel Goita of Mali and Lieutenant Colonel Damiba of Burkina Faso all received U.S. training in the past. This training included, but may not be limited to, special operations training, participation in partnership, joint exercises such as Flintlock, and attendance at programs.

RESPONSES OF MS. MOLLY PHEE TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JAMES E. RISCH

Question. What do you ascribe to this trend in coups and transitions of power by non-democratic means in the Sahel region and wider Africa?

Answer. Over the past 2 years, we have seen increasingly negative trends in African democracies. Among the most troubling trends are extra-constitutional and other seizures of power, most egregiously demonstrated by several coup d’états across the continent. A lack of genuine representation for marginalized groups, poor service delivery, and a feeling of insecurity coupled with a lack of trust in governments and security institutions has exacerbated anti-democratic trends in the region.

Question. What is the role of the U.S. in helping nations through these problematic periods without over-engaging democratically illegitimate regimes?

Answer. While transitional governments are often rife with corruption and lack the credibility to advance genuine reform, they are also opportunities to reframe historical grievances, establish accountability mechanisms for past abuses, and support reconciliation needed for social cohesion and long-term peace and prosperity. A successful democratic transition needs to be built from the ground up, ensuring public consultation and buy-in throughout the process, including a wide range of civil society actors.

We need greater investment in democracy and governance programing, as well as more development assistance that targets underlying social, environmental, and eco-

conomic deficiencies so that the United States is positioned to assist these transitions in moving toward a more stable democratic future.

Question. Where do you see this trend going in the months and years ahead? Have we entered a new era of change through force than the ballot box?

Answer. While we have seen a significant number of extra-constitutional seizures of power in the region, the most prevalent form of democratic backsliding continues to be through limiting political space, repressing opposition voices, and extrajudicial constitutional changes to extend term limits. Military seizures of power, military coups, and other measures to take over by force create significant challenges for militaries and transitional governments, as well as significant international attention. It is more likely we will see a slow erosion of democracy by those looking to maintain power for the longer-term.

Question. How can the United States implement a policy and invest in governments either under the rule of military juntas or constantly under threat of being overthrown?

Answer. We must address the underlying drivers of insecurity to effectively support efforts by African partners to turn the tide. We must be realistic about the daunting social, environmental, political, and economic conditions that overwhelm the Sahel. In order to contend with violent extremist groups, governments in the region must dramatically reform and improve. We can best encourage this required change by investing in governance.

The new interagency Sahel strategy seeks to build the capacity of governments in the Sahel to regain public confidence at the national and local levels by providing equitable delivery of government services, including security, law enforcement, and justice. We will provide the resources and guidance to encourage accountability, anti-corruption measures, and dialogue between capitals and communities. These are the keys to winning the support of civilian populations.

Question. Challenges with staffing at U.S. embassy posts in the Sahel is currently one of the greatest challenges to implementing U.S. policy in the Sahel, and will be a major constraint to implementing the new inter-agency approved Sahel Strategy.

How is the State Department working to improve staffing for Embassy posts in the Sahel?

Answer. AF is working with GTM to improve the incentives for serving in Sahel countries. AF Bureau also successfully lobbied to put two Sahel countries (Mali and Burkina Faso) on the Special Incentive Post bid season, allowing for bidders who were looking at SIP to have an early look at positions at these critical posts. AF also recently instituted a Bespoke Bidding Tool to help prospective bidders find positions in countries that can fit their needs. With this hands-on approach, we hope to direct qualified bidders to these extremely important positions in the Sahel.

Question. Is filling the post for U.S. Ambassador to Niger a priority for the State Department? If yes, how is the Department engaging with the White House on this appointment? If no, why not?

Answer. President Biden nominated Kathleen A. FitzGibbon to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Niger on August 3, 2022. Filling the Ambassador position in Niamey is a priority to the Administration and the State Department due to the importance Niger has in our Sahel policy. We look forward to engaging the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as Ms. FitzGibbon's nomination is considered for confirmation.

Question. You mentioned in your remarks in the hearing that, as a way to ensure the quality of individuals and the increase of staff hired for Embassy posts in the Sahel, the State Department is "providing incentives." Please elaborate what those incentives are and on adjustments to the bidding process being implemented at the State Department?

Answer. AF Bureau worked with GTM to increase the incentives for all Sahel countries to hopefully improve staffing at these important Missions. The following shows the changes: Bamako: increase in Rest & Recuperation (R&R) trips from 3 to 4 for a 2-year tour; N'djamena: increase of R&Rs from 2 to 3 for a 2-year tour along with an increase in differential from 30 to 35 percent; Niamey: increase in R&Rs from 2 to 3 for a 2-year tour; Nouakchott: increase in R&Rs from 2 to 3 and an increase in differential from 30 to 35 percent.

Question. Given recent developments in Mali, including two coups in 2020 and 2021, the withdrawal of French troops and conclusion of Operation Barkhane, and the entrance of Russia-backed Wagner Group, do you feel that MINUSMA has a suf-

efficient mandate to effectively provide for protection of civilians and promote stability in Mali?

Answer. MINUSMA has a broad mandate to support the Algiers Accord, protect the civilians of Mali, and support the political transition. We assess the difficulty MINUSMA has faced in Mali lies not with the mandate, but with the restrictions placed on MINUSMA by the transition government following the arrival of the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group. We have communicated to the transition government both privately and publicly the need for it to respect MINUSMA's freedom of movement in order to implement all aspects of the mission's mandate, including investigating allegations of human rights abuses and violations. Restricting MINUSMA flights, movements, or access limits MINUSMA's ability to anticipate, deter, and effectively respond to threats and effectively protect civilians. MINUSMA's inability to fully operate due to Mali's restrictions leaves the people of Mali and UN peacekeepers vulnerable.

Furthermore, MINUSMA's effectiveness is at-risk following the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane. When the UN deployed MINUSMA in 2013, it was with the recommendation that it be deployed alongside a parallel counterterrorism force, a role played by French and European forces until recently. The absence of French reassurance flights and the departure of advanced French hospital facilities that European troop-contributing countries rely upon will have ramifications for MINUSMA in terms of where and how it can operate.

We continually monitor the mission to assess its effectiveness.

Question. In your opinion, should the United States continue to support MINUSMA if sufficient adjustments to its mandate are not made, in part due to objections from Russia and China?

Answer. Our larger concern is a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council actively undermining UN peacekeeping operations through the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group, whose brutal tactics and disinformation campaigns, linked to Wagner Group's manager and financier Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, put civilians and peacekeepers at risk. For this reason, we pushed to add a new requirement to be included in MINUSMA's most recent mandate to strengthen its capacities to monitor and counter disinformation. We also imposed conditions on MINUSMA's support to the Malian Security and Defense Forces. We believe MINUSMA's mandate is sufficiently broad, but it is not permitted to fulfill its mandate completely due to restrictions placed on it by the Malian transition government in partnership with the Wagner Group. We continue to urge the transition government to end its partnership with the Wagner Group. Wagner will not bring peace to Mali. Instead, Wagner will only divert natural and economic resources away from Mali's fight against terrorism.

Question. In your opinion, should the United States continue to support MINUSMA if Mali's military junta continues to place restrictions on the ability of MINUSMA to operate in-country?

Answer. While movement restrictions on MINUSMA have largely been in central Mali, MINUSMA is also deployed to the north and east where it continues to improve the safety of Malian civilians and their access to aid; deter conflict between signatory parties to the Algiers Accord; and keep international attention and pressure on the Mali transition government to uphold its responsibilities related to the Algiers Accord, elections, institutions reforms, and human rights. MINUSMA's civilian staff monitors and reports on human rights, supports elections, mediates inter-communal tensions, facilitates the participation of women in political processes, and provides technical assistance on institutional reforms among other activities. The UN Country Team, responsible for development and humanitarian aid, and MINUSMA civilians would not be able to access or operate in parts of Mali without the mission's force protection and protective environment around MINUSMA bases and during operations. Malians who directly benefit from MINUSMA clearly understand and appreciate the mission's role, even if misunderstood by mainstream media. If MINUSMA is continuously unable to fulfill its role due to restrictions by the transition government, it will necessitate a review of U.S. support for the mission.

Question. Given the coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, and Mali's current rule of Mali by a military junta, do you feel the Algiers Accords [or Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali] remain relevant for framing U.S. policy toward Mali? Why or why not?

Answer. Supporting the Algiers Accord is one aspect of our policy towards Mali. We assess that full implementation of the Algiers Accord remains the best path to

peace in northern Mali. The Accord itself addresses key grievances of northern populations and calls for important steps towards decentralization of power, security sector reform, development, and reconciliation. These priorities are now applicable to other areas of the country suffering from instability. If fully implemented, the Accord's provisions will provide greater stability and facilitate efforts to address the growing terrorist threats in the country.

As we assess the main driver of instability in Mali and the broader Sahel is a lack of state presence and responsive governance, the tenets of the Algiers Accord are exactly the kind of improved governance measures we believe will address root causes of instability. The Embassy in Bamako is active as an observer to the international mediation. The United States also works closely with regional and international partners to push for rapid and full implementation of the agreement. However, no level of international involvement can secure peace for Mali. The signatory parties themselves must be driving the effort to bring peace throughout Mali.

Question. If the Algiers Accords [or Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali] remain relevant in your opinion, what are the most pressing current threats to its implementation? How is the State Department adjusting its approach to Mali in response?

Answer. The signatory parties to the Accord have fallen well short of their commitments and the Accord Monitoring Committee chaired by Algeria has not met since October 2021. The political transition has taken much of the transition government's focus away from implementation of the Accord. The appointment of longtime Accord critic Choguel Maiga as transition prime minister in June 2021 and the arrival of the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group in December 2021 have injected uncertainty into the relationship between the signatory armed groups and the transition government.

The Department continues to message that the Accord remains the best path to peace in northern Mali and its implementation would benefit Mali as a whole. We also continue to warn Mali about the costs of continuing to partner with the Wagner Group, which makes countries poorer, weaker, and less secure. At the local level, we continue to engage signatory parties bilaterally and as part of the international mediation to urge meaningful progress toward implementation of the Accord.

Question. What lessons can be drawn from the U.S.' experience supporting the implementation of the Algiers Accords [or Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali] since 2015?

Answer. The United States can only play a supporting role in implementation of a peace accord such as the Algiers Accord. Implementation requires buy-in and political will from the parties themselves.

Question. To what extent is the State Department engaging with rebel movements in northern Mali, including CMA?

Answer. The Embassy in Bamako engages regularly with the signatory armed groups in northern Mali, including the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), both bilaterally and as part of the international mediation. The Embassy in particular has strongly supported the introduction and participation of women into the mediation process.

Question. U.S. foreign assistance in the areas of democracy and governance, economic development, conflict prevention and resolution, and youth empowerment, and other types of foreign assistance are important tools in supporting the development of strong, representative democratic institutions, resilient societies and countering violent extremism. In your assessment, has the U.S. provided sufficient targeted assistance in these areas in the Sahel?

Answer. Increased and dedicated resources are needed to advance the Sahel Strategy over the next 5 years. There is a need for more funding for democracy and governance, climate change, economic development, and education to prepare countries pre- and post-transition. Democracy and governance funding is required to build resilience, advance timely and peaceful transitions, prevent and counter violent extremism, increase human rights protections, especially for women and youth, and increase civic participation to build strong civil societies. State and USAID will need to increase funding to respond to the negative effects of climate change and help communities to withstand shocks caused by droughts, pandemics and other stressors. We must continue to create more educational and economic opportunities to reduce the risks of the most vulnerable (i.e. youth and men) joining extremist organizations.

In the near term, we are using funding from the second supplemental appropriation for Ukraine to mitigate food insecurity and the economic impacts exacerbated

by the war on Ukraine and ongoing State and USAID programs to promote democracy and governance, economic development, conflict prevention and resolution, and youth empowerment across the Sahel. We will work with the Department's Office of Foreign Assistance (F) to prioritize FY 2022 resources to increase support in these areas and will continue to do so with budgets in future years.

Question. Beyond assistance, how is the State Department, in coordination with partner agencies and departments, engaged in building resilient institutions in the Sahel, supporting a return to or maintenance of democratic rule, and countering violent extremism?

Answer. The Department engages at all levels of government and with civil society to promote tenets of responsive democratic governance. We use our public messaging strategically to speak out in support of respect for democratic norms, human rights, media freedom, civil society, and government transparency and accountability and express our solidarity with the people in the Sahel who are suffering from violent extremist attacks. Our full range of educational and cultural exchange programs address issues such as good governance, countering violent extremism, journalism, and civic engagement, which all contribute to these ends.

We exposed Yevgeny Prigozhin's harmful disinformation campaigns and networks in Africa via a recent public bulletin on the Department website so that local populations and media can be informed about malign influences which poison fact-based narratives in their countries. We continue to counter disinformation through analysis of disinformation networks and network building in numerous African countries. The United States founded the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to coordinate international counterterrorism efforts and worked with Italy to create the Coalition's Africa Focus Group, which has held its first three meetings and was followed in May by the first Coalition Ministerial meeting, held in Africa. The United States joined the Sahel Alliance in March 2022 to improve coordination with other donors and is an unofficial observer of the Coalition for the Sahel, which seeks to foster a unified approach to countering instability.

Question. Are there lessons from the U.S. approach to Mali over the last 10 years that can be applied to the U.S. engagement with and approach to Niger?

Answer. Underpinning the Sahel Strategy is the assessment that instability in the Sahel is a security problem with a governance solution. For the last 10 years, our and the international community's approach to the Sahel, led primarily by French military reinforcement, placed an overemphasis on security. As we enter a new phase of engagement based on the Sahel Strategy, we will shift our primary focus to governance, democracy, and development assistance to accompany smart investments in national security capabilities. The Department has also enhanced coordination with France and likeminded partners on diplomacy, development, and cross-sector institutional capacity building, in addition to operational and tactical defense requirements. In Niger, this means supporting the Government of Niger's social and economic development plan, which prioritizes reform of the education system with an emphasis on girl's education; reinforcing the judicial system with a focus on corruption prevention; and returning Niger to its pre-COVID 19 economic growth trajectory.

Question. What lessons were learned from the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program and how are those lessons being applied in preparation to implement President Biden's Sahel Strategy?

Answer. Progress in achieving our counterterrorism objectives through the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) has been uneven but programming and planning improvements have supported our revised approach to countering violent extremism across the Sahel. The Department has adopted a more strategic and knowledge-based approach to programming security and non-security assistance, including a more effective predictive analysis for drivers of terror and crime in the region. More effectively deploying these tools will be game changing and will substantially improve the outcomes of U.S. policy and programs. TSCTP provides a useful interagency coordination structure for policy and program coordination we have used to maximize outcomes.

RESPONSES OF MR. ROBERT JENKINS TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JAMES E. RISCH

Question. The military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad mark a low point for democracy in the Sahel. Add to this Guinea's coup in West Africa and the coup

attempt in Niger in March 2021, and it seems these extra-constitutional power changes remain an ever-present threat, particularly in this region of Africa.

What do you ascribe to this trend in coups and transitions of power by non-democratic means in the Sahel region and wider Africa?

Answer. Those who have led coups and extra-constitutional transitions in the Sahel region and other parts of Africa have offered widely varying reasons for their seizures of power, both publicly and in private, making it difficult to ascribe a singular reason or trend. Additionally, while there have been a number of coups and extra-constitutional regime changes over the past few years, a robust majority of citizens in the Sahel and throughout sub-Saharan Africa still favor democratic rule.

In Burkina Faso, in advance of the coup, the democratically elected government was not able to provide security to the population, which cost it legitimacy. The Burkinabe military was meanwhile frustrated with its lack of resources as it battled violent extremist groups, opening the door for a military takeover. In Guinea, a non-inclusive and arguably illegal referendum was held to allow the then sitting president, Alpha Conde, to run for a previously banned third term. Public anger over Conde's constitutional change paved the way for a military coup. In Sudan, the military seized power in advance of a promised handover of power from the military to civilians.

Despite the wide array of political circumstances and reasons given for regime change, the societies experiencing them share common traits that include frustration with a government that has been unable or unwilling to provide basic services such as health, economic growth, and education; a lack of security; and a lack of inclusive political participation.

Question. The military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad mark a low point for democracy in the Sahel. Add to this Guinea's coup in West Africa and the coup attempt in Niger in March 2021, and it seems these extra-constitutional power changes remain an ever-present threat, particularly in this region of Africa.

What is the role of the U.S. in helping nations through these problematic periods without over-engaging democratically illegitimate regimes?

Answer. Our efforts to promote and strengthen democracy and democratic values must be long-term, multi-faceted, and interconnected. During problematic periods, USAID recognizes the importance of bolstering civil society and improving the capacity of individuals to advocate for their needs, creating fertile conditions for democratic consolidation and fighting against democratic backsliding. In transitional or restrictive political spaces, USAID's efforts demonstrate solidarity with pro-democratic forces, provide protection, and prevent further backsliding by enabling civil society to adapt and maintain pressure to restore democratic and deliberative processes.

At the same time, USAID carefully identifies opportunities to lay the groundwork for a democratic transition and strengthen existing checks and balances where possible. In addition, USAID coordinates with like-minded international partners (including regional institutions) to amplify international efforts to strengthen democracy. This approach allows partners to organize and protect against coups and other extra-constitutional regime changes while marshaling efforts should such events take place.

USAID also works with host governments in burgeoning democracies to demonstrate to citizens that democracy delivers services such as health, economic growth and education, enhanced gender equality and social inclusion, access to justice, security, and the ability to play a role in decisions that most affect their lives. This serves to limit potential backsliding, improving the potential for countries to come through problematic periods and maintain their democratic legitimacy.

It is also important to strengthen democratic values across all of USAID's work. To that end, USAID is further integrating democratic accountability into economic growth, stabilization, global health, humanitarian assistance, gender equality, inclusive development, and human rights programming. Embedding strong participation, inclusion, transparency, accountability, and oversight measures in health, education, and economic programming enhances sustained, resilient recovery efforts and can reduce fragility in the long-term. Moreover, USAID enables civil society and media actors to detect and counter efforts at mis- and disinformation, particularly by external authoritarian actors, that seek to undermine democratic processes and bolster illiberalism.

Question. The military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad mark a low point for democracy in the Sahel. Add to this Guinea's coup in West Africa and the coup attempt in Niger in March 2021, and it seems these extra-constitutional power changes remain an ever-present threat, particularly in this region of Africa.

Where do you see this trend going in the months and years ahead? Have we entered a new era of change through force than the ballot box?

Answer. There are many factors that impact the democratic fragility of sub-Saharan Africa. These include low socioeconomic development, conflict, insecurity, weak institutions, a lack of judicial independence and access to justice, and poor overall government legitimacy. Additionally, authoritarian regimes have become more creative in their attempts to consolidate and legitimize their power. However, sub-Saharan Africa also demonstrates opportunities for democracy and elections. Zambia and Malawi have both recently taken significant democratic steps forward at the ballot box. Leadership transitions in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo over the last few years create openings—however tenuous—for positive democratic movement. In 2021, Niger saw the first transfer of power between two democratically elected presidents in the nation’s history. Also, the continent’s large youth population presents tremendous opportunities for economic growth and innovation, civil society and democracy.

As the most recent Afrobarometer public opinion data shows, a majority of citizens across the continent still favor democratic rule. It is this citizen support for democracy that can ultimately help stem or even turn the tide of undemocratic political practices. This is the basis for assisting democratic actors to demonstrate that democratic governance delivers services, security, gender equality, access to justice, economic growth and political accountability. Such advancement must be inclusive, bringing in youth, women, and other traditionally marginalized populations, to improve government legitimacy and fend off resentment that could potentially lead disaffected groups to join malign actors.

This demand for democracy also provides a substantial opportunity to work with democratic actors in transitional or restrictive political spaces, elevating their voices and providing technical expertise on a variety of issues, further advancing their own goals of rights-respecting democracy in their home countries.

This trend underscores the need for a coordinated development, diplomatic, and defense partnership as well as strong partnerships with host-country counterparts and other local partners to achieve peace and stability. It is through these partnerships that the USG can enhance partner country efforts to improve security sector governance; reinforce the principles of human rights, the rule of law and good governance; and mitigate the grievances that drive instability.

Question. The military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad mark a low point for democracy in the Sahel. Add to this Guinea’s coup in West Africa and the coup attempt in Niger in March 2021, and it seems these extra-constitutional power changes remain an ever-present threat, particularly in this region of Africa.

How can the United States implement a policy and invest in governments either under the rule of military juntas or constantly under threat of being overthrown?

Answer. In restrictive political spaces, USAID’s efforts demonstrate solidarity with pro-democratic forces, provide protection, and guard against further backsliding by helping civil society to adapt, learn and coordinate, while also strengthening checks and balances on authoritarian governments. This often includes efforts to decentralize decision making and service provision and working with local communities to develop and further democratic goals.

In fragile states, including burgeoning and new democracies, USAID works to improve government capacity and legitimacy while working with civil society to build capacity to advocate for government accountability and citizen preferences and needs. This reduces the risk of extra-constitutional regime change by demonstrating the ability of democracy to deliver services such as healthcare and education, economic growth, security, and access to justice. Further, it demonstrates the ability of such governments to provide individuals a voice in the decisions made that most affect their lives, limiting potential frustration and disaffection that often leads to support for such regime change.

Further, across both fragile and restricted countries, USAID’s long-term investments in peacebuilding, including efforts to build resilient social ties between identity groups and mitigate the risks of inter-communal conflict, are also an important tool in building the stable, peaceful societies that allow democracies to thrive. Communities reconciling differences and working together on shared interests are more likely to effectively lobby government, establish civil society organizations, improve their own capacity to manage conflict, and demand commitment, accountability, and transparency. Reconciled communities are also more likely to be inclusive, resilient to external threats, respect human rights, and monitor public service delivery, thus supporting a return to or refocus on positive norms and standards.

Question. Please describe the various responsibilities of USAID missions and regional offices in the Sahel or supporting USAID activities in the Sahel. In particular, what is the division of labor between the USAID Missions in Mali and Niger, the Sahel Regional Office in Dakar, Senegal, the Sahel Regional Office in Niamey, Niger and the West Africa Regional Mission in Accra Ghana?

Answer. USAID has bilateral missions in Mali and Niger, an Office of the USAID Representative in Burkina Faso, and USAID Program Managers (but no direct hire staff) in the U.S. embassies in Chad and Mauritania. Besides these operating units, the Agency also has regional platforms in Accra, Ghana, and Dakar, Senegal, that oversee the implementation and coordination of our efforts in the Sahel. The West Africa Regional Mission in Accra, Ghana implements regionally funded programs in the Sahel and partners with regional organizations, the private sector and with local partners to achieve peace and prosperity. USAID/Senegal's Sahel Regional Office implements bilaterally funded programs and provides oversight, mentoring, and technical backstopping to USAID staff in the countries where USAID has a limited presence or non-presence: Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania.

Question. How is USAID working with other bilateral and multilateral actors in the Sahel to address humanitarian needs and build resilience?

Answer. USAID coordinates closely with the major bilateral donors in the Sahel on humanitarian issues, meeting regularly at the country and regional level to discuss the evolution of the humanitarian context and response priorities. USAID has actively participated in a number of high-level events including the recent April 6, 2022 European Union organizing conference on the Food and Nutrition Crises in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, where USAID urged greater burden sharing and called on new donors to contribute toward the growing needs in the region. At the working level, USAID enjoys good relations with the other major bilateral donors and we often agree on common messages regarding issues impacting the humanitarian response and we coordinate our advocacy towards key stakeholders and partners, including multilateral organizations such as the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). USAID also co-funds specific projects with other donors such as the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) in Niger that supports a network of actors to provide immediate lifesaving assistance to recently displaced populations affected by the armed conflict in the Sahel or vulnerable households impacted by other shocks such as floods.

Multilateral organizations such as OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, and IOM are key partners in USAID's response to the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel, and USAID frequently engages with these organizations to assess key response needs and gaps. Through our engagement, USAID influences their strategic priorities and resource allocation, works to improve the delivery of assistance, and monitors the effectiveness of our programs.

USAID has longstanding relationships and partnerships with bilateral and multilateral actors in the Sahel to strengthen resilience to recurrent crises, including droughts, flooding, and conflict. One example of this is the Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) II program (2018–2023) in Niger and Burkina Faso that seeks to improve the capacities of individuals, households, communities and institutions to maintain and improve well-being in a dynamic and challenging operating environment. Under RISE II, USAID is partnering with over 30 implementing partners, including the World Food Program and UNICEF, government stakeholders and civil society on a multi-sectoral, integrated, community-based approach to strengthening resilience through land rehabilitation, water management, nutrition, community planning, smallholder farmer support, seasonal assistance, and school feeding. Since 2014, USAID's partnership with WFP in Niger alone has helped rehabilitate more than 110,000 hectares of land to improve agricultural and livestock production, diversify livelihoods, and reduce conflict. These investments are helping communities better cope with the unprecedented shocks facing the Sahel this year.

Question. Food insecurity is a persistent challenge for the people of the Sahel. Recent events, including the COVID–19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated challenges related to the global food and agricultural input supplies and ability of humanitarian actors to respond to hunger in the Sahel, across Africa and globally.

How would you characterize USAID's relationship with the World Food Programme in the Sahel? Are there areas where coordination can be improved?

Answer. USAID has very good working relationships with the United Nations Food Programme in the Sahel, and coordinates closely at both the country and regional level. We appreciated WFP for being proactive in raising awareness about the food crisis in West Africa and for sharing information and quickly responding to in-

quiries from the United States. Nevertheless, there is a need for greater transparency from WFP on its resource capacities and the operational challenges it faces. This includes earlier and more regular proactive discussion on individual country funding situations as well as greater clarity on resources that WFP has been able to secure from other actors and donors. In addition, we would like to have greater clarity from WFP on their country priorities and the tradeoffs that are required given resource availability in terms of depth versus breadth of a response. USAID is coordinating with other major humanitarian donors to the Sahel, including the EU's Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) to reinforce the need for improved transparency from WFP. This is essential for us to have a more effective working partnership that allows us as donors to act as a "critical friend" and, where relevant, support the response to the most acute needs through policy and programme.

Question. Food insecurity is a persistent challenge for the people of the Sahel. Recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated challenges related to the global food and agricultural input supplies and ability of humanitarian actors to respond to hunger in the Sahel, across Africa and globally.

How is USAID working with communities in the Sahel to address chronic food insecurity beyond humanitarian food assistance?

Answer. The Agency's primary tool to address food insecurity beyond humanitarian food assistance in the Sahel draws on resilience programming strategies that focus multiple layers of well-sequenced and integrated multisectoral, gender equitable and socially inclusive activities, and funding in communities that have historically received humanitarian assistance. The goal of resilience programming is to build the human and financial capacities of these communities so they can better withstand and recover from environmental, economic, and political shocks and avoid reliance on emergency and humanitarian food assistance. Resilience programming helps communities move from humanitarian assistance toward agriculture-led economic growth and market-based development activities.

Additionally, USAID is using its trade and investment activities, including the new Africa Trade and Investment (ATI) program, to strengthen established businesses, farming associations, and sourcing partnerships that can rapidly scale access to key inputs such as seeds and fertilizers. Programs such as ATI, the Agency's flagship effort for Prosper Africa, helps USAID establish partnerships with diverse companies to scale production of food crops critical to food security and nutrition across multiple markets, enable export deals for key inputs to food insecure regions, and facilitate trade deals that deliver food from regions of surplus to those of scarcity.

Question. Food insecurity is a persistent challenge for the people of the Sahel. Recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated challenges related to the global food and agricultural input supplies and ability of humanitarian actors to respond to hunger in the Sahel, across Africa and globally.

As the U.S. places more emphasis on Niger as the lynchpin for stability and democratic governance in the Sahel, how is USAID adapting programming to reflect this? In what areas is Niger in need of support that USAID is currently unable to provide, and how can Congress be helpful? Are there lessons learned from our support to the Government of Mali that should be applied to our approach to Niger?

Answer. Niger is the only country in the world with ISIS on multiple borders. Security remains a principal concern of the Government of Niger (GoN) and imposes an increasingly heavy burden on its national budget. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) target national security forces, international actors, and local populations. VEOs leverage existing inter-communal friction, including farmer-herder and ethnic tensions, and use gender-based violence to create greater operating space.

Despite these challenges, Niger is a country of strategic importance, and we remain committed to strengthening its efforts to inoculate itself against regional instability. At the same time, we need to continue to promote citizen-responsive governance and the consolidation of democracy, expand the role of women in government, and promote a human rights-based approach by security forces and the judiciary.

In late 2020, USAID swore in its first Niger Mission Director in 24 years, completing the transition from a USAID Office to a USAID Mission. USAID invests approximately \$200 million yearly in Niger (half of which is humanitarian assistance), focusing programs on youth and women with activities in good governance, rule of law, countering violent extremism, conflict prevention and mitigation, health, water

and land management, community resilience to natural disasters and man-made shocks, food security, and agriculture. USAID implements the President's Malaria Initiative, the Global Health Security Agenda, as well as the Presidential Feed the Future Initiative in Niger. USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) implements activities to increase community engagement with government leaders and identify the key drivers of youth isolation and VEO recruitment.

The limitations on assistance in Niger are due to the complex and dynamic operating environment in Niger and not necessarily to any one specific constraint. However, the strong and sustained commitment by the Government of Niger to address the persistent security threats while continuing to promote development action in more secure areas is a constant. The lessons from Mali may not be as relevant in Niger except to note the need to be adaptive to maintain assistance even in challenging situations.

Flexible human and financial resources allow us to adapt to evolving conditions in the Sahel. Flexible hiring mechanisms and better incentives will help us fill positions in the field.

Question. Food insecurity is a persistent challenge for the people of the Sahel. Recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated challenges related to the global food and agricultural input supplies and ability of humanitarian actors to respond to hunger in the Sahel, across Africa and globally.

When it comes to the appropriation of global resources to combat Russian disinformation, how do you foresee the allocation of funds to civil society programs working to deter civilians from misinformation and disinformation in the Sahel?

Answer. USAID provides assistance to local civil society and media partners in African countries through training, technical assistance and subgrants that can help address urgent threats to civic and political space. For example, this has included assistance for radio and print journalists to combat COVID 19-related misinformation and provide more timely, accessible, user friendly, and accurate information to citizens. This work has also included a focus on remote areas of a country where reporting and information is limited and where there may be a greater risk of malign influence.

Further, this has included grants to civil society organizations to conduct training on recognizing mis- and disinformation. Such training focused on both traditional and social media. In a recent round of training in Mali, participants reported that these efforts allowed them to understand that the information they receive through social media and sometimes traditional media is not always accurate. The participants also became aware of the impact that mis- and disinformation can have on communities, and especially on the attitudes and behavior of community members. Using newly acquired skills, participants committed to verifying information and being more judicious in sharing information received through social media platforms.

USAID/Mali is submitting a Congressional Notification for Complex Crisis Funds proposal to launch a more holistic approach to addressing the proliferation of disinformation in Mali. The activity will strengthen countering disinformation approaches in four key areas: (1) Tracking disinformation in partnership with local and international organizations. (2) Improving the responsible production of information through supply-side programming, including providing journalists with information garnered through disinformation tracking to counter false narratives. (3) Improving the responsible consumption of information through demand-side programming, including online engagement with consumers to discourage sharing disinformation and activities to debunk disinformation spread offline. (4) Evaluating rigorously the effectiveness of interventions, such as online demand side interventions, to inform future programming throughout the Sahel and other countries impacted by disinformation.

Question. Food insecurity is a persistent challenge for the people of the Sahel. Recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated challenges related to the global food and agricultural input supplies and ability of humanitarian actors to respond to hunger in the Sahel, across Africa and globally.

You mentioned that the "generational problems" in the region cannot be fixed within the next 5 years. Once the U.S. strategy is implemented, do you expect the generational problems to resolve themselves, or do you foresee additional assistance and effort being required?

Answer. The Sahel suffers from high levels of poverty, water scarcity, weak governance, low youth literacy rates, rising temperatures, longer droughts, and pro-

nounced gender inequality. A complex set of drivers have resulted in a chronically vulnerable population that lacks sufficient income and assets, with limited means to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from economic and climatic shocks and stresses. The U.S. Sahel Strategy reflects a collective assessment of the current development challenges and the tools, including development assistance, that the United States can bring to bear to help address these complex drivers. The Sahel Strategy alone will not resolve these problems and, as we do in many of the countries and regions where USAID has a long-term presence, our approaches will need to be adapted over time to continue to address or mitigate the complex drivers. We have provided a few examples herein.

The Agency is guided by the U.S. Government Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) 2022–2026. A key focus of the GFSS is economic empowerment of youth (about 65 percent of the population is under the age of 30 in the Sahel) and women in agriculture and agribusiness. One of the ways that USAID addresses the “generational problem” is by working to improve youth and women’s access to finances and business services. Sahelian youth suffer from socio-economic exclusion and are severely affected by unemployment and underemployment. Around 44 percent of young people in the region are neither in school nor actively employed. Two-thirds of these youth are women and the majority live in rural areas. Therefore, more equitable economic opportunities for youth and women are needed to improve their livelihoods and participate more fully in the economic and political development of their communities. Another way that USAID tackles the “generational problem” is by addressing the drivers of child marriage; 18 of the 20 countries globally with the highest prevalence of child marriage are in sub-Saharan Africa, most are in the Sahel. By improving economic opportunity, keeping girls in school, and working with local leaders to change social norms, USAID aims to end child marriage and improve the health, wealth, and empowerment of Sahel’s youth and their communities.

RESPONSES OF MS. CHIDI BLYDEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JAMES E. RISCH

Question. The military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad mark a low point for democracy in the Sahel. Add to this Guinea’s coup in West Africa and the coup attempt in Niger in March 2021, and it seems these extra-constitutional power changes remain an ever-present threat, particularly in this region of Africa. What do you ascribe to this trend in coups and transitions of power by non-democratic means in the Sahel region and wider Africa?

Answer. The recent coups and transitions of power by non-democratic means in the Sahel region and wider Africa may be attributed to many things, and specific causes are sometimes difficult to identify. While there are some similarities between the countries where power transitions have occurred through non-democratic means, these power transitions are usually complex events involving countries whose democratic traditions, maturity, and processes vary, and in which the spread of violent extremist organizations has resulted in governmental breakdowns in or in a complete lack of governance. The challenges are further exacerbated by weakened economies and institutions, among multiple drivers of insecurity.

Question. What is the role of the U.S. in helping nations through these problematic periods without over-engaging democratically illegitimate regimes?

Answer. The U.S. has primarily played a diplomatic and advisory role in helping nations and regional institutions through these political transitions. I defer to my Department of State colleagues regarding the policies driving U.S. engagement with governments empowered via non-democratic means. However, we should be clear in our communication and our intentions that we will not provide certain types of assistance to governments which attain power via non-democratic means. Also, some elements of defense diplomacy can, we believe, help restore civilian control and help influence leaders to expedite transitions to democratically elected governments. Therefore, the United States should remain engaged in dialogue with non-democratically created governments and not shut the door completely, as this will only create wider opportunities for malign actors to replace us.

Question. Where do you see this trend going in the months and years ahead? Have we entered a new era of change through force than the ballot box?

Answer. I believe the months and years ahead will be a test for African partners and institutions. If this is indeed a trend, we should examine root causes and potential response mechanisms. The U.S. should also examine what is happening and

consider whether we need to increase our institutional capacity building to strengthen defense and security governance, adherence to the rule of law and human rights, and respect for civilian control of militaries.

Question. How can the United States implement a policy and invest in governments either under the rule of military juntas or constantly under threat of being overthrown?

Answer. Within a whole-of-government approach, the Department of Defense has the ability to strengthen fundamental elements within the security sectors of at-risk countries. DoD can strengthen institutional functions such as human resource management, budgeting and financial management, strategy and policy development, and acquisition and logistics. In keeping with the U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption, DoD can help strengthen national systems to ensure funds appropriated to a nation's defense establishment result in thoughtfully acquired defense equipment and adequate logistics support to armed forces. DoD can emphasize respect for the rule of law and human rights, and the benefits of civilian control of the military.

Question. How is AFRICOM adjusting its posture in the Sahel to account for the French drawdown in the region?

Answer. AFRICOM has updated its approach in light of the redeployments in the region. The plan is currently under review.

Question. How is the Department of Defense coordinating with the State Department's Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) and other federal departments and agencies to recover U.S. hostage Jeffery Woodke?

Answer. The Department of Defense will continue to work with intergovernmental partners including the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, the Department of State, the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, and the U.S. intelligence community to facilitate the safe recovery and return of Mr. Woodke and all other U.S. persons held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad.

Question. How has the U.S. adjusted its level of effort and approach to recovering hostage Jeffrey Woodke given the French drawdown in the region?

Answer. The Department of Defense is reviewing potential effects of the French relocation in the Sahel and will continue to work with both European allies present in the region and African regional partners to locate and recover Mr. Woodke and all other U.S. persons held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad.

Question. How is the Department of Defense adjusting its approach to force protection given the growing terrorist threats and rise of government coups in the Sahel?

Answer. Protection of U.S. citizens and service members is always a critical mission for the Department of Defense. To mitigate the increasing risks in the Sahel, the Department of Defense will continue to ensure U.S. forces are fully trained and prepared for their missions, provide support to allies and partners also engaged in counter-terrorism actions, and support interagency efforts to affect the political, social and economic root causes of terrorism and political instability.

Question. How is the Department of Defense going to juggle the implementation of the U.S. Regional Strategy for the Sahel while also making the protection and safety of U.S. personnel and U.S. security, a priority?

Answer. Force protection remains our highest priority. We will continue to use the "by, with, and through" partners approach to achieve security and stability in the Sahel with a limited forward presence of U.S. forces.

RESPONSES OF MS. CHIDI BLYDEN TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TIM KAINE

Question. Nearly 800 U.S. military personnel are deployed in Niger, the second-largest U.S. military presence in Africa after Djibouti. Following the 2017 Tongo Tongo ambush in Niger, where four U.S. Special Forces soldiers and four Nigerien soldiers were killed, how has AFRICOM adjusted or updated its "advise and assist" missions throughout Niger and the region as a result of the incident?

Answer. Following the 2017 Tongo Tongo ambush in Niger, AFRICOM made adjustments in various areas. Broadly, these changes include establishing clear and unambiguous guidance for the planning and approval of military operations, conducting a holistic review of certain equipment requirements, ensuring appropriate turnover procedures within the theater, and taking certain actions with respect to coordinating support from partner nation forces.

