



## FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES FACING THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

# AFRICA

---

THE NEW CENTER | MARCH 2021



# FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES FACING THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

## **AFRICA**

*March 2021*

## **AUTHOR**

Zane Heflin

Policy Analyst

[zane@newcenter.org](mailto:zane@newcenter.org)

## **ABOUT THE NEW CENTER**

American politics is broken, with the far left and far right making it increasingly impossible to govern. This will not change until a vibrant center emerges with an agenda that appeals to the vast majority of the American people. This is the mission of The New Center, which aims to establish the ideas and the community to create a powerful political center in today's America.

## **THE NEW CENTER**

1808 I Street NW, Fl. 5

Washington, D.C. 20006

[www.newcenter.org](http://www.newcenter.org)

# INTRODUCTION

Joe Biden's first speech on foreign policy as president came in his address to the [34th African Union Summit](#) on February 2, 2021. He outlined his vision for U.S.-Africa relations stating that the "United States stands ready now to be your partner in solidarity, support and mutual respect," and specifically mentioned trade, democracy, human rights, public health, and climate change as opportunities for cooperation with the region. President Biden has promised to take a more diplomatically engaged approach with Africa than President Trump, who notably did not visit the continent during his time in office.

In this installment of our foreign policy primer series, we take a look at the challenges and flashpoints in Africa that President Biden can expect to face early on in his administration.





## URGENT PRIORITY

### COVAX INITIATIVE

[COVAX](#), a global initiative that finances the production and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine to lower-income countries, will be vitally important for many African countries in the fight against the pandemic. So far, 75% of all shots worldwide have been administered in just [ten wealthy countries](#). COVAX has committed to provide 2 billion vaccines to 92 low-income countries, but that covers shots for only 20% of the population in those places, far below the herd immunity threshold of about 70%. [COVAX](#) shipped the first batch of AstraZeneca vaccines to the West African country of Ghana on February 24, 2021. Neighboring Ivory Coast received over 500,000 doses the following week. But these vaccines are still arriving slowly and in few numbers. Ghana, for instance, has received only 600,000 doses, covering one percent of its population.

So far, COVAX's ability to reach its goal remains precarious, in part because of funding shortfalls as well as global supply issues—drugs simply aren't being made fast enough to cover people spanning the 54 countries waiting on vaccines through the scheme. President Biden recently made the decision to join the COVAX Initiative and committed [\\$4 billion](#) to its funding, but more support will be required to accomplish the goal of equitably distributing 2 billion doses of the vaccine by the end of 2021. [John Nkengasong](#), director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, stated that “we will not be able to eliminate COVID-19 cases everywhere if we still have a lot of cases on a continent with 1.2 billion people.” Inoculating African citizens is essential not just for the health of people on the continent but for the entire world.





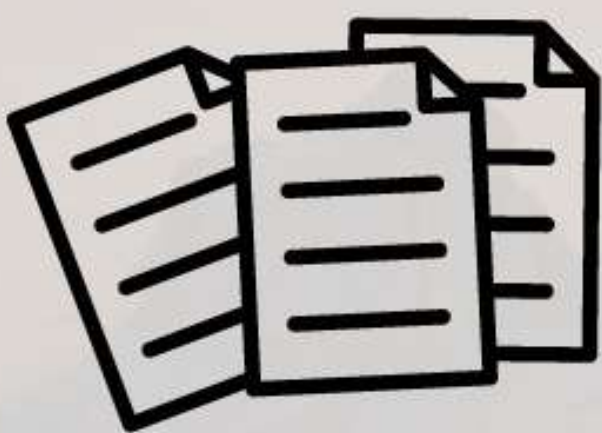
## TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL

U.S. Army General [Stephen J. Townsend](#) reported to Congress in 2020 that “both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State networks are working together to exploit under-governed regions, disenfranchised populations, and porous borders and threaten the security and stability of our African partners.” The Sahel region provides a [prime example](#) for this ongoing issue, with countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger facing increasing violence as a result of the proliferation of several jihadist terrorist groups. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP, a splinter group of Boko Haram), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have all been responsible for carrying out deadly attacks on civilians over the last year.

French troops and UN peacekeepers have carried out security operations in the region with U.S. support to some effect, but France has already signaled plans to [reduce their military presence](#) in the Sahel states. The security situation in the region, which has already seen a [250% increase](#) in violence since 2018, could rapidly deteriorate even further with this decision. President Biden will likely continue to provide support to both France and the G5 Sahel, which is the U.N.-backed initiative that includes troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, but this issue will need to be watched closely in 2021.

### The G5 Sahel

A joint force to tackle security threats



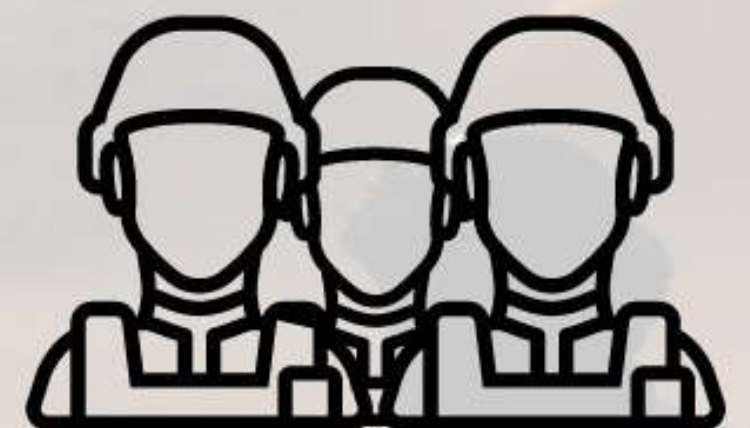
#### 3 missions

counter-terrorism,  
organized cross-border  
crime and human  
trafficking.



#### 5 countries

Mauritania, Niger, Chad,  
Burkina Faso and Mali



#### 5,000 men

spread across 7 battalions  
in 3 sectors



diplomatie.gouv.fr/en - @francediplo\_EN - December 2017

(cc) BY-NC-SA



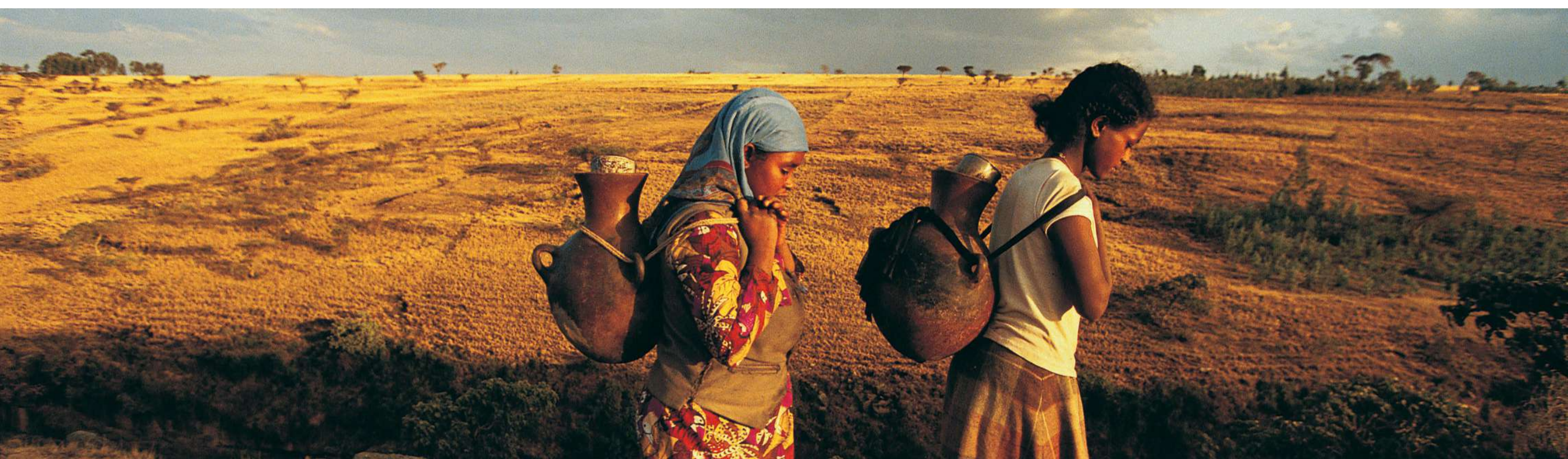
## TIGRAY CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the dominant political party representing the northernmost region of Ethiopia, chose to proceed with its own regional elections in defiance of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. Prime Minister Ahmed's government forces took control of the Tigray region's capital of [Mekelle](#) on November 28, 2020 in the wake of a reported TPLF attack on federal forces stationed in the region. However, despite Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's announcement that the military offensive was over, the fighting has continued with involvement and spillover in the surrounding countries of Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. The UN estimates that more than two million people have been [internally displaced](#) because of the conflict, and alleged war crimes such as extrajudicial killings have taken place on both sides.

Recent reports from the U.S. government and [Amnesty International](#) allege that the worst abuses of the war have come not from Ethiopian military forces or the TPLF, but rather irregular forces that have rallied behind Ahmed's military campaign. These include ethnic fighters from Amhara, a nearby region of Ethiopia with a longstanding rivalry with Tigray, as well as Eritrean soldiers. Amnesty International's report states that Eritrean soldiers conducted extrajudicial killings of men and boys in the town of Axum, with soldiers also firing upon residents who tried to remove bodies from the street. An internal U.S. [government report](#) obtained by The New York Times documented that several Tigrayan towns had been attacked by Amhara militias, with homes being pillaged and burned to the ground. Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) spoke with Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed on March 2, 2021, and urged him "to take immediate, concrete steps to protect civilians, including refugees, and to prevent further violence".

## CHINESE INVESTMENT IN AFRICA

The Biden administration and a growing number of congressional Democrats and Republicans view China as America's biggest foreign adversary, and this concern extends to China's growing influence in Africa. China's [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI) includes an ongoing strategy of engaging with Africa in the construction of infrastructure projects and other programs that require foreign direct investment. Many observers view Chinese investment in Africa as a means for them to access Africa's abundance of valuable [raw materials](#), such as the rare-earth minerals required for most electronic products, as well as generally expanding its global geopolitical influence. The race to establish trade relationships in Africa that provide access to rare-earth mineral supplies could prove to be the next arena of [geopolitical competition](#) between the U.S. and China.





## WATCH LIST

### SOMALIA'S PRESIDENTIAL CRISIS

Somalia has faced a political crisis due to President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed's (commonly known by his nickname 'Famarjo') decision to delay elections and refusal to leave office after his four-year term formally ended on February 8, 2021. The impasse over the election has [inflamed tensions](#) among the federal and regional governments and opposition parties. Somalia's prime minister Mohamed Hussein Roble [struck a deal](#) with opposition parties to delay their plans for mass anti-government protests, however the agreement did not set a new date for the election and Famarjo was not directly involved in the negotiation.

Somalia is concurrently dealing with intensifying attacks from al-Shabab, which recently attacked a major hotel in Mogadishu in January 2021. President Trump removed the last American troops (700 soldiers) present in Somalia just before leaving office. The Al-Qaeda-affiliated militant group controls much of rural southern Somalia and has contributed to the country's [persistent instability](#). The political crisis will distract the country's security apparatus from its efforts against Al-Shabab, potentially creating an environment in which the group could operate more freely and regain territory it has lost to the government over the past decade. If a political agreement remains elusive, "the unity of effort in the war on terror will be lost, and we will continue to witness the strengthening of al-Shabab," said Mohamed Mubarak, executive director at the [Hiraal Institute](#), a Somali think tank. President Biden will need to monitor the political crisis as it risks strengthening Al-Shabab and spiraling Somalia into further civil conflict.





## GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a major hydroelectric generator with the potential to be the [largest power plant in Africa](#), has been under construction since 2011 and is nearing completion. However, as a result of the dam's location on the Nile River, both Egypt and Sudan, which are downstream, could face the consequence of being deprived of this vital water resource. The Egyptian government has even gone so far as to threaten to [bomb the dam](#) if their demands for its operation aren't met, including a legally binding agreement over river flows. The Trump administration helped broker a deal over the issue in 2020, but Ethiopia walked away from negotiations over accusations that the process was [biased toward Egypt](#). In response, President Trump made the decision to [suspend hundreds of millions of dollars](#) in foreign aid to Ethiopia over the "lack of progress" in the talks. The Biden administration recently made the decision to [de-link the pause](#) in aid to Ethiopia from their dam policy as they review how the U.S. can play a role in facilitating the solution.



*The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Source: [The Economist](#)*



## WESTERN SAHARA

The Polisario Front, a rebel national liberation movement of the Sahrawi people, has fought for an independent Western Sahara since the 1970s. But on December 10, President Trump recognized Morocco's claim to [Western Sahara](#) in exchange for Morocco's recognition of Israel. While a ceasefire has been in place since 1991, fighting has started once again in the wake of Trump's decision to recognize Morocco's [claim of the territory](#). While some senators, including Jim Inhofe (R-OK) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT), have encouraged President Biden to [reverse this decision](#) and recognize the Sahrawi's claim to the land, Morocco has said such a step could lead to a revocation of its recognition of Israel. Armed conflict between the Polisario and the Moroccan government has been ongoing consistently since November 13, but the Moroccan government has been [downplaying](#) the level of conflict as well as restricting media access to avoid giving the Sahrawi any legitimacy.

## VACCINE HESITANCY

The African CDC says that 79% of people on the continent would [accept the vaccine](#). However, some prominent voices in African politics have been responsible for spreading misinformation. Madagascar's President has endorsed [herbal alternatives](#) to the COVID-19 vaccine. South Sudanese politicians have been spotted wearing '[protective badges](#)' that they claim offer protection against contracting the virus. Tanzania's president has urged people to pray away the "[satanic](#)" virus. The general distrust of government has led many citizens to question the safety of the vaccine across the globe, and countries in Africa are no different. Vaccine hesitancy could prove to be a major obstacle in combating COVID-19 on the continent.





## SIMMERING CONFLICTS

### CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC CIVIL WAR

The ongoing Central African Republic Civil War, which has fluctuated in intensity since it began in 2012, has escalated since elections in December 2020. Few people outside the capital, Bangui, could safely vote because of rebel violence. Almost [one-third](#) of all Central Africans have been displaced from their homes in recent years—including 200,000 who fled just since December, after the troubled election. Two militia leaders accused of war crimes in the conflict are currently being prosecuted (started February 16) by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

### UNITED LIBYAN GOVERNMENT

Since the overthrow of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has for the past several years been [split between rival administrations](#): a UN-backed, but weak government in Tripoli—a city largely controlled by an array of armed factions—and an eastern-based government backed by strongman General Khalifa Haftar. Each is backed by foreign governments with Turkey supporting the UN-backed government and the UAE, Egypt, and Russia backing Haftar. After hostilities ended in October 2020, ongoing talks have led to the formation of an interim government in February 2021, with elections scheduled for December 2021. However, the Libyan interim government could easily fragment as interim leaders tied to Libya's most important regions still have yet to be included.

### MOZAMBIQUE INSURGENCY

Ansar al-Sunna, an Islamist militant insurgency, carried out raids in the northern region of Mozambique in the Cabo Delgado province throughout January 2021 resulting in numerous civilian casualties and a spate of kidnappings. The militant group funds itself through the heroin, contraband, and ivory trade, and has managed to recruit locals to their cause as a result of rampant unemployment. There is [very little reliable information](#) on the group due to the poor treatment of the press by government and military personnel.

