

FINAL REPORT | DECEMBER 2022

Coastal West Africa Senior Study Group

Strategic Recommendations for Policies and Programs
to Encourage Good Governance, Peace, and Stability



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

In February 2022, the United States Institute of Peace created the nonpartisan Senior Study Group on Coastal West Africa to identify specific programs and interventions that the United States and other international partners can offer Coastal West African governments and civil societies to help prevent conflict and support lasting peace. Comprised of 11 former senior policymakers, business leaders, and respected academics from the United States and West Africa, the study group met between February and July 2022 for a series of six discussions on the political and socioeconomic vulnerabilities affecting the subregion, including unequal and inadequate development, marginalized communities, and weak institutions of accountability. This report presents the consensus findings of these discussions and is designed to inform the approach of US and international partners to identify opportunities to advance security and stability in Coastal West Africa.

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United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700

Fax: 202.429.6063

E-mail: usip_requests@usip.org

Web: www.usip.org

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Coastal West Africa Senior Study Group

Co-chairs

Oge Onubogu

Director, West Africa Program,
United States Institute of Peace

Ambassador Terence McCulley

Senior Visiting Expert, West Africa Program,
United States Institute of Peace

Senior Study Group Members

Pauline Baker

President Emeritus, Fund for Peace;
Senior Advisor on Governance,
Creative Associates International

Ambassador Johnnie Carson

Senior Advisor to the President,
United States Institute of Peace;
Former US Assistant Secretary of State for
African Affairs

Raymond Gilpin

Chief Economist and Head of Strategy,
Africa Bureau, UN Development Programme;
Former Dean of Academic Affairs,
Africa Center for Strategic Studies

Ambassador Robert Jackson

Former US Ambassador to Ghana and
Cameroon

James Kolbe

Former US Representative from Arizona;
Senior Transatlantic Fellow, German Marshall
Fund of the United States

Ambassador Deborah Malac

Former US Ambassador to Uganda and Liberia

Aïchatou Mindaoudou

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Republic of Niger; Former UN Special
Representative of the Secretary-General for
Côte d'Ivoire

W. Gyude Moore

Senior Policy Fellow at the Center for Global Development; Former Minister of Public Works, Republic of Liberia

Ambassador Tibor Nagy

Former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; Former US Ambassador to Guinea and Ethiopia

Leila Ndiaye

President and CEO, Initiative for Global Development; Former Senior Director of Policy for African Affairs, US Chamber of Commerce; Former Special Advisor to the Head of State, Republic of Côte d'Ivoire

Serge Thiémélé

Founder and Managing Partner, First Capital; Former President, US Chamber of Commerce in Côte d'Ivoire

Advisors

Richard Joseph

Non-Resident Senior Advisor, Africa Center, United States Institute of Peace

Joseph Sany

Vice President, Africa Center, United States Institute of Peace

Research Team and Secretariat

Horacio Trujillo

Facilitator and Writer, Independent Consultant

Afiwa Missoh, Jude Mutah, Matthew Reitman, and Katherine Todd

United States Institute of Peace

Members of the Coastal West Africa Study Group express their support for the general findings and recommendations the group reached but do not necessarily endorse every statement or judgment in the report. They participated in the study group in their personal capacities; the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions or employers.

Co-chairs' Note

Coastal West Africa may be at an inflection point between greater political stability, peace, and prosperity or instability, violent conflict, and worsening economic prospects. The opportunities for the former are evidenced by youthful protesters seeking more responsive governance across the subregion. The increased risk of descending into violence and authoritarianism is manifested in the six armed coups and attempted coups in and around the region since 2020, the erosion of democracy, and the rise in extremist violence.

The US government and the international community as a whole are currently critically examining their decades of investment in programs and activities that have fallen short in helping partner nations in Coastal West Africa build capacities to address the underlying causes of unresponsive governance, extremist movements, and violence. This examination—and an affirmation of Coastal West Africa's importance, a recognition of the region's capacities, and an acknowledgment of the hazards it faces—led the US government to declare the region a priority in its recently launched Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. This strategy, born of the 2019 Global Fragility Act, focuses on nine countries, five of them—Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo—in Coastal West Africa.

The peoples and governments of these five states—and their international partners in seeking peace and prosperity—are naturally debating how best to shape the policies that can build a brighter future. To advance the process of finding answers to this question, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in early 2022 convened a Senior Study Group of current and former policymakers, prominent political scientists and economists, representatives of international organizations, and business leaders. The group, including senior voices from Coastal West Africa, worked for six months, from February to July 2022, to formulate recommendations for US government policies and for USIP's own efforts in the region. This report summarizes the group's deliberations and

recommendations. It aims to stimulate discussion among not only US government officials but also officials of the governments of Coastal West African states and other countries, as well as international organizations working to build peace and foster progress in the region.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has of course transformed, and still is altering, the landscape in which governments are able to work. The pandemic challenges political and economic governance at national, regional, and global levels and demands considerable agility in the implementation of policies and programs. Recognizing this, the Senior Study Group has focused on identifying *fundamental, strategic* recommendations, expecting that policymakers who are closer to specific initiatives in the region—and particularly policymakers in Coastal West Africa itself—are best positioned to develop detailed policies and programming.

We thank our USIP colleagues for their exceptional logistical and intellectual support. We especially acknowledge the contributions of our study group members, who generously volunteered their time and expertise to make this report possible.

As this report neared publication, we were saddened by the passing of our friend and colleague, former US Representative James Kolbe. Jim was an important member of the study group, informing our discussions with his astute understanding of US foreign policy, particularly on Africa, and his deep understanding of the US Congress. Jim was a devoted public servant, and we mourn his loss as a leader and colleague. We remain deeply grateful for his many insights that informed this report.

Oge Onubogu

Director
West Africa Program
United States Institute of Peace

Ambassador Terence McCulley

Senior Visiting Expert
West Africa Program
United States Institute of Peace

Executive Summary

The countries of Coastal West Africa are currently facing significant challenges to peace and security as extremist violence spills over from the neighboring Sahel region. Attacks in 2022 in the northern parts of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo illustrate the immediacy and gravity of the threat, and governments across the subregion are grappling with protecting fragile communities in the north, addressing porous borders that facilitate attacks from neighboring states, and building the capacity of security forces to address the threat.

In light of these challenges and of the concern among policymakers in Washington and elsewhere to help the region navigate toward a more prosperous, peaceful, and democratic future, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) convened a Senior Study Group from February through July 2022 to identify opportunities to advance security and stability in Coastal West Africa. Preceding this, in 2021, the Institute had begun consultations with West African civil society leaders and US government officials whose work focuses on that region. US officials invited USIP to share findings of these conversations as part of informing Washington's development of policies and programs for the region.

US officials also invited USIP in 2022 to share its perspective on the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability.¹ This strategy is designed to implement the Global Fragility Act, an ambitious law enacted in 2019 that makes preventing conflicts and promoting stability a US foreign policy priority. The strategy focuses immediately on Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, and Papua New Guinea, along with five Coastal West African states—namely, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo. The Senior Study Group regards the strategy as a unique opportunity to shape US policy not only in those five countries but also in the Coastal West Africa region as a whole.



Young women, who balance large bowls on their heads, are paid to carry other people's shopping bundles in the open-air Makola Market in Accra, Ghana, on November 23, 2019. (Photo by Francis Kokoroko/New York Times)

The study group—made up of current and former policymakers, academics, business leaders, and representatives of international organizations—regards good governance as unquestionably the key to stability and peace in Coastal West Africa, a conviction that also underpins the new US strategy, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized in his speech on August 8, 2022, in South Africa.² The study group views good governance as central to promoting the inclusive socioeconomic progress that is in turn critical to advancing political stability, security, and peace. Yet economic dynamics are complex and difficult to influence, being affected by an array of regional and global factors that range from local markets to wars to climate change. Thus, the study group underlines the need to improve the economic prospects of Coastal West Africa but has eschewed offering specific prescriptions for economic interventions. Instead, the group emphasizes the need for all development partners to ensure that their activities center political stability and peace through the promotion of inclusive economic growth, which is dependent on good governance.

Peace and security cannot be built solely through improved governance. . . . Attention must also be paid to the influential role of regional dynamics.

The study group also emphasizes that peace and security cannot be built solely through improved governance *within* Coastal West African countries. Attention must also be paid to the influential role of regional dynamics.

Seizing the extraordinary opportunity presented by the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability demands high-level leadership within the US government, coordination within Washington and in the field, and the provision of resources beyond those identified to date. Furthermore, while many of the group's recommendations are directed to the US government, they embody principles that are applicable to other international efforts.

Specifically, the study group calls for the following:

- **Demonstrated, high-level commitment to building stability and peace in Coastal West Africa.** The US government should make the Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability a key topic at, and beyond, the US-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022. The summit should include meetings by the president, the secretary of state, and other senior US officials with their counterparts from Coastal West Africa. The US government should devise ways to sustain its demonstrated commitment beyond the summit and throughout the strategy's implementation.
- **A senior figure in Washington to lead US efforts in Coastal West Africa.** Responsibility for those efforts, and for keeping the region a US government priority, must rest with a senior policymaker, preferably at the level of undersecretary of state. Within that leader's ambit, the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations should collaborate with the State Department's Africa Bureau, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Defense Department on implementation of the new US strategy.
- **Specifically assigned leadership and resources in the region.** Ambassadors in the five Coastal West Africa countries identified in the strategy should make its implementation a priority for their missions. As part of this effort, they should work closely with their country teams (and in particular with bilateral and regional USAID directors). Given the importance of regional dynamics, the study group recommends the designation of a regional coordinator in the field. The imbalance of resources among the five US missions will require taking steps to ensure that posts with limited or no USAID presence are provided with adequate support.

- **Consistent, more agile engagement of citizenries and communities in all efforts to foster peace and stability.** All US activities should devote greater attention and resources to strengthening indigenous capacities that can be employed to improve governance and broaden economic prosperity. Adopting a whole-of-society approach, activities should engage civil society, including religious leaders and business and farmers’ associations. To empower local populations in shaping solutions, the US government should consider establishing an “Ambassador’s Conflict Prevention and Resilience Fund” to let chiefs of mission seize opportunities to help local groups advance the US strategy’s goals. This fund could be modeled on the Ambassador’s Special Self-Help program, which allows US ambassadors to provide seed money to local development initiatives. The Resilience Fund, however, would be streamlined bureaucratically, applying practices of the most agile US development funding in the region.
- **Expanded engagement with fragile, poor, and isolated communities, particularly in areas that have suffered violence.** This heightened level of engagement could include establishing a diplomatic presence in areas remote from Coastal West African capital cities—designating, as many embassies already do, officers and teams to cover a country’s northern and border regions with increasing USAID-supported programming, particularly programs designed to strengthen capacities of government institutions. This should be accompanied by redefining Defense Department programs to focus on institution building within security services and on improving accountability to civilian populations.
- **Implementing all activities, including economic development, with an awareness of the need to promote peace and stability.** Given the powerful roles that economic inequities and rent-seeking behaviors play in instigating instability and conflict, all economic development programs should be shaped to avoid these ills.
- **A combined regional and country-by-country approach.** The conflicts and instability within individual Coastal West African countries are connected to regional dynamics. Thus, all efforts should include high-level bilateral engagement with the political leadership of the respective countries, as well as with the Economic Community of West African States, including support for that group’s Accra Initiative for peace and security in the region. While the new US strategy engages five specific West African states, the US government and other partners should integrate their work in those countries with their efforts focused on other countries in the region, including Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.



At the Palais du Peuple in Conakry, Guinea, people wait for a meeting with the military junta, led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, on September 15, 2021, several days after the coup that ousted President Alpha Condé. (Photo by Sunday Alamba/AP)

- **Effective coordination of all initiatives in Coastal West Africa.** The US government should coordinate its activities both among its own agencies and with its partners in the region. Within the US effort, the government should consider appointing a joint State Department–USAID strategic officer (reporting to the high-level policy coordinator) who would be responsible for the strategy writ large. While the lead responsibility for implementing the strategy in Coastal West Africa should be assigned to USAID’s Africa Bureau, the State Department’s Africa Bureau must also assume meaningful policy oversight, including from the assistant secretary and through the Offices of West African Affairs, Economic and Regional Affairs, and Regional Peace and Security. Clear guidelines should place the Defense Department in a supporting role in the strategy to ensure a coordinated, State Department–led “3D” (diplomacy, development, and defense) effort. Interagency coordination must occur both among bureaus and across the region, with teams assigned at each level. Regular interagency mission meetings at regional and country levels will be required to monitor implementation and improve strategies and programs; routine interagency meetings in Washington should also monitor and refine programs.

- **Financial resources to match strategic ambitions.** Coastal West Africa’s need for supportive partnerships exceeds the financial capacity of any donor, so the United States and other partners, including the European Union and many of its member states, must plan on sharing burdens. The portion of funding available under the Global Fragility Act—\$200 million annually across the nine countries covered by the new US strategy—can serve at best as a catalyst for other investments. It will need to be combined with other resources, particularly because the US missions in Coastal West Africa, and across Africa as a whole, are understaffed and underresourced.
- **A review by the United States and all its partners in Coastal West Africa of development assistance across the board to maximize the synergy of their work to help governments in the region meet their people’s needs.** This assessment should avoid duplication of the efforts of development partners and seek to leverage what has been learned from previous programs. This broad assessment would include activities that are not focused narrowly on preventing conflict and promoting stability, including such US programs as Power Africa, the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the Security Governance Initiative, and USAID’s Disaster Assistance Response Teams.

Background

A United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Senior Study Group met from February through July 2022 to identify opportunities to advance peace and security in Coastal West Africa. This report presents the recommendations of that study group, which consisted of current and former policymakers, prominent political scientists and economists, representatives of international organizations, and business leaders. The formation of the study group was preceded in 2021 by a series of USIP engagements with stakeholders in the region, including civil society leaders, policymakers in Washington, and US missions in the region. The study group assembled a cross section of experts on Coastal West Africa, including senior voices from the region.

The study group's recommendations are laid out in the next section of this report. This section explains why Coastal West Africa has become a US foreign policy priority, describes the formation of USIP's Senior Study Group, and highlights the key aspects of the study group's deliberations.



The US government has identified stability in Coastal West Africa as a foreign policy priority, engaging five countries in particular—Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo—through its Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, which was adopted in December 2021. The strategy reflects the US government's consideration of the five countries as strategic focal points in the fight against transnational terrorism and violent extremism emanating from the neighboring Sahel region.

Concern about instability across the Coastal West African states is related not only to the spillover of violence from the Sahel, but also to the region's socioeconomic and demographic trends. The five countries targeted by the new US strategy have populations whose median age ranges from 19 to 22 years, making the limited socioeconomic prospects for youth a significant risk factor for violence. Children's poor access to schooling—averaging from barely three years in Guinea to

Coastal West Africa



Source: Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

seven years in Ghana—is hobbling their prospects and will sustain the risk of violence for years to come. Yet youth civic engagement—of the kind visible in Ghana’s 2021 #FixTheCountry nonviolent protests and Nigeria’s youth movement against police brutality—is a resource that can be developed in support of better governance, justice, and peace.³ The specific challenges vary, of course, among the five countries targeted by the new strategy and across the region.

Guinea has suffered the most notable democratic erosion following the armed forces’ September 2021 coup d’état. With a significant push from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the military-appointed government eventually agreed to a 24-month transition to civilian rule but has constricted civic and political freedoms and left transitional steps unclear. Guineans and their partners are seeking a path for restoration of civilian rule and strengthening democracy.

In neighboring **Côte d’Ivoire**, while sustained economic growth since the violent political crises of 2010–11 has restored the country’s role as a driver of growth in the region, ethnic and land disputes remain a threat for renewed conflict, and the northern part of the country has seen an increase in extremist attacks from groups based in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso.

Ghana offers a democratic model for the region but faces challenges common to other coastal states. Education and economic opportunity fall well short of the needs of its burgeoning youth population, and the economic and human development of the northern interior lags behind southern regions. Like other coastal states, Ghana faces continued incursions by extremists from the Sahel, with the concomitant risk to the country's stability from extremists recruiting among local populations and establishing a presence in the north.

Togo, which has been ruled by a single family for more than five decades and which suffers from endemic corruption, imposed a state of emergency in the north in 2022 because of extremist violence. The extreme poverty of Togo's rural and northern regions, and the socio-economic gap between them and the more urban coast, increases the risk for extremism to root itself in Togo's north.

In **Benin**, the government has imposed electoral restrictions to exclude opposition parties and employed tactics from internet restrictions to violent force by police to quash protests. In the border regions, attacks by extremist groups from the Sahel have increased, and capacity challenges have impeded the ability of Benin's security forces to respond.

The challenges facing these five countries are exacerbated—and indeed cannot be separated from—violence and instability within the wider region. The crisis in the Sahel claimed more than 6,500 lives and displaced some 1 million people in 2020; in February 2022, the total number of persons internally displaced since 2011 was 2.7 million.⁴ Additionally, Nigeria may be facing its worst instability in decades due to extremist violence in the north, clashes between settled agrarian and nomadic herder communities across the middle of the country, and separatist movements and militancy in the south, along with nationwide banditry and kidnapping.⁵ A worsening of stability in West Africa's most populous nation and largest economy could further destabilize Coastal West Africa. In January 2021, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) highlighted the urgency of addressing deteriorating security dynamics in Coastal West Africa to prevent the consolidation and expansion of violent extremist organizations as they seek revenue and recruits.⁶

More recently, the US government has declared that it is increasing its focus on Africa, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlining the new US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa in a speech in South Africa on August 8, 2022.⁷ As the United States retains its concerns over strategic competition in Africa from China and Russia, the new policy reaffirms US support for the free flow of ideas, information, and investment and for elevating US engagement with African partners to promote and deliver the dividends of democracy and security.

When, in February 2022, USIP convened a Senior Study Group to explore how best to advance peace and security in Coastal West Africa, it was both responding to growing concern within Washington about the region and seeking to build on USIP's work on West Africa, which had recently expanded beyond its established program in Nigeria. In 2021, the Institute had launched a series of consultations on West Africa with US government officials and civil society leaders from



Electoral officials count ballots at a polling station in Lomé after voting in Togo's presidential election on February 22, 2020. Faure Gnassingbé, who has served as president since 2005, was elected to a fourth term. (Photo by Sunday Alamba/AP)

the region. USIP was invited by US officials to share the findings of these conversations and thus help to inform the development of US policies and programs toward the region.

Additionally, in 2022, the US government had invited USIP to provide input into the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, which was created as the vehicle for realizing the ambitions of the 2019 Global Fragility Act. During its deliberations between February and July 2022, the study group came to the conclusion that the strategy is a unique opportunity to shape US policy not only toward Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo but also toward the region more broadly. Thus, while the group has framed most of its recommendations in terms of the strategy, they are—and should be read as—applicable to peace and security in the wider region.

The study group's deliberations on ways to advance peace and security in Coastal West Africa included the urgent need to counter the spillover of violent extremism from the Sahel. The study group reviewed and drew on examples of US programs and policies in the Sahel to prevent and counter violent extremism—such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership—but recognized that these efforts

US and international efforts to build peace must be integrated across the wider region [and] they must work across wider issues—of governance, justice, and human welfare.

have not succeeded as intended.⁸ The group further noted circumstantial differences between the Sahel and Coastal West Africa, as well as the variability between them in terms of strategic importance and US strategic influence.⁹ The group underscored the urgency of its work, given the 2021 coup in Guinea and attacks throughout 2022 by violent extremist organizations in the northern parts of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo.¹⁰ While combating terrorism and violent extremism is a vital US interest, US and international efforts to build peace must be integrated across the wider region, including Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. They must work across wider issues—of governance, justice, and human welfare. And they will be driven by wider interests. These include the region's strategic natural resources and commodities (from bauxite to gold to cocoa and cotton); its position along key Atlantic Ocean shipping lanes; and the critical need to support democratization at its disparate stages across the region.¹¹

The study group identified improvements in governance as a prerequisite for peace and stability in Coastal West Africa, including efforts to advance the rule of law, combat corruption, and deliver essential public services that demonstrate the relevance of government in the lives of the region's citizens and that build the social compact that knits a nation together. Extensive evidence shows the key role of good governance is fostering and maintaining peace and stability.¹² Revitalized efforts to promote good governance in Coastal West Africa are thus vital and should promote its organic development. This will mean supporting indigenous efforts, including those by national governments, civil society, and regional and continental institutions. Political stability—and the security and peace that can come with it—depends on healthy relationships between society and the state. This may require a significant reconstitution of social contracts in Coastal West Africa, including attention to issues such as the proper role of government, the role of the citizen, elite capture of the economy, and the linkages among the region's economies and the global economy.

The study group further considered how “economic governance” can influence peace and stability. The way in which a country governs and distributes its resources can either promote stability or drive conflict. In the commodity- and resource-fueled economies of Coastal West Africa, capture of these resources by elites or by one or another segment of society can contribute to intergroup conflict. Similarly, economic transitions—whether driven by globalization or international crises, climate change or coups—can alienate vast segments of a population, especially those outside of cities or resource-rich areas, exacerbating horizontal inequalities that can contribute to tensions and conflicts. Such transitions are especially destabilizing in societies in which economic management is treated as zero-sum, with control of government translating to control of economic policies for the benefit of particular segments of the population.

The group noted the differences in the socioeconomic and political landscapes across the five Coastal West Africa countries, but agreed that peace and stability in the subregion depend not only

on building good governance in individual countries but also on improving security in the larger West Africa region and across the African continent. For example, Coastal West Africa's growing youth population presents a significant challenge for each nation and the region as a whole. Similarly, the growing influence of extremism, so destabilizing in the neighboring Sahel, is a regional problem. Regional organizations, such as ECOWAS, need to play a more vital role both in their original missions—promoting intraregional trade and economic cooperation—and in addressing other issues, such as coups and other erosions of constitutional democracy. However, the structure and operations of organizations like ECOWAS may be outdated for recent sociopolitical dynamics and may need to be significantly updated to permit them to carry out their original missions.

The US government, USIP, and other actors should also engage emerging regional institutions such as the Accra Initiative, through which Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo seek to improve their cooperation against extremism and instability. Another emerging institution is the African Continental Free Trade Area, which aims to gather Africa's 1.3 billion people and \$3.4 trillion in annual GDP into one of the world's largest free-trade communities. Increasing intra-African trade and harmonizing trade policy and regulation will facilitate foreign direct investment and promote economic growth that is the foundation of peace and stability on the continent.



To be as effective as possible, international and US engagements must address Coastal West Africa and its challenges systemically, using a coordinated and complementary approach. These efforts must be promoted through high-level leadership and concomitant investments in local capacity, not least because of the historic *underinvestment* in Coastal West Africa, reflected, for example, in the relatively small size of diplomatic and development missions in the region and the limited financial resources available to support such efforts. The study group argues that US responses to this challenge in Coastal West Africa, and across the African continent, should be informed by three overarching principles:

- First, for such efforts to be successful, they need to support the local efforts of governments and their populations.
- Second, the US government needs to examine what activities have worked and what have not worked in the region as well as in similar contexts, including the Sahel. The government should examine programs undertaken by like-minded international actors, including the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the Nordic countries, in Coastal West Africa.
- Third, the US government needs to be clear about the specific outcomes it hopes to accomplish, including through its new strategy, in Coastal West Africa. It should recognize the limits of its influence and determine how it will measure progress and make needed course adjustments.

The specific recommendations of the Senior Study Group on Coastal West Africa are presented in the following section.

Recommendations

The Senior Study Group’s recommendations fall into three categories. The first—considered most critical by the study group members—consists of recommendations related to US prioritization of Coastal West Africa and US leadership and capacity to advance peace and security in the region. The second category focuses on governance. The third and last set of recommendations addresses the socioeconomic dynamics that are influencing the prospects for sustainable peace and security for Coastal West African nations and their peoples.

Ensure US Government Prioritization, Leadership, and Capacity

Amid the US government’s efforts outlined in 2022 to build a broad partnership with Africa, the United States is balancing commitments continentwide, and crises in the Sahel region continue to require urgent attention. Sustaining the focus on Coastal West Africa envisioned in the new Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability will require continuing to prioritize the region on the US foreign policy agenda, high-level leadership, and a corresponding commitment of meaningful resources to substantively improve US efforts.

The study group’s more specific recommendations along these lines are the following:

Build US efforts, including the new strategy, on the realities in the region. Useful models for action include USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) programs in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire over the past eight years and the Security Governance Initiative (which had success in Ghana, albeit not throughout the subregion).¹³ Examples from West African initiatives include the Accra Initiative, which was launched in 2017 to promote greater coordination among the security forces and intelligence communities in the member states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo).¹⁴ The United States and its



The Autoroute du Nord separates Banco National Park, one of the world's last old-growth rainforests to survive within a major metropolis, from a developed area of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, on June 18, 2022. (Photo by Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/New York Times)

regional partners should adapt all efforts, and the pace of implementation, to the disparate conditions in the region's countries. Often, small-scale efforts to revive social contracts between governments and communities, especially in vulnerable border areas, can yield cost-effective impacts.

Engage the “whole of society” in each country to build the activities to advance peace and stability. US initiatives should engage not only governments but also civil society, including religious leaders, business and farmers' associations, and other influential groups. This engagement should include dedicating greater attention and resources to strengthening indigenous capacities to develop and advance good governance, inclusive economic prosperity, and sociopolitical stability and security. The study group recommends that the US government consider establishing an “Ambassador's Conflict Prevention and Resilience Fund,” modeled on the nimble programming that OTI has carried out in the region over the past eight years. Such a fund would allow missions—particularly those with limited or no USAID presence in their countries—to access flexible funding to seize opportunities to advance peace and stability goals, accompanied by close monitoring by US embassies to help local groups working on these issues.

Among the most potent improvements of US efforts to build stability in Coastal West Africa could be to strengthen US engagement in marginalized areas.

Broaden US engagement with poor, isolated, and fragile communities in each country. Among the most potent improvements of US efforts to build stability in Coastal West Africa could be to strengthen US engagement in marginalized areas, which include most of the border areas of each country that have been subject to extremist attacks from the Sahel. Another powerful measure would be to support the effectiveness of the national and local governments in providing security and other public services to their populations. For example, increasing USAID-supported programming in these regions would strengthen the capacities of government institutions, while Department of Defense–supported efforts could improve the accountability of security services to their citizens. The study group is mindful of budgetary and security considerations, but recommends that the US government consider the advisability of establishing a diplomatic presence in northern or remote areas of the five countries targeted by the new US strategy. One option, already embraced by many missions, is to designate officers or teams to focus on these vulnerable regions of each country.

Integrate regional and country-by-country approaches. Many of the conditions that can tilt a country toward either peaceful stability or violent turmoil are regional. Among these are inclusive economic growth and development, corruption and crime, population growth, human migration, environmental and climate conditions, and the quality of governance. Thus, all efforts to build peace and security should engage regional as well as local or national issues and institutions. In Coastal West Africa, this will mean working with ECOWAS. The study group recognized shortcomings in ECOWAS’s capacities and suggested that the new US strategy presents an opportunity to redefine the US government’s relationship with ECOWAS and contribute to the organization’s capacity to advance peace and security. US bilateral engagements in the region should engage heads of state to demonstrate the high-level commitments discussed in this report and to secure host country support. The study group further recommends that the United States ensure its engagement among critical influencers among the region’s countries, notably Nigeria and Senegal.

Use the five-country strategy to shape all US government policies in Coastal West Africa. All US activities, including economic development, should be shaped deliberately to promote peace and stability. Given the roles that economic inequities and rent-seeking behaviors play in instigating instability and conflict, all initiatives should be designed to reduce or avoid those ills.

Ensure that the strategy features all the elements of a high-priority policy. These elements include high-level commitment, clear goals, necessary human and financial resources, and robust communication and shared understanding among all US government agencies involved. Detailed recommendations are these:

- **Consistently demonstrate high-level commitment.** Given that the US government has acknowledged in recent years the growing importance of Africa, and of Coastal West Africa in particular, to US interests, the president and other high-level officials should publicly demonstrate their commitment to fostering peace and good governance in the region. Such demonstrations should include making the new strategy and peace in Coastal West Africa key topics in the US-Africa Leaders Summit scheduled for early December 2022; holding meetings between the secretary of state or the president and their counterparts from Coastal West Africa; and organizing analogous meetings with counterparts by other senior US government officials.
- **Structure the effort to implement the high-level commitment, both in Washington and the region.** Responsibility for the US undertaking in Coastal West Africa must be vested with a senior policy coordinator, ideally at the level of undersecretary of state. Within that leader's ambit, the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations should collaborate with USAID on the overall US effort, including implementing the five-country strategy. Likewise, ownership of this effort in the region must be clear, both in the five countries identified by the strategy and in the other states. Ambassadors in each country should identify the peace and security effort as a priority for their missions and work with their country teams (in particular, bilateral and regional USAID directors) to implement it. The study group recommends the designation of a regional coordinator in the field, with a particular focus on supporting US missions that have limited or no USAID presence. Such a regional coordinating role could be located in Accra, Abidjan, or even Abuja. For example, the regional USAID mission in Accra has already been coordinating programming envisaged by the strategy and has staff and travel resources in place to support efforts in other countries. Although Nigeria is not among the five countries targeted by the strategy, Abuja has one of the larger US missions in West Africa, and Nigeria has historically played a leadership role in the region.
- **Ensure coordination between the State Department and USAID.** One way to achieve this would be to appoint a joint State Department–USAID strategic officer (reporting to the senior policy coordinator described above). The lead responsibility for US interventions in Coastal West Africa, including through the five-country strategy, should be assigned to USAID's Africa Bureau. At the same time, the State Department's Africa Bureau must also assume policy oversight, including by the assistant secretary of state for Africa and through the Offices of West African Affairs, Economic and Regional Affairs, and Regional Peace and Security.
- **Set clear guidelines for the Defense Department's supporting role in the region and in implementing the five-country strategy.** Such guidelines will be vital to ensure a coordinated "3D" (diplomacy, development, and defense) effort to realize the US government's aspirations to prevent conflict and promote stability. The Defense Department's role should include supporting institution building within the security structures of Coastal West African nations and promoting security forces' accountability to civilian governments and populations.

- **Establish firm interagency coordination at both the bureau level and across the region.** The State Department, USAID, and, as required, the Defense Department and other agencies should assign teams at each working level. This inclusive identification of the agencies to be involved in coordination should be buttressed by regular interagency mission meetings at the regional and country levels to monitor implementation and improve strategies and programs. Routine interagency meetings in Washington should undertake the same tasks.
- **Provide financial resources to match the US government’s commitment.** Although the five-country strategy provides a useful roadmap for the United States to further incorporate conflict prevention and peacebuilding across its diplomatic, development, and defense efforts in Coastal West Africa, the level of ambition needs to be matched by adequate additional financial resources. The Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability will divide \$200 million per year among the nine countries it targets (the five in Coastal West Africa and four others). This amount can fund peacebuilding programming that might help catalyze funding from other sources, but is too little to significantly increase or improve programming overall across the targeted countries—especially in light of recent violent extremist attacks in the northern areas of Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Togo, which confirm that the need for US help in parts of the region has moved beyond conflict prevention. Additionally, the study group noted that the US missions in these countries and the region are already understaffed and underresourced.
- **Review programming by the US government and partners to avoid duplication and synergize efforts.** The US government should take stock of all initiatives working to build peace and security to avoid duplication and to learn from and leverage previous and existing programs. It should pay special attention to efforts that have built the capacities of local entities, even if they are not focused on promoting peace and stability. Examples of US efforts that merit close review include Power Africa, the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the Security Governance Initiative, and USAID’s Disaster Assistance Response Teams.

Promote Good Governance

A prerequisite for building peace and security in Coastal West Africa (as, indeed, in all other parts of the world) is to establish and nurture good governance. As seen in the Sahel and northern Nigeria, violent extremism thrives and proliferates in areas where state authority is absent or weak. Good governance is fundamentally about demonstrating the relevance of the state’s authority to its citizens by the provision of public services (such as health, education, and infrastructure) and by assuring the safety and security of civilian populations.

Given this direct link between the quality of governance and peace and stability, the study group recommends that US government programming focus on supporting and reinforcing host government efforts to strengthen the civic bond between local populations and all levels of national government through the provision of equitable justice, the delivery of social services, and the protection of vulnerable civilians carried out by a professional and accountable security force.



Soldiers perform morning exercises in Pendjari National Park in northern Benin on June 15, 2019. The country deployed troops to the park to secure its border with Burkina Faso. (Photo by Finbarr O'Reilly/New York Times)

Specifically, the study group recommends the following:

Tailor good governance initiatives to the conditions in each country. Each country is at a different stage of governance and development and has its own culture to be considered in developing its governance systems. The United States must seek input from host governments and local voices outside of government in each country to define US objectives for advancing peace and security in the region. It also must tailor its efforts to allay any suspicions among local populations about the “real” reasons why the United States is seeking to influence the character of governance in their societies.

Set appropriate metrics for progress toward the kind of improved governance that buttresses peace. The US government should identify specific, relevant metrics to guide the design and implementation of its initiatives in the region. These metrics should track progress in terms of improved sociopolitical outcomes and should not simply tally numbers of projects, dollars invested, and participants. These metrics should be informed by a thorough stocktaking of previous and ongoing

initiatives and should be identified in collaboration with local stakeholders to ensure that they are tailored to each country's unique governance and security conditions.

Ensure improvements to governance that meet the concrete needs of each country's citizenry.

Good governance requires not only accountable institutions and practices, including the rule of law and fair elections, it also means delivering services and meeting the expectations of local populations. Examples of what citizens in many Coastal West African countries expect from their governments range from efficient e-government services to improvements in the transparency of tax systems to expanding access to banking and financial services.

Learn and apply lessons from prior work in disparate settings. US efforts should apply best practices developed in light of lessons drawn from past successes and shortcomings—including lessons learned even in the same activities. For example, the Security Governance Initiative in Ghana helped break down silos among US government actors and helped the host government improve its coordination across agencies, contributing to Ghana's developing a database of criminal cases and securing the support of the FBI on cybersecurity issues.¹⁵ In other countries in the subregion, the Security Governance Initiative enjoyed less success—but it nonetheless offered valuable lessons.

Engage emerging regional institutions. The US government, like other international partners, should engage mechanisms such as the Accra Initiative to encourage the prioritization of peace and stability through their design and policies. Although this security initiative among five West African nations typically favors military-oriented responses to problems of extremism, the US government can partner with it in seeking broader, more effective approaches that can address extremism's root causes. Similarly, the United States and other international actors should encourage the African Continental Free Trade Area and other regional mechanisms to prioritize peace and stability in their own institutional designs—and in the economic and security policies that they advance.

Engage all local and international partners working to improve governance in Coastal West Africa. The United States should coordinate its efforts with governments and civil society in each country, considering national development plans and local aspirations. It should coordinate with multilateral institutions, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, and the European Union. It should seek synergies with like-minded bilateral partners such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Nordic countries, all of which have strategies for Coastal West Africa that are similar to the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. The US government should also consider US initiatives already underway—including the Young African Leaders Initiative, Prosper Africa, the President's Malaria Initiative, and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief—leveraging their established relationships with local stakeholders to strengthen the overall US effort to foster better governance.

Encourage the Mitigation of Economic Inequalities

The third set of recommendations speaks to the link between instability and economic inequality in Coastal West Africa. Although poverty is not an exclusive driver of extremism, underdevelopment and lack of economic opportunity can create conditions for extremist groups to thrive and recruit. If government institutions are absent, inefficient, or insufficient and are seen to favor elites, these inequalities can rupture the compact between government and the governed and allow extremist groups to operate in a sea of indifference, where local populations see national government as irrelevant in their lives.

To help redress these economic inequalities, the study group proposes the following recommendations:

Shape policy interventions to help redress economic inequalities that risk violent conflicts. US activities should respond to the risks of violent conflict from severe inequalities. This should include attention to (vertical) inequalities within a population as a whole and to (horizontal) inequalities in the ways that economic status, opportunities, and other benefits are distributed among different communities—whether geographic or identity-based. Efforts to promote fairer economies should consider entry points that may not be obvious. For example, Guinea’s macroeconomy and foreign investment are dominated by the mining industry, yet improvements to subsistence agriculture, on which 80 percent of the population relies, can have a more meaningful effect on the lives of individuals than investments in the mining sector.¹⁶ A helpful approach for international actors undertaking economic interventions can be to see, or at least present, themselves not as custodians of broad strategies to change policies but as partners who are extending offers of support on particular issues and initiatives.

Shape interventions to help redress inequalities of power and perceptions of unfairness that risk violence. Structurally unequal representation in government among a country’s communities—and the unequal policies that then result—contributes to conflict and the risks of violence. Any conflict prevention strategy must respond to these dynamics. It also should recognize that the legitimacy of governance, which can be undermined by perceptions of inequality, is a matter not of how fair a government or policies or economic realities actually are but of how they are perceived, particularly by isolated, poor, and fragile communities.

Shape US activities in light of the legacies of past international roles. As noted above, although the United States can by itself influence socioeconomic development in the region, the effectiveness of US action depends on engaging with international partners, as well as local ones. US activities should always be attuned to public perceptions of past interventions. The influence and legacy of France, for example, loom prominently in West Africa, in part because of France’s continued significant economic and commercial relationships with the region. US actions—by the US government and American businesses—that are intended to contribute to economic progress in countries of Coastal West Africa will be viewed, judged, and influenced by such legacies, which are often conflated with “the West” writ large.



The rising threat of political instability and the risk of violent conflict in Coastal West Africa call for more effective efforts to support democracy, good governance, and more inclusive economic growth. In the absence of such efforts, violent extremism will continue to spread, and peace and security will be harder to attain and sustain. The Biden administration's new Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, combined with the bipartisan Global Fragility Act, demonstrate the US government's acknowledgment of Africa's strategic importance as well as its economic potential. The new US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability can be a catalyst to encourage collaboration with the governments and peoples of Coastal West Africa to build the governance and economic architecture that can sustain peace and security in the region and beyond. To succeed, the US government must attend to voices from the region, empower its own representatives in the field, identify high-level leadership in Washington, improve coordination across US agencies, sustain engagement across multiple fiscal years, and commit resources commensurate with the United States' ambition to be a strong partner to a vital region and its hundreds of millions of people.

Notes

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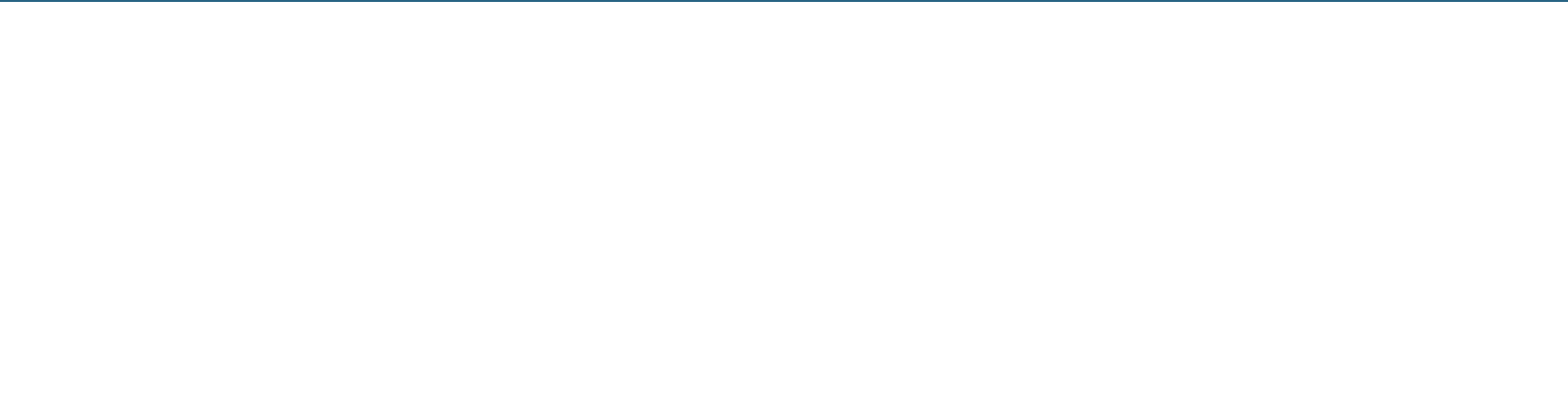
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About the Coastal West Africa Study Group

In February 2022, the United States Institute of Peace created the nonpartisan Senior Study Group on Coastal West Africa to identify specific programs and interventions that the United States and other international partners can offer Coastal West African governments and civil societies to help prevent conflict and support lasting peace. Comprised of 11 former senior policymakers, business leaders, and respected academics from the United States and West Africa, the study group met between February and July 2022 for a series of six discussions on the political and socioeconomic vulnerabilities affecting the subregion, including unequal and inadequate development, marginalized communities, and weak institutions of accountability. This report presents the consensus findings of these discussions and is designed to inform the approach of US and international partners to identify opportunities to advance security and stability in Coastal West Africa.



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2301 Constitution Avenue NW
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202.457.1700
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