Participant name: French Embassy

Embassy in Cote d’Ivoire.

Notes:

China is discreet. Embassy events, building construction, hospitals. But they don’t live with society. “**They are invisible**”. There is malign influence on social media but China is not seen there as much. Their influence is especially through soft power. Less offensive influence than Russia. However this seems to be changing: a Chinese author wrote a tribune on the biggest newspaper, front page. La Nation has also institutional links with China.

There is also opportunism for Benin’s President. Wants to exploit both USA and China. There are economic offers from China: trade, 5G network, office subsiarary with Alibaba. There are tensions over common standards. Lots of reticence to take a lot of loans: the government considers that 8% of GDP borrowing on February was a success. Other limits also include Chinese economic slowdown, but economic growth in Benin will continue to improve their relationship no matter what. The regional currency is also very strong. The trade deficit and disputes between USA and China could also improve the trade relationship between Benin and China, especially for soy.

For Russia it is difficult to decipher what’s from Burkina Faso and what’s Benin. Atakora (north) has much different views than the south on Russia. North thinks it’s forgotten and that the south wants to remake them at their image. Narratives from Niger that France is about to invade (for their own population) is also crossing the border. Often via “under the tree” (or word of mouth) or social media.

Unlikely that there could be a coup in Benin. Some elected officials in the north are opposed to the government though. Some influencers like Kemi Seba have allegiances that are well known, but others can accidently share misinformation. For example, many members shared a misinterpretation of the “ungrateful” speech of Macron. Another example are questions that are not good and asked in press conferences, but help spread rumors.

For the Helicopter crash. It was hard to stop the rumors of a French military presence, and many people still believe that was the case. “Rationality doesn’t work”. France has very little credibility in the region. To fight disinformation, they have a network of fact checkers and do “pre-debunking”. But French embassy is dependent on what the Benin authorities say. They aren’t making communication but are now making efforts. For example, the Operation Mirador conference in Cotonou, where press was invited. But the silence is very cultural, not especially due to President Talon. French foreign policy is also experiencing a change in communications lately too. And the Benin authorities may hide the truth, but the North sees a lot of military activity too.

For the plane: the EU communicated too much about it. There were too many declarations about it, and they didn’t seem to care about the potential impact. Military ties with other embassies are generally focused with what’s happening in the north. But comms could be improved, as the ties are mostly informal and lack clarity on who does what. There is a temptation to blame the French or let them take the blame. There should be more social media communication. Embassies are not as informed as the French.

France radioactive? Niger and Burkina Faso are fresh news. But people need t o understand that “**it’s more anti-western than anti-French**.” There is a thirst for more sovereignty and the west is seen as an obstacle to that, but China is ecopredatory.

Recommendations: Training of Journalism and support of NGOs, wide range partnerships with civilian actors. On May 2023 there was a training with Lille University on disinformation, to train young journalists and detect talent, but out of the 60 applicants, only 10 were taken (low quality of applicants) and out of them only 1 has kept contact. Moving forward, there should be an alumni program that would help fight Kemi Seba. Another would be a diaspora organization, becomes a lot of misinformation originates from the diaspora in France, especially due to Macron’s unpopularity. On the American side, there needs to be more reactivity. Also need to incite people to fight against troll factories.