**Interview with Steven Kemeny, Sahel Advisor, December 9, 2024, Washington, DC**

**The body politic in many countries, esp francophone. One friend said greatest predictor a country will have a coup is that they are francophone.** I**f use metaphore of body politic it is so weak it is open to infection. One is violent extremism**, another is coup and can only happen if you have great dissatisfaction and low expect for government and they fail to meet them. With the francophone, they were pushing on an open door. What is happening in Chad makes sense, so I just think there are opportunities, ppl want to hear why things are going wrong. And so it is hard, we have not , they have a much easier job than ours bc it is just clouding the waters.

No dividend from democracy. No jobs. A lot of babies and no jobs for any of them. The mnjtf, the force commander was there, the lake chad basin commission commissioner was there. In 1960s there were 7 million people and now 20 million and far less agricultural opportunities.

**Value in getting kicked out of Sahel**

I will share, this is off the record. In a way us getting kicked out of Niger and focusing on sehel is benefit of focusing terrorist ire on Russia and not us. When talk about core interest, our big core interest is protection of homeland but we want to help friends in Europe on migration and we don’t want civilians to hurt. Core interest is protection on homeland. Not being there, not carrying ops against terrorist and not being the focus on terror threats alleviates a lot of the pressure off the homeland and makes us safer. We can’t be the bad guys if we are not there.

Burkina faso … I would contrast burkina with niger. BF focused on heavy handed tactics, poorly trained individuals engaging in contact. Niger took some of our lessons and what they do, you don’t see atrocities in Niger. You see the willingness to provide openings for surrender, a consciousness about targeting, all the things that make them more successful. Another you can’t understate, these countries turned away from the west bc threat of sactions, real sactions on Niger and real threat of invasion… after the coup, a summit by July 30 of the ECOWA heads of state and had statement of draconian sanctions and threatened military invasion and the usk… us had important role in saying regional way does not make sense and threatening is hollow, they didn’t see as hallow threat at all. So when you … it is real. My focus is really on burkina. The coastal countries, you have center periphery problem which is not the same as sahel states. The coastal portion is a different population than the hinterlands but making same mistakes, under service, marginalized groups. So that is problematic when disparity that will inflame the tensions so they need to focus on that. From a messaging point of view there is the vulnerability and that is the open wound and infection can exploit.

The coastals are urban and the interior and northern parts are rural. A lot to say about messaging, it is so easy bc of whats app groups and nontransparent to us. Full disclosure my wife works at meta. Whatsapp is the internet to most ppl. Africans have facebook light. It is the face of the internet to africans. The truth about WhatsApp is end to end encryption and that encryption is very good. A lot of opacity and so cheap to put out bs. I could have a second career writing bns. They don’t need a lot of ppl

State talking at all… …

Sahel has invited the Russians in but in terms of sovereignty, they still drink their own cool aid as funkily defined as it is. They need eachother. They don’t have friends. Russia needs friends… lends legitimacy to illegitimate sources of countries.

Misinfo is a hard problem set. Look at the united states.

In burkina…

Should we visit BF? It won’t hurt you to ask the embassy, while it may not be realistic, we do want to explore the possibility. They may say no.

**Risks of participation in BF**

Local gov talk with us? They have a special technique in bs, they have the volunteer defense forces so if you are too critical to the regime you get conscripted and sent to the front. Has a chilling effect in bs. In Niger, insults to gov is punishable by jail. They are closing media spaces, they are passing democratic timelines…. They drink their own coolaid about threats from France and about sovereignty. F

**Messaging best bet for BF**

**Any levers in BF? Positive messaging and branding is the strongest thing you can do.**

**Risk of association with french**

These countries not as successful as smeering the us with the French stink. Being careful with relations with France on this is important. When I was on the mali desk, to get to mali need to go through paris literally and figuratively bc the French had a hand in everything. They really hate the French and part of misinformation is to say we are the French but that

You join a gang like Russia you can’t leave the Russia gang.

Other, the problem is they are asking ppl not to trust their own lying eyes. We are here to provide you security, when BF getting ass handed to them. So increasing the truth captures up with them. Have prices dropped? Have there been more economic opportunities and jobs? No. when tested against reality these messages are false and talk about where is the lever, the evident truth right in front of your eyes.

Peace

**GOALS FOR BF**

Does the us want to kick Russia out? We are going to transition so investing in big roles does not make sense in five to ten weeks. So the answer to your question is I don’t know. I find out.

Integrated country strategy. Classified.

We get hectored by congress, why don’t you have a strategy for the sahel. We have a strategy, no strategy can anticipate all events on the ground and our principles have not changed. Things changed after niger, now we are at point where talking about next steps and our options are limited. So what has come out of IA process. Targeted sustained engagement. Two focus areas. Lay the foundation for a return to democracy. Maintain ppl to ppl ties with realization we will shift our focus to coastal west Africa. Dod person put it succinctly. We were on the inside out in niger and now from the outside in. what lessons have we learned from the coups. The first is need to realize how toxic the French are. The over militarization with ouor engagement these countries ….

Defense, diplomacy… l

FRENCH STINK

Sahel envoys conference three weeks ago. The eu is totally bound up bc the French want a burn down the house policy and the other countries want to engage and keep lines of comm open. My view was having the French there meant we could not have an honest conversation about the role of the French. The sahel conference was totally bound up and constipated.

But France are longest serving partners,

Do we want a sahel conference where the French are not there?

Our space for western engagement is limited. Our amb has not presented her credentials in niger. She can’t talk to head of state. So we are talking limited opportunities to influence.

At some point they will recognize the Russians over promise and under deliver. So the big question for hat is how long do we wait till ppl become completely satisfied. Even if tactical victors there are not strategic directives.