

Turkish Power Stations Light Up Foreign Tug of War in West Africa

November 2023



Passengers cross the Gambia River to Gambia's capital Banjul, where Karadeniz Powership Goktay Bey is docked. It provides 60 percent of Gambia's electricity.

In harbours across West Africa, ships bearing the Turkish flag emit a steady stream of wispy yellow smoke. Docked within a stone's throw of the beach, the floating power stations are still and silent, as if part of the city's permanent skyline.

But these ships are new. Since 2018, Turkish company Karadeniz Holdings has exported powerships to [six](#) West African countries from Senegal to Sierra Leone. The fossil-fuel-burning vessels have become an indispensable component of West Africa's power infrastructure, a region where [220 million](#) people live without electricity. Karadeniz [provides](#) 15 percent of Senegal's electricity needs, 60 percent in The Gambia and is the only electricity provider to Guinea-Bissau.

Yet in October, Karadeniz [cut](#) electricity to Guinea-Bissau's capital of over half a million people for almost two days, citing outstanding payments. One month earlier, Sierra Leone's capital Freetown was plunged into darkness due to an unpaid debt of \$40 million.

Once a corner of relative peace and stability on the continent, West Africa is in flux. Strong relations with Europe have sharply eroded as populations blame the former colonial powers for rising violence and economic woes. In their wake, Russia, Turkey, India and China promise solutions as they compete for investment, trade and diplomatic relations. But so far, these promises have delivered little.

Since 2020, military coups have ousted pro-Western governments in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger. The juntas, now ruling close to 90 million people, have gained popularity by positioning themselves as anti-European, and particularly anti-French.

Widespread suspicion of French intentions in West Africa has been fuelled by the former colonial power's failure to quell violent terrorist groups. Violence has soared to its highest levels in a generation, despite France's expensive counterinsurgency effort, Operation Barkhane, which deployed French



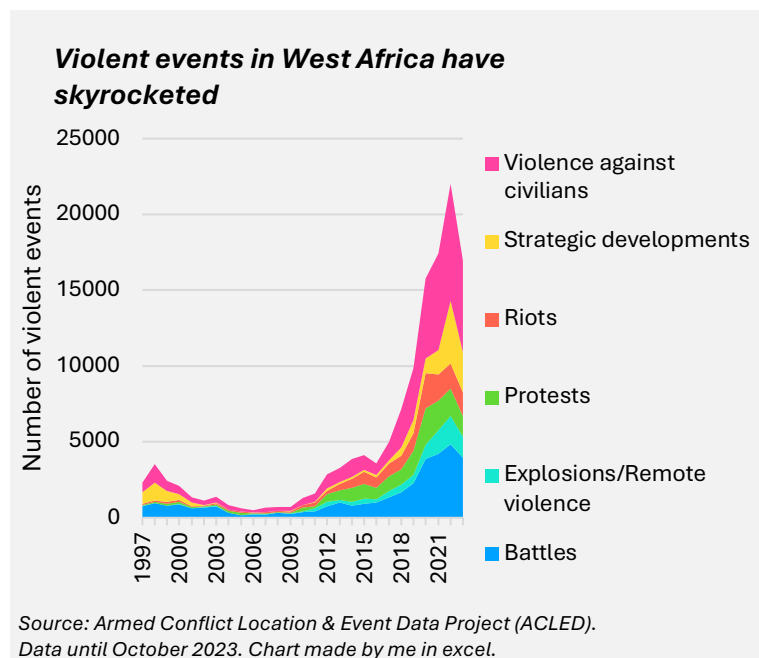
Left: Karadeniz Powership in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau, operating since 2019; Right: Karpowership in Dakar, Senegal, operating since 2020.

troops to combat terrorism from 2014 to 2022. Since the mid-2010s, the rapid expansion of Islamist terrorist organisations has led to routine violence for large swathes of the civilian population across West Africa. Once confined to the rural desert region of the Sahel, these groups are increasingly spreading into previously safe coastal countries like Togo and Benin.

The region also faces a deepening economic crisis spurred by the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Uncertainty has dampened investment and trade, restricting job opportunities, and high food and fuel inflation has made essential goods unaffordable for millions of people. Rising global interest rates also threaten debt sustainability in the region, increasing the cost of servicing loans. In Ghana, [90](#)

[cents](#) of every dollar of government expenditure is spent on debt repayment, a budget emergency that has led to harsh cuts in public services. No West African country has been able to issue an international bond [since Spring 2022](#), a common way of raising government funds.

Yet, rather than blaming Russian aggression or Chinese secrecy in the early days of the pandemic, most domestic news coverage highlights Europe's failure to deliver COVID-vaccines to Africa during the pandemic, and Europe's expectation that African countries condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Seen as hypocritical and out of touch, support for European nations has deteriorated. In particular, France's control over the CFA



franc (the local currency that Charles De Gaulle introduced in 1945), and their paternalistic tone in diplomatic relations have fuelled regular protests and even an attack on the French embassy in Burkina Faso in 2022. But a wider collapse in European influence across the region looms.

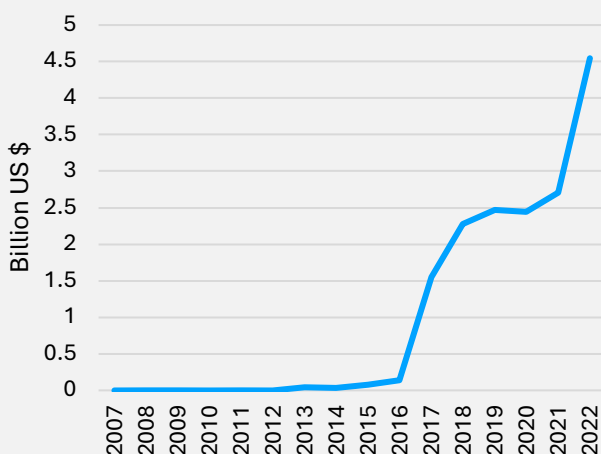
The coups have fragmented the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a nearly 50-year-old political, economic, and peacekeeping union that broadly had good relations with Europe. Whilst the Union has suspended members now led by military juntas, the remaining members appear impotent; Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger make up 60 per cent of the Union's land mass. Threats

to intervene in Niger following the 2023 coup ring hollow, even though it was only in 2017 that ECOWAS troops successfully restored democracy in The Gambia following President Jammeh's refusal to concede election defeat.

European nations have done little to address the changing mood in the region, distracted by the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis. In search of new partners to solve security challenges and economic hardship, West Africa is proving fertile territory for competing geopolitical powers' ambitions. Russian mercenaries, for example, have swiftly replaced the French troops who left in 2022 following the end of Operation Barkhane. The Wagner Group, a private military company sponsored by the Russian government, reportedly reached a [\\$10 million a month](#) deal with Mali's government to fight Islamist terror.

China is also intensifying its presence. Following relatively little Belt and Road investment in West Africa, the region is now central to China's geopolitical strategy: between 2021 and 2022, West Africa received [86 percent](#) of Chinese loans to Africa, worth \$1.92 billion. Chinese investment has focused on mining, a critical sector as global competition for critical raw materials intensifies. In Guinea, home to a third of the world's aluminium reserves, China has invested [\\$2.8 billion](#) since 2017. Since 2021, Chinese companies invested [\\$130 million](#) in a Malian lithium mine and at least [\\$383 million](#) in Sierra Leone, where an entire port and railway system will be upgraded to export iron ore.

ECOWAS Exports of Aluminium ores and concentrates to China



Source: based on ECOWAS Trade Information System (ECOTIS). Chart made by me excel.

Building on historical and cultural ties with East Africa, India is seeking to counteract Chinese influence in the West. Since 2015, it has opened [eight](#) diplomatic missions in the region, and is now the continent's second largest lender after China. In 2019, India [inaugurated](#) the Mahatma Gandhi Business Park in Ivory Coast, and the following year [opened](#) a convention centre of the same name in Niamey, Niger.

But the broadest approach is Turkey's, whose strategy extends far beyond floating power stations. President Erdoğan has visited the continent [40 times](#) since 2005, and has developed a concentrated [cluster](#) of embassies, coordination offices, and educational institutions in West Africa. Turkish Airlines flies to [every single](#) West African country except Guinea-

Bissau and Togo, more than any other airline. Since 2020, Turkey has [signed](#) military cooperation agreements with Niger, Nigeria, Togo and Senegal, and has [exported](#) drones and armoured vehicles to Togo and Niger.

West Africa is caught in an intricate nexus of emerging economic, security and energy diplomacy. The region continues to grapple with escalating violence, economic pressures and regional fragmentation, while the growing competition among global powers presents a nebulous future.

President Erdoğan [lauds](#) Turkish involvement as a catalyst for the African continent taking its rightful place in the global system. President Xi has [pledged](#) that investment to Africa has "its future growth in mind". Meanwhile, European leaders remain largely silent. Whether new geopolitical players will bring relief to the citizens of West Africa remains to be seen. But whatever the future holds, the shifting sands of this nascent geopolitical arena will likely blow far beyond the region's borders.