

Hybrid Warfare Scenarios: China and the Geopolitics of West Africa. “The Sahel Silk Road”

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The last part of the African continent to be analyzed in the Hybrid War vulnerability study is its western core region around Nigeria. This part of Africa is significant for many reasons, not least of which are its demographic and energy potential. Nigeria importantly sits at the juncture of what observers traditionally delineate as West and Central Africa, though for the sake of the present study's scope and strategic relevance, the countries of Chad and Cameroon – regularly categorized as part of Central Africa – are redefined as West Africa because their security and strategic outlook are most immediately tied to events in that region as opposed to the one that they're popularly grouped with.

The research aims to demonstrate the importance of the author's definition of the West Africa Core Region (WACR) to China's New Silk Road strategy for the continent as well as reveal the many Hybrid War risks that threaten its future integration into Beijing's grand envisioned project.

This introductory article will spell out the geostrategic context of West Africa and describe some of the larger influencing factors at play in the region. After that, the subsequent chapters will then proceed to analyze Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria in that order.

Connecting The Giants

Basic Concept:

Hitherto this point, the research described the two bicoastal transportation infrastructure projects that China is pursuing in Africa as being the Northern Trans-African Route (NTAR) and its Southern Trans-African Route (STAR) counterpart. While these two are actively being pursued, they weren't the only opportunities that China had for linking Africa's Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts, with what might have been the original plan being scuttled long before any official proposal in this direction could have been proffered.

From a grand strategic standpoint, it makes the most sense for China to connect Africa's two largest countries together across a vast resource-rich belt in order to maximize their future economic strengths as prospective Chinese-friendly multipolar leaders in the continent. Practically speaking, this would mean joining Ethiopia and Nigeria by means of South Sudan and the Central African Republic, though because of the absolutely dysfunctional workings of these two civil war-torn transit states, there was no way that China could seriously offer even a vague proposal for making this happen. The below map illustrates the basic concept for connecting these two demographic giants:



The US' efforts in contributing to the Failed State Belt that was just discussed in the prior chapter can be seen in hindsight as a cost-effective masterstroke in preempting a Chinese-built New Silk Road passage between these two states. The externally provoked destabilizations in South Sudan and the Central African Republic have been impactful enough that they've completely broken the idea of a unified government in each state, let alone the very idea of a "government" and "state" in these adjacent territories. It's unclear how long it will take to rectify the damages that have been inflicted and return even a semblance of law, order, and stability to these two countries, but for the time being, it can be safely assumed that neither South Sudan nor the Central African Republic could function as reliable transit states in fulfilling this vision. This is despite the tempting opportunity to use their extracted resources to further fuel Nigerian and Ethiopian growth as part of China's supreme strategy for ensuring Africa's sustained multipolarity under its guiding influence.

The Sahel Silk Road

In light of the obvious obstacles that the Failed State Belt poses to this vision, a second workaround is conceptually possible but similarly marred by American-encouraged destabilization. Running from northern Nigeria through Chad and Sudan, this 'detour' of sorts could terminate at Port Sudan and/or continue into Ethiopia, though the latter is uncertain due to Khartoum's oftentimes tense relations with Addis Ababa over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project. Despite the Sudanese Foreign Minister recently [stating](#) that his country's differences with Ethiopia on this divisive project have been settled, Sudan might not have any interest in taking ties with Ethiopia to the trusted level that its integration along this Sahel Silk Road would necessitate. Before going any further, here's a useful depiction of how this path would look:



Khartoum would be the pivotal node in this construction no matter whether the terminal point is in Port Sudan and/or Addis Ababa. Both locations are easily accessible by Chinese merchants in that the first can be directly reached on the Red Sea while the latter is linked to by means of the Djibouti-Ethiopia railroad. The second scenario might be more difficult to pull off in the long run because no railroad presently exists between Ethiopia and Sudan and likely won't be constructed for some time, if ever, due to the residual distrust lingering from the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam controversy. Therefore, while it's ideally in China's best interests to expand the Sahel Silk Road to Ethiopia, more than likely, Addis Ababa wouldn't be directly connected to this framework via any unimodal system for many years to come, though it could theoretically access it via highway routes.

That being said, even the Sahel Silk Road between Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan was beset with American-influenced problems before any real work on it could get underway. The Darfur issue sprung to the forefront of global attention during the mid-2000s, catapulted to fame by numerous celebrities who wanted to [diversify their careers](#) away from being Hollywood film stars to supposed "humanitarians". Whether these individuals acted on their own self-interested prerogatives or were linked to the US "deep state" (permanent military-intelligence-diplomacy bureaucracies) in the manner that Angelina Jolie is by her [membership](#) in the Council of Foreign Relations, the point is that these "useful idiots" promoted a crisis that ended up having the effect of preemptively sabotaging China's Sahel

Silk Road plans for constructing an overland route connecting Nigeria with the Red Sea.

Port Sudan To Douala:

Once the Darfur issue eventually blew over and the [tensions](#) between Sudan and Chad were [resolved](#), Boko Haram coincidentally emerged as a transnational threat of an even larger magnitude than Darfur ever was, thereby putting an indefinite hold on whatever hopes China may have had for actualizing this vision. Nevertheless, the Chinese are assiduous and aren't used to being stopped in their plans, which is why they improvised a novel solution for getting around this new set of obstacles in their Silk Road designs. Instead of directly connecting Ethiopia with Nigeria, the Chinese now seem intent on linking Port Sudan with the Cameroonian Atlantic port of Douala by means of a future railway through Chad. It was announced in the summer of 2014 that China would provide [\\$2 billion](#) worth of financing for this endeavor, but since then, barely any news has surfaced about this project in the international press.

The last reliable tidbit to be heard about it came in August 2016 when the Sudanese Ambassador to Chad [said](#) that "arrangements are underway" for the Chadian portion of the initiative, while the Chad-Cameroon part of this corridor progressively continues to be constructed and is additionally supported by a [\\$71 million loan](#) from the World Bank to Yaoundé. As for the Sudanese component, rail infrastructure already exists connecting the Darfur border town of Nyala to Khartoum and Port Sudan. On the surface of things, it might be confusing why China would want to connect Port Sudan with Douala when its original and most logical strategy calls for it to link Ethiopia and Nigeria instead, but in fact, what China is doing is merely adapting to the American-changed geostrategic conditions and trying to connect Nigeria with Port Sudan instead. Superficially, of course, none of this is happening since the railroad is expected to terminate in Cameroon and not Nigeria, but in practice, Douala is close enough to southern Nigeria as to be accessible to that market and thus integrate that part of the most populous African country into China's multipolar transnational connective infrastructure project without much difficulty. Here's a visualization of this new route:



As can be seen, a return to conflict in Darfur could jeopardize these plans, though it convincingly seems like Sudan has a lot more control over the situation at present than it previously did while still fighting another war in what is nowadays the territory of South Sudan. Also, the Chadian capital of N'Djamena is a key node that's veritably threatened by Boko Haram, but given Chad's strength and proactive measures in countering this menace, it doesn't appear likely that it or the venture would be offset by this. What's most interesting about this new Silk Road proposal, however, is how it's essentially a blend of the two earlier discussed routes between Ethiopia and Nigeria and Sudan and Nigeria, whether by means of the Failed State Belt or the Sahel, respectively.

An intriguing observation is that the Ethiopia-South Sudan-Central African Republic-Cameroon-Southern Nigeria route passes through majority-Christian territory while the Northern Nigeria-Chad-Sudan counterpart goes through its overwhelmingly Muslim-inhabited counterpart. No strategic judgement is being made one way or another in this regard and these facts realistically didn't play any role whatsoever in these two routes' envisaged paths, but they're nonetheless interesting to take note of. The blended Port Sudan-Douala Railway thus accordingly traverses through majority-Muslim territory in Sudan

and most of Chad before crossing over into mostly Christian territory in southern Chad and the parts of Cameroon through which it passes. From the standpoint of the “Clash of Civilizations” blueprint that the US is following in dividing and ruling the Eastern Hemisphere, this would mean that any aggravation of identity (religious) tension between the people of northern/central and southern Chad could disrupt the entire project.

Core Dynamics

The geostrategic situation in the West Africa Core Region (WACR) must be expounded upon so that the reader can properly understand the relevant dynamics in this part of the continent. For starters, Nigeria is obviously the core for the entire region, with the neighboring countries of Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon representing its ‘Near Abroad’ in geopolitical terms. These are the states most directly affected by whatever happens in Nigeria and vice-versa, hence why they’re all grouped together in this study as forming the WACR. Having established the parameters of this pivotal subregion, several relevant inferences can thus be made in helping others understand how each part relates to the other.

French Neo-Imperialism:

The most noticeable observation is that Nigeria is an Anglophone country surrounded by Francophone states. The differences between these two sets of countries go beyond the linguistic and into the political-economic realms. It’s clear that each category was previously colonized by a different European power, but a further subdivision can also be made among the four French states. Benin and Niger are part of the West African Franc that’s used among the [West African Monetary Union](#)’s (UEMOA) members, while Chad and Cameroon are members of the [Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa](#) (CEMAC) that use the Central African Franc. Both currencies are [directly controlled by Paris](#), so France thus exercises supreme neo-colonial influence over the affairs of almost every one of its former African colonies. Compounding this astounding level of control is its military component as expressed in [Operation Barkhane](#), which is what France has now branded its transnational African deployment in the wake of the 2013 Malian intervention (officially known as [Operation Serval](#)). Of relevance to the WACR, this includes Niger and Chad, which are rich in uranium and oil, respectively. Taken together in all of its various iterations, France refers to its post-colonial policy towards Africa as “[Françafrique](#)”.

ECOWAS And Lake Chad:

For as much influence as France is exerting on its former colonies in the region, Nigeria is struggling to push back through its leadership in the [Economic Community Of West African States](#) (ECOWAS). As pertaining to WACR, this includes Niger and Benin, the latter state of which is essentially an outgrowth of Lagos in present-day strategic terms and French-extracted Nigerien uranium’s only present transit route to the sea. Nigeria is much too internally weakened right now to positively impact any of its neighbors except in broad future-oriented economic terms, but nevertheless, it remains a force to be reckoned with, which is why ECOWAS is indeed a regional integration organization for observers to keep an eye on.

The eastern borderland of this bloc includes the oil-rich Lake Chad region, which thus brings Cameroon and Chad into the same subregional geographic designation as Niger and Nigeria. Furthermore, the transnational threat of Boko Haram has tied these four countries even

closer together as they multilaterally attempt to deal with this menace. The terrorist group is exceptionally dangerous to all of them because it nests within an easily traversable territory inherently vulnerable to Daesh-like sudden capture, which means that the states of the anti-Boko Haram coalition must always remain on guard to prevent this blitzkrieg-like threat from ever materializing.

Intra-Core Anglophone-Francophone Cooperation:

The anti-Boko Haram coalition of Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria serves as more than just a counter-terrorist mechanism, since it also binds some of ECOWAS' members together with CEMAC's in the first transregional workable framework between the two. On a more symbolic front, it brings together the Anglophone and Francophone countries of the WACR in pursuing a shared concrete vision much more urgently defined than the one which ECOWAS provides.

Continuing along the tangent of Anglophone-Francophone cooperation in WACR, the earlier talk about constructing a [Trans-Saharan Pipeline](#) from Nigeria to Western Europe by means of Niger and Algeria also suffices as a possible joint example of this, but it must be emphasized that this gas project has never gotten off of the drawing boards and might likely never will due to the advent of LNG and the competitive price reduction that its future large-scale rollout will soon lead to, which will make this means of sale just as attractive and perhaps even more strategically secure than a standard land-based pipeline through such a volatile region.

Lastly, on the topic of issues that bridge the Anglophone-Francophone divide in the WACR, it needs to be mentioned that Cameroon by its present existence is a perfect example of this because of its 1961 democratic incorporation of the former UK colony of "Southern Cameroons", which thenceforth turned the unified country into a meeting point for these two languages, albeit one that's still geographically distinct.

Turbulence In The Transregional Pivot Space

What follows is a gist of the Hybrid War scenarios that confront West Africa, though there are also a lot more nuanced details pertaining to them as well as several other related destabilization possibilities that will be explored in the coming chapters:

Boko Haram:

Nigeria is the geostrategic center of the WACR, and it follows that its internal destabilization would reverberate outwards through the rest of West and Central Africa just as Libya's did vis-à-vis North Africa and the Sahara. The reader should remember that Nigeria links together ECOWAS and CEMAC, with the latter being bridged because of Cameroon and Chad's active membership in the anti-Boko Haram Coalition. The terrorist group that they fight against is actually the number one threat to all four of them because its location around the Lake Chad basin means that it could easily spread from one Muslim community to the next, not only in ideological terms, but also as it relates to military conquest because of the easily traversable terrain that in many ways mirrors the one along the "Syraq" border. The difference, however, is that Nigeria's neighbors have been strong enough to repel this threat as it infringed on their borders and actually took the initiative to [push it back](#) within Nigeria's because Abuja was unable to properly deal with the group by itself. It's a telling fact that the largest and most energy-rich country of the WACR is the least militarily capable

of defending its own borders and restoring sovereignty within it, which speaks to the staggering level of corruption which has corroded the Nigerian Armed Forces for decades.

The Anti-Terrorist Coalition's Shortcomings:

While it might seem as though the anti-Boko Haram coalition could succeed in containing the terrorist threat within Nigeria's borders and thus protecting themselves from its contagion, the reality is a lot more complex because the slow-motion implosion of the Nigerian state would inevitably affect all of them with time. As Boko Haram returns to becoming more of a domestic Nigerian problem and less of an international transregional one between ECOWAS and CEMAC, it runs the danger of becoming too overwhelming for the Nigerian authorities themselves to handle and thus getting totally out of control. For sensitive reasons of national sovereignty, a coalition offensive deep into the heart of northeastern Nigeria could create a lot of domestic problems within the country and possibly raise tensions between itself and its militarily ambitious Chadian neighbor, so there's a chance that N'Djamena will not go further within Nigeria than is necessary to directly protect its own security and borderland capital. Boko Haram is so dangerous to Nigeria not just because of what it physically does in the secluded corner of the country that it's active in, but because of what it represents, which is a strong religious-regional (Muslim-Northern) identity backed up by militant means. The stronger that Boko Haram becomes and the longer that Abuja takes to fully root it out, the more emboldened that Christian-Southern insurgents such as MEND and the "Avengers" become in the other part of the country once referred to as "Biafra".

Christian Counter-Responses:

This is extremely problematic for Nigeria because unlike Boko Haram, MEND and the "Avengers" are active in the most economically active part of the country that accounts for most of the government's revenue, so an upsurge in religious-regional terrorist activity here could be devastating for the national coffers and thus multiply anti-government sentiment with time as the already impoverished population is forced to endure further budget cuts and resultant socio-economic hardships. The southern separatists could then [branch out across the border](#) in recruiting the coordinated help of their "Southern Cameroon" counterparts in recreating the Nigerian destabilization scenario inside Cameroon. Just as northern Nigeria is wracked by Boko Haram violence, so too is northern Cameroon, and it could then also experience the same sort of southern secessionist violence in the former British territories as its neighbor is latently going through in the Niger Delta, albeit for different but complementary reasons. In turn, if Chad can't reliably access Cameroon in carrying out the [80% of national trade](#) that it conducts through the country (including via the pipeline that traverses its territory), then not only would the CCS Silk Road through Cameroon, Chad, and Sudan be disrupted, but the middleman state in this arrangement would undergo aggravated domestic difficulties related to a lack of consumer goods and sky-high prices, which might naturally create space for a southern Chadian revolt among the historically restive Christian population that already distrusts the northern Muslim-led government.

The Bigger Picture:

The larger pattern being established here is that Muslim militancy in the northern reaches of Nigeria and Cameroon encourages its southern Christian counterpart, with the consequences of these dual interlinked destabilizations affecting Chad to a very strong

degree. As for Niger, it only has to contend with Boko Haram in this example, though Niamey is certainly wondering what it would have to do if a destabilized Nigeria ends up exporting its problems to neighboring Benin, which is the landlocked country's main outlet to the sea. If Lagos' 'cross-border international suburbs' of Porto Novo and Cotonou are adversely affected to a serious enough degree that French-destined Nigerien uranium exports can no longer reliably and/or safely traverse through the latter (which itself is basically an outgrowth of the capital), then a French military intervention might be in the cards to secure Paris' vital energy lifeline through the country.

To be continued...

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