For much of the past decade, the United States watched its influence in the Sahel steadily erode. France's retreat from Mali, a succession of military coups across West Africa, and growing anti-Western sentiment created fertile ground for alternative powers to step in. Today, a sweeping offensive by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Al-Qaeda's most powerful affiliate in West Africa, has exposed the fragility of Mali's ruling junta and the limits of external power projection in the region. Militants now exert influence across large swaths of northern Mali, while local forces have struggled to contain the insurgency despite years of brutal counterterror operations. Reports of withdrawals from key northern positions have punctured images of dependable external patronage.

For Washington, the implications are significant. This has reopened political and strategic space in a region where American influence appeared all but extinguished. Yet if the United States interprets this solely as an invitation to return to business as usual, it risks repeating the very mistakes that have undermined every external power that has tried to impose stability on the Sahel.

The temptation is understandable. The region matters. Jihadist violence continues to spread across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, threatening not only local governments but also Western citizens, embassies, businesses, and strategic investments. Recent security alerts from the US Embassy in Bamako underscore how rapidly the threat environment is deteriorating. Militants have targeted foreign-linked mining operations, and extremist groups remain capable of kidnapping Western nationals across the region.

Lessons from Failed Interventions

But the lesson of Mali is not that the United States needs a bigger footprint. It is that foreign powers consistently overestimate what military partnerships with unstable regimes can accomplish. External actors have inherited the same impossible conditions: weak

governance, ethnic fragmentation, corruption, economic despair, and military rulers who rely heavily on indiscriminate force. Far from crushing the insurgency, these tactics have often strengthened extremist recruitment and deepened public resentment.

Washington should resist the urge to tie itself too closely to governments whose political futures are uncertain and whose military strategies are proving counterproductive. The Sahel's recent history is littered with cautionary tales. Mali expelled French troops and UN peacekeepers before pivoting to new partners. Niger, once hailed as a cornerstone of US counterterror strategy, ousted its democratically elected government in 2023 and later forced out American forces—including personnel stationed at a $110 million drone base Washington had only recently completed. These reversals illustrate a hard truth: alliances in the Sahel can evaporate overnight.

A Narrower US Framework

That does not mean the United States should disengage entirely. Rather, it should adopt a narrower and more realistic framework for involvement. Instead of ambitious state-building missions or open-ended military commitments, Washington should focus on targeted cooperation that protects concrete American interests while preserving strategic flexibility.

Limited intelligence-sharing, surveillance coordination, and counterterror monitoring offer a more sustainable model. American ISR capabilities, for instance, can help regional governments identify militant networks threatening major population centers or foreign assets without binding Washington to every action undertaken by local juntas. Such cooperation is far less politically toxic than large troop deployments and avoids making the United States synonymous with unpopular regimes.

Learning from India’s Model

Equally important, Washington must broaden its network of partners beyond the Sahel’s coup-prone capitals—and draw lessons from successful non-military approaches like India’s in Africa. More stable regional actors—including Morocco, Algeria, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, and Mauritania—have a direct stake in preventing jihadist spillover and can serve as more dependable security interlocutors. Supporting these states may ultimately prove more effective than investing heavily in fragile juntas whose legitimacy and survival remain in question.

India’s demand-driven, capacity-building model offers a compelling example of sustainable engagement that prioritizes mutual benefit and local ownership over extractive or coercive partnerships. Through initiatives like the Pan-African e-Network, India connects 48 African countries for tele-education and tele-medicine, linking super-specialty hospitals and universities to regional hubs in nations like Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria—directly addressing healthcare gaps in West Africa without political strings. In Senegal, for instance, the “Solar Mamas” program trains rural women to install and maintain solar systems, empowering communities in off-grid areas and reaching 36 African countries including Sahel-adjacent states. Lines of Credit for infrastructure, such as rural electrification and irrigation in partner countries, further align with African priorities, fostering long-term stability through economic resilience rather than short-term security fixes. This South-South approach has executed over 194 projects across 37 African nations, emphasizing skills training via ITEC and affordable tech transfer, providing a blueprint for how development cooperation can indirectly bolster security by tackling root causes like poverty and isolation.

Preparing for Political Flux

The United States should also prepare for political change rather than pretending current military rulers are permanent fixtures. In the Sahel, governments fall quickly. Building adaptable relationships that can survive transitions of power is far more valuable than staking America's credibility on individual strongmen.

The challenge for Washington is not whether to reengage in West Africa. It is whether it can do so without becoming the next foreign power swallowed by the Sahel's endless instability. By emphasizing targeted tools, regional allies, and development-inspired models like India's, the US can seize this opportunity more wisely—protecting interests while avoiding the pitfalls of overreach. This balanced path promises enduring influence in a volatile region.