



EXPLOITER SERIES

Sociocultural Exploitation in Burkina Faso

The Exploiter Series adopts a rigorous, social science-based approach centered on the Exploitable Conditions Framework (ECF) to unveil key actors and their motivations for exploiting local and regional vulnerabilities that advance their strategic interests and disrupt national, regional, and global security and stability.

KEY JUDGMENTS

China, Russia, and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) each employ nuanced strategies in Burkina Faso to exploit sociocultural vulnerabilities for their geopolitical or ideological goals. China focuses on infrastructure for strategic influence. Russia enhances its military presence to counter VEO threats and Western influence. Jihadist VEOs entrench themselves as a parallel legitimate authority to secure influence and footholds.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

Increased Dependency on Foreign Investment

Major powers' investments in Burkina Faso's economic and security sectors may temporarily benefit the country, but this foothold risks dependency, which will undermine national sovereignty and stability and could exacerbate violence in the country.

Increased Regional Instability

External powers, VEOs, or even nonstate actors (e.g., Wagner Group) ability to leverage the first-, second-, and third-order effects of climate vulnerabilities is likely to destabilize the region (i.e., the Sahel region), escalate conflicts and arms proliferation, and exacerbate humanitarian crises, increasing displacement, food insecurity, and human rights violations.

Challenges to U.S. Regional Influence

Instability in the Sahel challenges U.S. power projection and rapid response and complicates U.S. Army access and maneuverability amid Russian and Chinese influence.

KEY EXPLOITERS



VEOs



Russia



China

ECF Assessment Methodology

<p>Cross Border Encroachment</p>	<p>Demographic Pressure</p>
<p>Divided Societies</p>	<p>Economic Inequality</p>
<p>Environmental Threats</p>	<p>Illicit Networks</p>
<p>Ineffective Government</p>	<p>Infrastructural Deficits</p>
<p>Mobilizing Ideologies</p>	<p>Multiple Sovereignty</p>
<p>Resource Scarcity</p>	<p>Technification of Society</p>

Not Relevant
 Relevant
 Somewhat Relevant
 Highly Relevant

Dominant Condition

Environmental Threats

Environmental degradation is the linchpin condition exacerbating resource scarcity, demographic pressures, economic disparities, and ineffective governance. This lays the groundwork for jihadist destabilization and strategic exploitation by external powers.



Burkina Faso

ANALYTIC BACKGROUNDER

Geographic Context

Burkina Faso, a landlocked country in West Africa, is situated in the heart of the Sahel region, bordering Mali to the north and west, Niger to the east, and Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin to the south. Its flat terrain features occasional hills, with arid northern areas and a greener, humid south. The country experiences a tropical climate with distinct rainy and dry seasons. Burkina Faso is increasingly important geopolitically as a pivotal transit hub for legitimate commerce and illicit activities.

Economic Landscape

Burkina Faso is one of the world's least developed countries, facing high poverty rates and a limited industrial sector. The economy depends on agriculture, especially cotton production, and gold mining. Despite these challenges, Burkina Faso has shown resilience and growth potential with a young and increasingly urban population. However, sociopolitical instability and insecurity, particularly in the north, hinder sustainable growth and reduce access to education and healthcare services.

Political History

Known as Upper Volta until 1984, Burkina Faso gained independence from France in 1960 following a largely peaceful process. After World War II, France responded to global anti-colonial sentiments by allowing its West African colonies to self-govern. Maurice Yaméogo became Upper Volta's first president but was overthrown in January 1966 by Aboubakar Sangoulé Lamizana following strikes and public demonstrations against austerity. This coup introduced a sequence of military leaders, including Saye Zerbo (1980), Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo (1982), Thomas Sankara (1983), and Blaise Compaoré (1987). Sankara renamed the country Burkina Faso and implemented transformative policies. His replacement, Compaoré, introduced democratic reforms but was overthrown in 2014 by a popular rebellion when he tried to change the constitution to remain in power, leading to a transitional period under interim president Michel Kafando. In 2015, Roch Marc Christian Kabore was elected president, only to be overthrown after winning reelection by Paul-Henri Sandiango Damiba in January 2022. The current president, Ibrahim Traoré, overthrew Damiba in September 2022, quickly establishing his strongman rule with ideological linkage to Russia.

Contemporary Vulnerability

Burkina Faso faces a critical environmental threat landscape marked by the impacts of climate change. The country grapples with frequent and intense droughts and deforestation, leading to desertification. These ecological issues exacerbate existing challenges in water management, agriculture, and food security that threaten the livelihoods of a predominantly agrarian society. The environmental challenge further intensifies local conflicts over scarce resources and drives migration, both internal and cross-border, adding layers of complexity to the region's security dynamic.



EXPLOITERS

Violent Extremist Organizations

Jihadist groups exploit local vulnerabilities to advance their agendas, particularly those created or exacerbated by environmental degradation and resulting socioeconomic strains. These groups, including affiliates of the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida, exploit the harsh environmental realities and ensuing hardships to propagate their ideologies. They aim to establish territorial control, swell their ranks with new recruits, and commandeer valuable natural resources to fund their operations. The jihadists embed themselves within the local sociopolitical fabric by providing services to **disenfranchised communities** in areas where the government is absent or ineffective, ultimately creating a stronghold that can serve as a base for further expansion and operations. Thus, the presence of jihadists in Burkina Faso represents a direct threat to the country's security and stability and poses a wider regional challenge to the broader Sahel region.

Russia

Russia's involvement with the Burkinabe junta, which mirrors its engagements with other African nations like the Central African Republic, suggests a strategy to exploit political upheaval to assert influence. This strategy is evident from Russia's offer of military training to Burkinabe forces following the September 2022 coup, aiming to capitalize on Burkina Faso's political instability. The **deepening military ties** were highlighted during a late 2023 meeting between Burkina Faso's junta leader, Ibrahim Traoré, and Russia's Deputy Defense Minister in the Burkinabe capital of Ouagadougou, which followed discussions at the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. Russia's initiatives, including offering to train officers and pilots, reflect a broader shift in its strategic approach toward Africa, positioning itself as a counterweight to Western influence by supporting governments potentially isolated internationally.

China

China's involvement in Burkina Faso strategically aligns with its global ambitions by capitalizing on vulnerabilities such as environmental challenges. While initially seeming beneficial, Chinese investments increase Burkina Faso's debt and dependency, subtly undermining its sovereignty and stability. Since reestablishing relations in 2018 under its global Belt and Road Initiative, China has **funded and built critical infrastructure**, including water management systems, to combat desertification and health and renewable energy projects. These investments address Burkina Faso's immediate infrastructural needs. Additionally, China's policy of non-interference and the appearance of partnership without the stringent conditions often tied to Western investments have helped it gain traction in Burkina Faso. This strategy facilitates China's entry into critical sectors of Burkina Faso's economy and sets the stage to potentially entwine the country within China's expanding sphere of influence, posing a long-term threat to its autonomy.



BURKINA FASO ECF ASSESSMENT

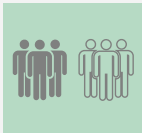
Cross Border Encroachment



Demographic Pressure



Divided Societies



Economic Inequality



Environmental Threats



Illicit Networks



Ineffective Government



Infrastructural Deficits



Mobilizing Ideologies



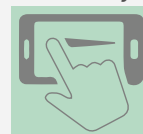
Multiple Sovereignty



Resource Scarcity



Technification of Society



Not Relevant

Somewhat Relevant

Relevant

Highly Relevant

Cross Border Encroachment: *Somewhat Relevant.*

Burkina Faso, located in the Sahel region and surrounded by six nations, has a migratory tradition.



Divided Societies: *Somewhat Relevant.*

There are underlying ethnic and religious tensions, but Burkina Faso has historically managed to maintain relative cohesion.



Environmental Threats: *Highly Relevant.*

Climate change has intensified droughts and disrupted traditional agricultural practices.



Ineffective Government: *Relevant.*

Political instability, coups, and changes in leadership are common and have hampered effective governance.



Mobilizing Ideologies: *Relevant.*

Islamist extremist ideologies are on the rise, especially since the coups in 2022, with jihadist groups gaining a foothold.



Resource Scarcity: *Relevant.*

Water, arable land, and food security are becoming scarcer due to environmental changes.



Demographic Pressure: *Relevant.*

Burkina Faso has a rapidly growing population nearing 23 million people, with more than 65 percent under the age of 25, which puts pressure on resources and jobs.



Economic Inequality: *Relevant.*

The nation faces economic challenges, with a significant portion of the population reliant on subsistence farming; vast disparities exist between urban and rural livelihoods.



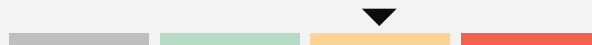
Illicit Networks: *Relevant.*

Jihadist groups make parts of Burkina Faso ungovernable; and the region highly vulnerable to trafficking, including arms, drugs, and humans.



Infrastructural Deficits: *Relevant.*

Despite some progress, Burkina Faso still lacks infrastructure in many areas which impedes its development.



Multiple Sovereignty: *Relevant.*

Islamists challenge the state's authority and exercise de facto control of certain areas, imposing their own governance structures, and undermining central authority.



Technification of Society: *Somewhat Relevant.*

Technology use is less prevalent compared to other countries in the region, but connectivity and the role of digital tools is growing, especially in urban centers.



DOMINANT CONDITION DETAILED



Environmental Threats is the most prevalent sociocultural condition in Burkina Faso, with climate change at the forefront. These threats—from droughts to desertification—intersect with other critical conditions (i.e., demographic pressures, resource scarcity, illicit networks, etc.), resulting in a complex and destabilizing landscape. From desertification to resource depletion, environmental issues are foundational and interconnected, emerging as the epicenter of Burkina Faso’s vulnerability, which different stakeholder groups exploit, albeit indirectly.

This situation is exacerbated by pressures from a rapidly growing population, which intensifies competition for limited natural resources, leading to conflict over access. The strain on the state’s capacity to provide services and maintain law and order creates a vacuum that illicit networks exploit. These networks offer alternative income sources or protection, while mobilizing ideologies find fertile ground among disenfranchised populations.

As resources dwindle, economic disparities deepen. Those with limited access to land, water, and economic opportunities suffer disproportionately. This disparity provides fertile ground for exploiters—ranging from VEOs to opportunistic external powers—who manipulate grievances, recruit followers, and position themselves as alternatives to the state or its rescuers.

Meanwhile, Burkina Faso’s ineffective government struggles to manage and mitigate environmental crises effectively, undermining economic stability and social cohesion. Illicit networks exacerbate these vulnerabilities by controlling resource extraction or smuggling, further destabilizing the region. They leverage mobilizing ideologies, offering narratives that promise solutions or scapegoats for the environmental threat faced by communities.

Amid its environmental and resulting socioeconomic challenges, post-coup Burkina Faso has drawn the strategic interests of China and Russia. Addressing the environmental epicenter is, therefore, crucial for disrupting the cycle of exploitation and instability.

370%

growth rate since 1960

From 1960 to 2022 the population of Burkina Faso increased from 4.83 million to 22.67 million creating a significant youth bulge combined with **food and water insecurity, a lack of employment opportunities, and additional human stress on the environment (2022).**

33%

landscape degraded

Over 9 million hectares of once arable land is now unusable. **Degradation will continue to expand at 360,000 hectares per year (2022).** Climatic variations and human activities such as overgrazing, negative agricultural practices and deforestation are the main contributors (2021).

~40%

live in poverty

Burkina Faso ranks **184th out of 191 countries in the 2021–2022** Human Development Index report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

Contrary to the assessment that environmental degradation is the primary concern, an alternative hypothesis posits that ineffective governance, illicit networks, and mobilizing ideologies represent the primary exploitable conditions and the most significant threats to Burkina Faso's stability. In this view, ineffective governance creates a power vacuum, undermining the state's capacity to enforce laws and deliver services, eroding public trust and legitimacy. Illicit networks, particularly VEOs, exploit this void by engaging in activities that destabilize social, political, and economic systems, further impairing state functionality and security.

Together, these conditions create a self-reinforcing cycle of instability, making them the critical levers of exploitation and disorder in Burkina Faso, overshadowing environmental concerns in immediate impact and threat level. This alternative hypothesis suggests that addressing governance inefficiencies, dismantling illicit networks, and countering divisive ideologies are imperative for restoring stability and security in Burkina Faso. Although this hypothesis has merit because exploitation is prominent and visible in these conditions, the results of this analysis instead points to environmental threats as the center of gravity.



COUNTERSTRATEGIES TO MITIGATE SOCIOCULTURAL EXPLOITATION

There is a need to strengthen international cooperation on climate change, specifically targeting Burkina Faso, and encouraging diversified partnerships for infrastructural and environmental projects. National policies focusing on sustainable and resilient local solutions could be enhanced. For the U.S. Army, this could include conditionally boosting military engagements, training, and joint exercises with Burkina Faso and other Sahelian nations. Collaborating with allies to enhance border surveillance and intelligence-sharing capabilities as well as the strategic positioning of assets is vital to ensuring rapid response capabilities and deterring adversaries from establishing military bases or hubs.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

of Sociocultural Exploitation

Burkina Faso



- **Economic Dependency:** Investments by major powers might initially seem beneficial but could lead to long-term economic dependency and exploitation of natural resources.
- **Security:** The presence of external military or extremist groups could escalate violence and conflict, particularly in areas where government control is weak and erodes the nation's sovereignty.
- **Social Cohesion:** Competing external influences could exacerbate existing ethnic and regional divides, undermining national unity.
- **Climate Resilience:** External exploitation could worsen climate resilience without a coordinated and sustainable approach to climate change, making the nation more susceptible to future challenges.

Regional



- **Increased Regional Instability:** The involvement of major external powers, non-state actors, and VEOs can lead to a complex geopolitical landscape, potentially spreading insecurity into coastal West African countries, threatening regional stability.
- **Escalating Conflict:** The proliferation of arms and the presence of foreign military actors could escalate conflicts across the Sahel, potentially leading to a regional arms race and increased violence.
- **Humanitarian Crises:** As climate vulnerabilities are exploited, conflicts could exacerbate humanitarian crises, leading to increased displacement, food insecurity, and human rights violations.

United States

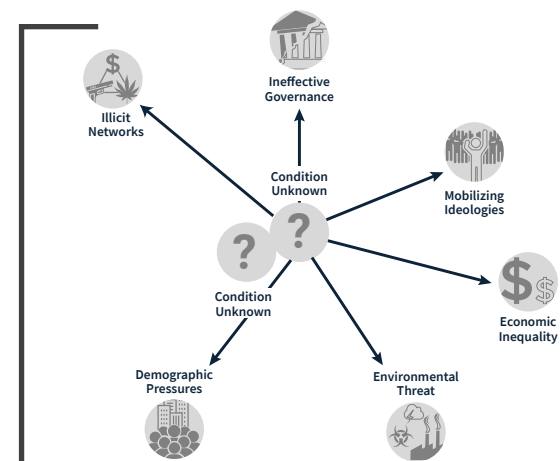


- **Rethinking Partnerships:** Regional partnerships might benefit from recalibration to promote alignment with U.S. interests, potentially involving increased information operations, military-to-military engagements, and capacity-building efforts with Burkina Faso and its neighbors.
- **Diminished Power Projection and Rapid Response:** As access becomes more challenging in the Sahel, instability spreads, threatening U.S. regional interests.
- **Complex U.S. Army Access and Maneuverability:** Nuanced navigation is necessary to avoid entanglement in Russia's and China's geopolitical maneuvers.
- **Intensified Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Efforts:** Monitoring jihadist, Russian, and Chinese entities become imperative to prevent impediments to U.S. goals in the region.

ANALYTIC METHODOLOGY

A Grounded Theory Approach to Sociocultural Conditions and Exploitation in Burkina Faso

The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) G-2's Global Culture Knowledge Network (GCKN) applied Adapted Grounded Theory Methodology (AGTM) to evaluate the sociocultural conditions at play in Burkina Faso, identifying environmental threats as the pivotal factor in Burkina Faso's susceptibility to exploitation. The methodology enabled a deep-dive analysis, indicating environmental challenges as the central issue interlinking other exploitation aspects. AGTM, a systematic framework for theory construction through data collection and analysis, excels at discerning patterns, linkages, and dimensions from qualitative data. Using AGTM, GCKN's analysis progressed through three interconnected coding phases: **Open, Axial,** and **Selective Coding**. The third diagram below underscores the value of this approach, presenting environmental threats as the lynchpin of the grounded theory.

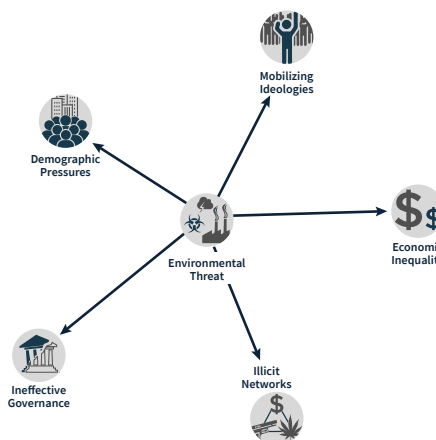


OPEN CODING PHASE

This phase involved the systematic collation, review, and segmentation of a vast body of qualitative data to identify key factors. GCKN SMEs analyzed and labeled these factors, which include environmental threats, ineffective government, illicit networks, mobilizing ideologies, resource scarcity, demographic pressures, and economic inequality. They serve as potential variables in the analytical framework to explain exploitation.

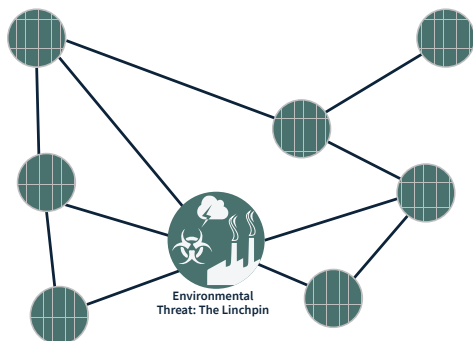
AXIAL CODING PHASE

During this phase, GCKN SMEs systematically explored connections between emergent categories. The environmental threats factor consistently emerged as the central axis around which other relevant factors like resource scarcity, demographic pressures, and illicit networks revolve. Each of these factors interdependently overlap and interact with the central axis, revealing how environmental threats exacerbate and are exacerbated by these variables.



SELECTIVE CODING PHASE

This phase confirms a hypothesis that identifies environmental threats as the core category or the central axis of analysis. GCKN SMEs applied iterative analytic tests to this core factor to assess its connection strength with other factors. The evidence revealed environmental threats as both a foundation and a catalyst for other variables, positioning this condition as the central theme driving various outcomes, such as influencing governance decisions and empowering jihadists.



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Images:

Page 1. *Russia on the globe with the annexed territories marked as claimed*, 24 September 2022, illustration (GCKN edited), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Federation_\(orthographic_projection\)_-_Annexed_Territories_disputed.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Federation_(orthographic_projection)_-_Annexed_Territories_disputed.svg); Susan Littleton, *ECF Assessment Methodology (iconography)* infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; Susan Littleton, *Key Exploiters (iconography)* infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Page 2. Haysam Azhar and Chavi Meattle, Climate Policy Initiative, *Landscape of Climate Finance in Burkina Faso*, 25 October 2022, photograph, <https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/publication/landscape-of-climate-finance-in-burkina-faso/>

Page 3. Susan Littleton, *Exploiters (iconography and global map)*, illustration, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Page 4. Susan Littleton, *Burkina Faso ECF Assessment (iconography)*, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Page 5. Susan Littleton, *Dominant Condition Detailed*, infographics, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; *370% growth rate*; Worlddata.info (2022). <https://www.worlddata.info/africa/burkina-faso/populationgrowth.php>; *33% landscape degraded*, African Renewal (2021). [https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/bringing-degraded-african-land-back-life#:~:text=In%20Burkina%20Faso%2C%20for%20example,360%20000%20hectares%20per%20year;Ministry%20of%20Agriculture%20as%20cited%20in%20USAID%20\(2021\).](https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/bringing-degraded-african-land-back-life#:~:text=In%20Burkina%20Faso%2C%20for%20example,360%20000%20hectares%20per%20year;Ministry%20of%20Agriculture%20as%20cited%20in%20USAID%20(2021).) https://www.agriculture.bf/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-07/rapport_situation_ref_vf1_10_02_201919_version_finale_07082019.pdf; International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (2021). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8125418/>; *~40% live in poverty*, The World Bank (2022). [https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/burkinafaso/overview#:~:text=Its%20economy%20is%20based%20on,Nations%20Development%20Programme%20\(UNDP\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/burkinafaso/overview#:~:text=Its%20economy%20is%20based%20on,Nations%20Development%20Programme%20(UNDP))

Page 6. Pfc. Luke Steward, DVIDS, *Flintlock 2019 training in Po, Burkina Faso*, 22 February 2019, photograph, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/5136586/flintlock-2019-training-po-burkina-faso>

Page 8: Susan Littleton, *Analytic Methodology, Grounded Theory Coding Flow Diagram*, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

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TRADOC G-2

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