

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

## **Defense 2030: Transatlantic Security and Strategic Competition**

### **“Keynote 1: Security Challenges in the Sahel and Beyond”**

DATE:

**Tuesday, June 29, 2021 at 10:15 a.m. EDT**

FEATURING:

**João Gomes Cravinho,**

*Minister of National Defense of Portugal*

**Neeme Raud**

*U.S. Correspondent, Estonian Public Broadcasting*

CSIS EXPERTS:

**Judd Devermont**

*Director, Africa Program, CSIS*

*Transcript By  
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Judd Devermont:

Hi. Good morning, good afternoon, welcome. My name is Judd Devermont. I'm the director of the Africa Program here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And it's really an honor to be here at the EU Defense Washington Forum to participate in this high-level conversation. We're going to discuss today the security challenges in sub-Saharan Africa. Really, these have become much more complex over the last couple years, and increasingly illusive to resolve.

Let me just give you a couple of points. The extremist threat in the Sahel is expanding and we are seeing signs of unrest now in coastal West Africa. The Islamic insurgency in northern Mozambique has grown in sophistication, contributing to a humanitarian crisis and jeopardizing a significant LNG development. There has been a surge in piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, making it the world's number-one hotspot for kidnapping. And then there is civil war and conflict in the Horn of Africa. And that is undercutting very fragile transitions in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia.

Now, that is a very grim picture, to be sure. But there are some positive developments. There's been a gathering of African, European, and other countries who are raising their hands to respond to these challenges. That doesn't mean that there's a consensus on how to address the underlying drivers, or even a straightforward division of labor and assessment of each tool that these countries are bringing to the table. But it's an important start, something that we haven't had in the last four years, especially as the United States rejoins the international community and is undertaking a review of its own global security posture and its key priorities.

So, it's this specific moment that I hope the Minister will share his thoughts on. After some brief opening remarks, we're going to discuss his assessment of these various challenges, whether we have the right strategy in place to address these hot spots, and then how do we foster more U.S., EU, and African cooperation. So, I'm delighted to be joined by the minister for a little opening remark before we get into a moderated Q&A. Sir.

Neeme Raud:

Judd, we are back in the studio. We have to inform you that the Minister has not yet logged in online to our conference. We are

hoping to see him very shortly. So I'll give back the floor to you, if you want to have your remarks a little bit more elaborated for this conversation. We hope Minister Cravinho will be with us very shortly.

Judd Devermont:

Sure. Thank you for that. Let me expand a little bit on the international landscape, because I think that's exactly where the Minister is going to have to weigh in. In the Sahel, we have really a mix of very different actors trying to respond to these challenges in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. So, you have a UN mission known as MINUSMA. You have the EU training mission. You have the French operation known as Barkhane. You have an EU – European task force known as Takuba. And then on the African side you have the G5 Sahel force, which is comprised of all five countries of the Sahel, and a couple nascent initiatives including the Accra initiative out of Ghana.

So, one of the things that the minister is going to have to help us think through as—and the U.S. is doing this concurrently—is how do all of these different pieces work together? What is the right posture for, for example, the United States? How does MINUSMA as a UN peacekeeping mission—one of the biggest in the world that often takes the most casualties, including recently an attack on German and Belgian peacekeepers—you know, what is the mandate, the mission? How does it support Barkhane? How does it support the G5 Sahel? (Audio break)—we need to think about U.S. support. There's significant, excuse me, UN support. There's significant debate about assessed costs for some of these missions.

And as many of you are already aware, President Macron has announced that Barkhane is going to be wrapping up, and so what is the onus on the Europeans for Task Force Takuba? What is the onus on MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel, and the U.S. presence and its support to these various missions as we go forward?

As we move south to Mozambique, I spoke briefly about this Islamic insurgency that emerged in October 2017 and then just very recently took the major town of Palma, which required Total do to a force majeure. Now they've receded from Palma, but they still control some smaller towns further up north. They were able to do a very sophisticated maritime and land attack. The U.S. has responded with a pledge to put some forces in training for the Mozambicans, the Portuguese have done the same, and now the UN has approved this mission. And just very recently, the South

African defense—the South African Development Community, SADC, has approved a mission.

So, again, how do all of these forces work together? How do we make sure that it's not just a military approach, but we're addressing the underlying grievances?

And then to the east, for those of you who are not tracking, yesterday was a very significant development in the eight-month-long civil war in Ethiopia, where the Tigrayan Defense Force took the regional capital of Mekelle and the government in response declared a unilateral ceasefire. This has been a day-one priority for the U.S. administration. The EU has been very active as well. And what does this sort of moment mean? Is this an opportunity to build on peace? And the tremendous amounts of insecurity, human rights abuses, mass atrocities, is this just a wrinkle, a pause in the fighting? How do we work together to make sure that we haven't lost this opportunity?

So, I think those are some of the real challenges that are ahead of us. And in all of these cases I tried to pull out the African response, whether it's the Sahel or in Mozambique, and certainly the African Union and others in Ethiopia, and that is really critical here. This is not going to be the U.S. and Europe responding singly by themselves, but it's going to be a partnership in cooperation.

And I think—I don't know if the minister has joined us. I can continue to elaborate.

Neeme Raud:

Yeah. Minister has not joined us yet. But, Judd, you are following closely the developments in Africa. We have not discussed in this conference, in this forum—at this forum Covid issues, but this is one of the big fields that the Europe and the United States are working now together, to provide vaccines to the African countries that are really lacking them—lacking the means to produce them. Could you briefly address that issue? That is really like the immediate cooperation of the European Union and the United States in Africa?

(Break.)

Neeme Raud:

We are continuing our live broadcast of the EU-Washington Defense Summit Forum. The security challenges in Africa is our topic, challenges in Mali and elsewhere in Africa that have direct impacts on Europe and the United States. And now we are glad to

welcome Minister of National Defense of Portugal João Gomes Cravinho, who has joined us. And the conversation he will have now with Judd Devermont, who is back with us. Judd is director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. You have about 5-6 minutes now you can have the conversation that we've been waiting for. The floor is yours.

Minister João Gomes Cravinho:

(Off mic)—very much. Yes, you can hear me? Great. Firstly, my apologies for these technical difficulties on our side. I'd like to in through five very short minutes present essentially three ideas. The first one, a generic one about the moment that we're living in the transatlantic relationship. I think President Biden has made very clear over the past six months his very strong commitment to this transatlantic relationship. And this has been received with enthusiasm and, I think, a degree of relief in Europe. Secretary Blinken has been making the same points. Both President Biden and Secretary Blinken have been engaging very much with the European Union.

I think the first point that I would like to make is that this engagement should also extend to the field of defense. The nature of the transatlantic relationship has been strained over the past few years. And the fact that it is necessary to reinforce NATO's credentials as a platform of political dialogue should not mean that we don't also engage between the European Union and the United States. And that this very relevant when one comes to Africa, which is the point that I would like to follow up with.

The African continent is undergoing severe security crisis. We are finding enormous arc of instability and state disaggregation that goes from all across the Sahel—from Mauritania in the west, right to Sudan in the east. And for the south, Central African Republic, and Congo, and even northern Mozambique, as we have seen lately. An important point about this is that there are internal dynamics and there are dynamics that come from outside of the continent. Terrorism, jihadism, of course, very much so.

There is also geopolitical competition happening on the continent. Russia and China are extremely active on the African continent. Russia has developed a model of working with mercenaries that are paid for with mining concessions, which means that it is a very cheap way of gaining influence in various parts of the African continent. And the reality, therefore, is that, as the U.S. shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific, it is very important that the—through the engagement with the European Union the U.S. should remain a relevant partner for the African continent.

So, the point that I would like to make there is that for looking at geopolitical competition worldwide, as the U.S. has to, it is not just about relating to Europe in the European continent and in the Asian-Pacific arena, but also looking at partnering with the European Union in Africa.

On the Sahel itself, here we have very major challenge and it results from the fact that many parts of the population of the Sahel countries do not see government as being a provider of public goods that they need. And it is fundamental for us to be able to support the countries of the region to shift the analysis so that the populations see the armed groups, jihadi groups as their main obstacle for their livelihoods, and the only way of doing this is by investing in their security, and the European Union is present in that field and needs to become increasingly present, and by investing as well with our civilian toolkit to support those countries. But the fundamental point is that there has to be improvements in terms of governance. Otherwise, with all the goodwill in the world we will not achieve that objective.

So there the most relevant issue, I think, is that when one works with the European Union—same in the United States—works with the European Union, it doesn't necessarily have to be boots on the ground. It should be, though, supporting the European Union, enabling the European Union to be a very proactive defense partner for the United States. And this requires engagement. It requires dialogue. We haven't had that yet between the EU and the U.S. And I would like to use this opportunity to make a pitch for that engagement because I see it as key to us helping to bring stability to the African continent.

Thank you.

Judd Devermont:

Well, Mr. Minister, I'm really glad that you were able to join us and those were incredibly important points to share with the audience. Let me just foot-stomp a couple of things that you said, that it is imperative that even though the U.S. is focused on the Indo-Pacific to not forget about Africa, to engage in Africa. The problems in Africa affect all of us. The opportunities in Africa we all benefit from.

And you know, I think that the U.S. is not alone here. We do have European partners. We also have African partners. The big challenge is not only addressing the governance issues that you recommended, but also thinking more broadly about the

architecture. We can't just keep appointing envoys and throwing military, you know, resources at this or funding. We have to think about how we are going to cooperate together effectively with a division of labor, with a clear plan, and I think that's where the next steps are. And I just want to echo your call for a conversation about this between the U.S., the Europeans, as well as the Africans.

So, thank you so much for your time, sir. I'm not sure if we have any more availability to chat, but if we do—

Minister João Gomes Cravinho:

Well, my side is. I'm not sure about the bandwidth, but my side absolutely.

Judd Devermont:

Great. Well, let me ask you one—I think we're out of time. Is that correct, moderator?

Neeme Raud:

Yes, we are – we are out of time for this conversation, unfortunately. But let me thank you again, Judd Devermont, Director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and João Gomes Cravinho, Minister of National Defense of Portugal, for this short conversation.

(End.)