China and the Islamic State in the Sahel: An Assessment of Potential Threats to Chinese Interests in the Central Sahel[1]

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Abstract:

Seeking to fill a void in the existing scholarship since no scholar has yet to examine the Islamic State Sahel Province's threat to China, this study utilizes a unique approach to examine two questions, namely does the Islamic State Sahel Province pose a threat to Chinese interests in the Central Sahel, and is it likely to impact Beijing's relations with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger? Part one of this study utilizes data from the Armed Conflict and Event Data Location Data (ACLED) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to construct the group's operational profile. The operational profile covers political violence and strategic developments in each country and across the subregion; the expanse of and shifts in areas of operations; and tactics and targets in each terrorism incident by country and the subregion. Findings from the data analysis are utilized in the second part in conjunction with additional data collected on the economy and China's economic relations to assess whether the group poses a threat to Chinese interests. The study concludes that in the short-term, the Islamic State Sahel Province does not pose a threat to those interests and recognizes the potential change of the threat in long-term.

Keywords:
Central Sahel, China, Islamic State, Sahel Province, Terrorism

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1. Introduction

China's relations with Africa have grown significantly since the 1960s (Rudolph 2022; Abegunin and Manyeruke, 2020). Under Chairman Mao Zedong, Beijing aimed to raise China's profile; maintain friendly relations with countries with different political systems; and support revolutionary struggles and promote common interests in the people's struggles for liberation from colonial rule on the continent. China's rivalry with the former Soviet Union and its One-China Policy were the main drivers. Under Deng Xiaoping, China sought to promote decolonization, continue support for revolutionary parties that were anti-Soviet, and expand its economic engagement with the continent. The only addition in the drivers of Beijing's relations in this period was Deng's economic opening-up and going global policies.

Under Xi Jinping, China's political and diplomatic, economic, and military/security relations increased significantly. Emphasis on non-interference in countries' economic development and internal affairs; the rejection of the imposition of political conditions; and pursuit of relations based on self-interested political gains contributed to enhancing political and diplomatic relations in this period. Economic relations expanded because of the *One Belt One Road* policy (or BRI), while military and security relations increased through the provision of free military assistance to the African Union and security assistance to United Nations programs for peacekeeping, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism. The latter two initiatives were seen as Beijing's desire to enhance its international profile. China's multilateral engagement was the biggest change in the Xi period (Rudolph, 2022). According to Alden (2007), what its relations over the years demonstrate is a shift from a bilateral to a multi-dimensional approach, with the latter encompassing bilateral, state-to-state, and sub-state relations; regional public diplomacy through FOCAC and the African Union (AU); multilateral engagement through UN initiatives such as peacekeeping missions; and military cooperation with the AU.

China's military involvement in the region is minute compared with traditional western powers such as France, but there is speculation that it could increase in the future due to its increasing reliance on Africa's resources and the continent's perpetual state of conflict (Rudolph, 2022; Abegunin and Manyeruke, 2020). Up to the present, China has sold small arms; developed military alliances with six countries, namely Sudan, Algeria, Nigeria, Angola, Chad, and Egypt; and provided financial, logistical, and defense support to many countries. As Abegunin and Manyeruke (2020) note, many African countries cannot finance their own security agenda and a lot of them face significant problems with respect to countering terrorism, piracy, and natural disasters.

Missing from the nascent literature on China's military and security engagement generally and in Africa specifically is the role played by Chinese private security companies (Sukhankin, 2023; Markusen, 2022). Chinese private security companies (PSCs) have evolved since they were first introduced during the Song Dynasty and their

practical disappearance following economic, political, and military stagnation in the 1920s (Sukhankin, 2023). The first modern PSC was created in 1984 under the auspices of the Public Security Bureau and operated in the first special economic zone in Shenzhen. Other PSCs operating during this period were confined domestically and under tight government regulation. It would not be until China's going-out policy, increasing outbound foreign direct investment, and rapid integration in the global supply chain network that many Chinese companies operating abroad in medium-to-high risk countries would be exposed to a range of security challenges.

Wang Duanyong and Zhao Pei categorize the security challenges according to extraneous risks and endogenous risks (Spearin, 2020). Extraneous risks refer to challenges emanating from weak states and conflict environments such as crime, extremism, terrorism, ethnic strife, and separatism, while endogenous risks refer to those of Chinese origins such as anti-Chinese sentiment due to poor working conditions; changes in local economic power configurations from investment; disregard for environmental degradation; failure to engage the local population; and cultural insensitivity. In some instance, as Spearin notes, the two categories merge when local, national, and external actors utilize the "Chinese card" to oppose, or facilitate a shift in, existing power dynamics within specific countries. Despite the growing security challenges and their associated risks, Chinese PSCs would not be legalized until 2009 when the State Council issued the Regulation on Administration of Security and Guarding Services (Sukhankin, 2023). Since then and particularly after 2013, they would continue to grow domestically and abroad and become essential for large Chinese state-owned enterprises operating in Africa.

According to Nantulya (2021), Africa has around 10,000 Chinese companies (two thousand of which are SOEs), 200,000 Chinese workers, and around one million Chinese migrants. The companies operate and migrants live in primarily medium-to-high risk countries where there are both extraneous and endogenous risks and have experienced a range of incidents over the years from kidnapping to terror attacks. Zhang (2019) examines the threat posed by international terrorism to Chinese foreign direct investment along the BRI, arguing the government needs to strengthen its laws and regulation to protect Chinese interests and increase counterterrorism cooperation while companies need to improve their risk management to prevent harm to their activities. While he focuses on international terrorism generally, other scholars note that China recognizes the threat posed by the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliates to its *One Belt, One Road* (OBOR) Initiative and other economic and energy investments and projects in both OBOR and non-OBOR countries in specific areas across the globe (Wang, Zhang, and Yang, 2017).

Does the Islamic State Sahel Province pose a threat to Chinese interests in the Central Sahel, and is it likely to impact Beijing's relations with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger? Existing scholarship has primarily examined the threat of the Islamic State to Chinese interests in South Asia and the Middle East. Very few scholars have examined

the threat posed to Chinese interests in Africa, let alone the Sahel. Scholars have referenced Chinese hostages taken in Mali, but there exists no study examining exclusively the challenges the Islamic State Sahel Province poses to Chinese interests in the Central Sahel. Building on Xi Zhang's study examining the general threat that international terrorism poses to Chinese foreign direct investment, this study seeks to answer these two questions by examining publicly available data on its operations in the subregion and China's economic relations with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

Part one of this study utilizes data from the *Armed Conflict and Event Data Location Data* (ACLED) and the *Global Terrorism Database* (GTD) to construct the Islamic State Sahel Province's operational profile. The operational profile covers political violence and strategic developments in each country and across the subregion; the expanse of and shifts in the Islamic State Sahel Province's areas of operations; and its tactics and targets in each terrorism incident by country and the subregion. Findings from the data analysis are then used in the second part in conjunction with additional data collected on the economy and China's economic relations with each country to assess whether the group poses a threat to Chinese interests. Chinese interests are defined by trade, investment and migrants living in each country. The study concludes that in the short-term, the Islamic State Sahel Province does not pose a threat to those interests and recognizes the potential change of the threat in long-term.

2. Operational Profile of the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)

Formerly the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (GSIS), the Islamic State Sahel Province (hereinafter "ISSP") formed in 2015 following Adnan Abu Walid Al-Sahraoui's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State and subsequent split of his faction with that of Mokhtar Bel Mokhtar's faction of Al-Mourabitoun (see the works of Warner, et. al., 2021) and Thurston (2020) for a more detailed accounting of its emergence and evolution). Despite Abu Walid's pledge of allegiance, the ISSP was not recognized by the Islamic State until 2016. From 2016 to when the decision was made to place it under the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2019, the ISSP first operated under its original name, namely the GSIS, and then ISWAP-Greater Sahel. In 2022, it was rebranded to the ISSP when the Islamic State granted it provincial status. Nsaibia (2023) posits that these temporal shifts are important for not only understanding its growth but also how it evolved operationally.

This section provides an operational profile of the ISSP using data from both the Armed Conflict and Event Data Location Data (ACLED) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The ACLED data covers the period between 2016 and 2023, while the GTD data covers the years from 2016 to June 2021. The ACLED data is state-centric, covering political violence and strategic developments between the state, armed forces (national and foreign forces) and police and the ISSP, as well as between the latter and other armed non-state actors, and their areas of operation. The GTD, on the other hand,

covers incidents designated as both terrorism and insurgent attacks and breaks them down according to the tactics used and targets selected. Although data for 2022 and 2023 are missing what is available is sufficient for generating inferences regarding the how and who, and later for assessing whether Chinese national interests could be a target in the future. All subsequent findings and inferences made are utilized and built on in the subsequent section.

2.1. Political Violence and Strategic Developments

The ISSP participated in 608 events between July 19, 2016 and July 27, 2023 in the Central Sahel, which comprises Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (ACELD 2023). Ninety-three percent of the events were categorized as political violence and seven percent as strategic developments. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 provide a breakdown of the political violence and strategic development events across the region in which the ISSP was involved (See the Appendix).

Battles in general and armed clashes in particular comprise most of the political violence events and fatalities (See **Table 1.1** in the Appendix). The two immediate questions emerging from the data are: 1) Who are the primary actors involved in the armed clashes; and 2) Are the fatalities mostly civilians, government/military/security personnel, ISSP militants, or others? The primary actors involved in clashes with the ISSP, in the order of the most engaged, include foreign and national armed forces (205 events); Jamaat al-Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM; 129 events); ethnic, ethnonationalist, militia groups (70 events); Wagner (11 events); and other ISSP militants (5 events). National and foreign armed forces are combined in the 205 events since the latter conduct operations on behalf of the state; the actual number for each is 115 and 90, respectively. If they are treated separately, then JNIM would rank number one, with a total of 129 events in terms of the actors involved in clashes with the ISSP. Ethnic, ethnonationalist, or militias participate in seventy events, while Wagner participates in eleven and other ISSP militants engage in five. ACLED does not collect data on private security companies operating in the Central Sahel other than Wagner.

Study written by Raleigh and Dowd (2016, p. 32) includes fatalities for each event but warns that those numbers are "typically the most biased, and least accurate, component of any conflict data. They are particularly prone to manipulation by armed groups, and occasionally the media, which may overstate or underreport fatalities for political purposes." An examination of fatalities for the armed clashes reveals militants rather than civilians, government or security personnel comprise most deaths. Of course, this raises the question: Who is responsible for their deaths? JNIM is responsible for 46 percent of the ISSP militant deaths, while foreign and national armed forces killed 42 percent. Other armed actors are responsible for the remaining 12 percent of the ISSP militant deaths. Other armed actors are working in conjunction with foreign and

national armed forces either overtly or covertly in counterterrorism operations targeting the ISSP (Chivvis, 2016). That fact has reinforced some scholars and practitioners' proposition that operations combining foreign and national armed forces and non-state armed actors have a greater impact on militants. Other scholars, on the other hand, dispute the effectiveness of this traditional counterterrorism strategy, arguing a human security approach is far more efficacious in the long-term (Emerson and Soloman, 2018). The implications of this finding and the efficacy of such a strategy are beyond the scope of this study. Militant fatalities for explosions and remote violence are not examined. As was previously mentioned, fatalities from the armed clashes are the primary focus since they represent the majority. Examining them in relation to one another, however, could potentially provide some interesting insight into the larger debate about whether air/drone strikes are a more effective traditional counterterrorism measure (Tar and Bala, 2020; Chivvis, 2016).

Strategic development events are the other category of events outside of political violence. According to Raleigh and Dowd (2016), strategic developments refer to contextually important incidents affecting future events in the country including those impacting the government or group. **Table 1.2** provides the breakdown of those events (See the Appendix). The implication of the results reinforces what has been stated above; that is, foreign and national armed forces have a significant impact on the ISSP and its operatives' activities. However, the above finding regarding the impact of JNIM on the ISSP suggests competition and rivalries should be counted as strategic developments for the purpose of better understanding their effect on both militant and counterterrorism operations. Moreover, there is likely to be an increase in the "Armed Group Event" category due to significant changes in theatre dynamics.

2.2. Expanse of and Shifts in Areas of Operations

An examination of both ACLED's political violence and strategic developments for geographical differentiation reveal Mali has the highest percentage of events (45), followed by Burkina Faso (36.5%) and Niger (18%). Of course, this finding is not surprising given that the Islamic insurgency first emerged in Mali and later spread to Burkina Faso (See also **Figure 1.1** and **Table 1.3** in the Appendix). Scholars and practitioners debate the insurgency's beginning, with some associating its commencement with the Tuareg rebellion of 2012 and others denoting the period between the end of France's *Operation Serval* in July 2014 and the start of *Operation Barkhane* in August 2014. *Operation Serval* began on January 11, 2013 (Chivvis, 2016). France began withdrawing its forces from Mali in February; the last military personnel left the country in August. On November 9, 2022, *Operation Barkhane* officially ended.

Unlike ACLED, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) does attempt a rudimentary classification of events by insurgency and terrorism incidents. An

examination of that database suggests a greater frequency of insurgent operations began in Mali on January 7, 2013 (START, 2021). From that date to the most recently published GTD data of June 2021, Mali has experienced a total of 1006 incidents; and 67 percent of the incidents are classified as terrorism, 31 percent as insurgent attacks, one percent as criminal acts, and one percent as attacks targeting state actors. Islamic militants are responsible for fifty percent of the attacks, while 40 percent of them were conducted by unknown operatives. The remaining 10 percent were conducted by militia (4%), (ethno)nationalists (5%), and separatists (1%).

Mali's insurgency spread to Burkina Faso in 2015. According to the publicly available GTD data on Burkina Faso, there are a total of 444 incidents between 2015 and June 2021 (START, 2021). Seventy-eight percent of the attacks are classified as terrorism, 21.6 percent as insurgent attacks, and less than one percent (0.4) as criminal incidents. Fifty-eight percent of the incidents are conducted by unknown operatives, forty-one percent by Islamic militants, and the remaining one percent by ethnic extremists, vigilantes, and criminal outfits. Niger saw a total of 220 attacks, with sixty-seven percent classified as terrorism, thirty-one percent as insurgent attacks, one percent as intra/inter-group conflicts, and one percent criminal acts. Sixty-six percent of those incidents are conducted by Islamist extremists, twenty-four percent by unknown assailants, and twenty percent by separatists, nationalists, and dissidents.

The ISSP's total number of incidents (both insurgent operations and terrorism) reported by the GTD across the Central Sahel is 108, with Mali comprising 38 percent, Burkina Faso 36 percent, and Niger 29 percent of the total. **Figure 1.1.** depicts areas of operation by each country and the regions in which they occur between 2016 and 2023, while the percentages in the table in the figure represent the total number of events or incidents by regions within and across the countries. What is interesting to note is the significance of specific regions, and that the Sahel Region in Burkina Faso had the highest percentage over some key regions in Mali. Mali's Gao Region, of course, had the second highest percentage.

Within Burkina Faso's Sahel Region, the Oudalan Province has the highest number of incidents compared to the other provinces in the country. Asongo Cercle, an administrative subdivision of Gao Region and important for both transportation and the economy, had the highest number of incidents compared to Bourem and Gao subdivisions. Niger's Tillaberi Region had the highest number of incidents, and within that region Tera, Abala, and Ayerou were significant locations for operations over the years.

While **Figure 1.1.** captures the expanse of the area of operations where the ISSP is engaged, a closer examination of data by country and region reveals geographical shifts by time and space. **Table 1.3.** depicts these shifts (See the Appendix). From 2018 to the present, there have been sustained operations in certain regions, subdivisions, departments, cities, towns, and villages across the Central Sahel. When examining

incidents across the countries and years, the years 2020 and 2023 stand out. The year 2020 is significant in the total number of events or incidents across all three countries and 2023 for conducting simultaneous operations across different regions and countries and capturing the ISSP's operational shift from Mali to Burkina Faso. Of course, there is variation temporally and spatially by country.

In Mali, the years 2022 and 2023 are significant overall in comparison to previous years, with 2022 having the highest number of incidents and 2023 for simultaneous operations across the regions. As mentioned previously, the Gao region remains a significant area of operation for the ISSP. For Burkina Faso, the years 2020 and 2021 are significant in terms of the total number of incidents, while 2020 is the most significant for the expanse of ISSP's simultaneous operational engagement in the country. Prior to that year, the Sahel Region experienced consistent operational activity. What is also interesting is that the numbers also signal the ISSP's operational shift back to Mali in 2022 and an increase in its activities in Niger in 2023 when comparing them temporally.

However, when looking at Niger independently from the other two countries, the increased activity in 2023 does not make that year significant in terms of the total numbers of incidents by year or expanse of operations. The year 2022 was the most significant for both the total number of incidents and areas of simultaneous operation. All three regions experienced operational activity. Niger's Tillaberi region is like that of Burkina Faso's Sahel Region and Mali's Gao Region in that it has both a higher number of incidents across the years. The Tahoua Region has also experienced operational consistency, but the total number of incidents is small in comparison to the Tillaberi Region.

Given the significance of 2022 in each country and the operational changes within the ISSP mentioned by Nsaibia (2023), it is important to note that this is when it was granted provincial status by the Islamic State. Neither the granting of provincial status nor the end of *Operation Barkhane* and the withdraw of French forces from Mali can alone explain the spread of ISSP's activity. Rather, significant changes occurring in theatre, namely increased clashes between JNIM and the ISSP in Mali and their economic and political competition on the ground; the movement of foreign armed forces from Mali to Niger and growing tensions between the governments and external Western powers; increasing numbers of western special forces and intelligence operatives operating on the ground in Niger for regional counterterrorism operations contribute to understanding why 2022 was significant for each country. They also put in context what has been observed thus far for 2023, which is an increase in activity in terms of both numbers and areas of operations across the Central Sahel. It is anticipated that in 2023, the ISSP will surpass 2020 in terms of total number of incidents across the Central Sahel and 2022 in terms of expanse of its operations within each country.

2.3. Tactics and Targets

The main tactics employed by the ISSP across the Central Sahel include armed assaults followed respectively by bombings, hostage-taking, assassinations, and hijackings. Private citizens, the military, infrastructure, police, non-state armed actors, government, education, business, and religious figures are the primary targets. Both the tactics and targets are ranked and listed in order of most to least employed and targeted based on the total number of incidents and their corresponding percentages. **Tables 1.4** and **1.5** provide a breakdown of tactics and targets by country and across the Central Sahel (See the Appendix). Their rankings change when looking across time to assess the consistency of their usage and the targets selected. **Tables 1.6** and **1.7** provide a temporal breakdown of both tactics and targets, which is used for assessing consistency (See the Appendix).

Armed assaults are consistently adopted over the years followed by hostage-taking and bombings, respectively. Neither assassinations nor hijackings are tactics consistently used by the ISSP. Private citizens are more regularly targeted followed by military, police, militias, government, and infrastructure. Business, education, religious figures, and civil society are not typical targets. In all cases, if the military, police, and government targets are combined, then they outnumber and are more consistently targeted than private citizens. A closer examination of the private citizens counted in the GTD database finds that many of them are not *per se* ordinary individuals (see **Tables 1.8** to **1.10** in the Appendix). Variations in the targets also exist when looking at each tactic by country. The remainder of this subsection examines tactics and targets for each of the countries and their variations.

In Mali, armed assaults are the most common tactic employed by the ISSP, and they are followed respectively by bombings, hostage-taking, and assassinations. The military is the primary target followed by private citizens, and non-state armed actors (see **Tables 1.4** and **1.5**). An examination of each tactic reveals variation in the ranking of the targets and some commonalities regarding who is specifically targeted. All private citizens targeted are politically or economically symbolic. **Table 1.8** lists the tactics and targets by their rankings and provides additional detail about specific targets.

In Burkina Faso, armed assaults are followed respectively by hostage-taking, bombings, assassinations, and hijacking when examining the total number of tactics used, while private citizens are followed by infrastructure, military, police, government, education, business, non-state armed actors, and religious figures when examining the total number of targets (see **Tables 1.4** and **1.5**). It is interesting to note that hostage-taking was ranked higher in this country than the other two countries, and there were more incidents of this type than in those before or after 2018. The private citizens targeted were those living in areas where rival militias or non-state armed actors were located or under their protection. Business was also targeted in this country while the other two countries did not have similar experiences. **Table 1.9** lists the tactics and targets by their rankings and provides additional detail about specific targets.

In Niger, armed assaults are followed respectively by assassinations, hostage-taking, and bombings when examining the total number of tactics used, while private citizens are followed by infrastructure, military, police, and government when examining the total number of targets (see **Tables 1.4** and **1.5**). It is interesting to note that assassinations were ranked higher in this country than the other two. The individuals targeted were either former or current government officials or leaders of rival armed actors, and there were more incidents of this type than in those before or after 2019. Private citizens targeted included those living in areas under the control of rival non-state armed actors, village chiefs or leaders, or off-duty military personnel. There was only one incident where unknown individuals were targeted in an IED attack on a vehicle driving on one of the main transport roads. Thus, most incidents targeting civilians in this country had either political or strategic value. **Table 1.10** lists the tactics and targets by their rankings and provides additional detail about specific targets.

Despite the variation among targets in each country, a few generalizations can be made. First, military, police and government comprise most of the targets across the countries when they are combined. Military targets primarily consist of bases, camps, checkpoints, convoys, detachments, patrols, personnel, and vehicles. Police targets are not typically targets in Mali, but they are in Burkina Faso and Niger. Police stations or posts, convoys, and on-duty officers are the main targets in those two countries. The government targets varied, with local government officials in areas under the control of rival armed groups being targets in Mali and Burkina Faso and representatives from the courts and parliament being targets in Niger. Custom posts are common targets in both Burkina Faso and Niger but not in Mali. While most of these targets are politically and strategically symbolic, the customs post targets hold economic value.

Second, all the private citizens targeted are symbolically significant and contain either political, strategic, or economic value. They are either living in areas under the control of rival militias or in areas where there are socioeconomic tensions or disputes with rival groups or communities.

Third, a closer examination of the areas where there is political competition among militant groups finds there to be a socioeconomic dimension to armed operations. This finding reinforces other scholars such as Idrissa (2017) claiming much of the violence among Islamic militants in the region is about political competition and that competition carries a socioeconomic component.

Fourth, businesses are not typically targeted by the ISSP. It was only in Burkina Faso where specific attacks targeting miners, traders, and livestock convoys occurred. These targets are not *per se* surprising when taking into consideration the role of both cattle rustling and artisanal mining to all militant groups' revenue generation. The economic dimension is explored in more detail in the following section.

3. The ISSP in the Central Sahel: Assessing the Potential Threats to Chinese Interests

The operational profile in the preceding section covered the type, nature, and frequency of violence, areas of operations, tactics used, and targets selected within each country and across the Central Sahel. This section uses that profile and its component to assess whether the ISSP is a current or potential future threat to Chinese interests. It does so by examining the countries' GDP and its breakdown by sectors; top market partners, including the main importing and exporting countries, as well as what is being imported and exported; the main foreign direct investors and their principal areas of investments; and China's position, trade, and investment in each country. Each country is examined separately given the variation in their economies and economic relations with China and the shifts in the ISSP's operational activities.

3.1. Mali

Mali's GDP continued to grow between 2016 and 2021, only experiencing a slight loss of almost 0.5 billion in 2022 despite years of continued violence (Trading Economics, 2023b). Agriculture makes up 35.69 percent of its GDP, followed by services at 35.39 percent and industry at 20.61 percent (O'Neill, 2023). South Africa, Switzerland, Bangladesh, Cote d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso are its top market partners. China ranks ninth. Gold, raw cotton, oily seeds, wood, and refined petroleum are the country's main exports (OEC, 2023d). Its top exporting partners include the UAE, Switzerland, Australia, China, and Turkey. The UAE comprises 78.1 percent of the exports to Asia, while China only comprises 1.23 percent. Refined petroleum, broadcasting equipment, woven cotton, packaged medicaments, and cement are the major imports, and the top import partners are Senegal, China, France, India, and the UAE. In terms of foreign direct investment, France, China, the U.S., Canada, India, and South Africa are the main investors (Lloyds Bank, 2023). Most of their investments target mining, oil extraction, the textile industry, financial intermediation, telecommunication, and infrastructure, and none of these appear to be major targets for the ISSP. The only exception is the one incident near the Kayes mine (See **Figure 1.1** in the Appendix). Areas such as Gao and Menaka where there is illicit trade in artisanal mining are primarily under the control of other armed groups and not the ISSP (GI-TOC, 2023).

Most of the ISSP's attacks occur in cattle rustling hotspots and near cross-border cattle markets (GI-TOC, 2022). Scholars have pointed to the relationship between cattle rustling and armed activity, while others have dismissed such claims. See **Figure 1.1** for the exact areas where the ISSP is operating and **Figures 1.2** and **1.3** in the Appendix for both the cattle rustling areas and known areas where armed groups are operating. What the data indicate is that there is some kind of relationship between the two. The GI-TOC reiterates what other scholars have claimed, namely that armed groups have

inserted themselves into disputes between herders and sedentary communities. Cattle rustling is not the only illicit activity in these areas, however.

Utilizing the GI-TOC's Illicit Hub Mapping tool, Gao, Menaka, and Mopti are identified as major hotspots for arms trafficking, cattle rustling, and illicit trade in counterfeit goods. Gao has become a smaller, alternative illicit arms market due to increased security in the Lake Chad region, while Menaka is the largest weapons market in the Liptako-Gourma region. They are also major transit zones for drug trafficking by criminal elements who pay the armed groups for protection of their convoys. Gao is a major transit point for illicit cigarette smuggling entering Mali via Burkina Faso for both the domestic market and North Africa markets. It is also a significant migrant-smuggling hub.

Taking into consideration ISSP's operational profile and the nature of the licit and illicit economies in the areas where it is active, it does not appear to be a threat to Chinese national interests at present. China's trade with Mali has remained consistent, with its exports surpassing that which it imports from Mali (Trading Economics, 2023g). Its top five exports include electrical equipment, vehicles, machinery, pharmaceutical products, and coffee. Exports have trended upwardly over the years. Mali's main exports to China include raw cotton, wood, electrical equipment, vegetable, fruit and nut products, and rawhides, skins, and leather. China's imports from Mali remain consistent apart from 2017 when there was a significant decline. However, they resumed their normal level the following year. The Chinese community living in Mali is small and concentrated primarily in Bamako. They have opened businesses, retail shops, small hotels, and construction firms. The threat to Chinese national interests could change, however. Expansion of the ISSP's activities into Bamako and the mining areas in Sikasso and Kayes or China's direct military support for counterterrorism operations including increasing the presence of its own private security companies where it has significant business interests in the country could place Chinese interests in the ISSP's cross hairs.

3.2. Burkina Faso

Like Mali, Burkina Faso's GDP continued to grow between 2016 and 2021, only experiencing a 0.86 billion dollar decline in 2022 despite the political instability and violence (Trading Economics, 2023a). Services make up 42.09 percent of the GDP, followed by industry at 32.01%, and agriculture at 17.46 percent (O'Neill, 2023). Switzerland, India, Singapore, Cote d'Ivoire, and Mali are its top market partners. China ranks thirteenth. Gold, raw cotton, zinc ore, oily seeds, and coconuts, Brazil nuts, and cashews are the country's main exports. Gold comprises 85.3 percent of the exports. Switzerland, India, Singapore, Cote d'Ivoire, and China are the most common destinations for these exports. China makes up only 1.49 percent of Burkina Faso's exports to Asia, while India comprises 10.7 percent (OEC, 2023a). Refined petroleum,

packaged medicaments, electricity, cement, and petroleum gas are its main imports. China, Cote d'Ivoire, France, Ghana, and India are the top importing countries. China comprises the largest share of the Asian countries. In terms of FDI, the main investing countries are Canada, France, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, and Morocco (Lloyds, 2023). The mining sector attracts most of the investment.

Burkina Faso's main mines are in Inata, Tambaro, Essakane, Kalsaka, Sabce, Taparko, Perkoa, Mana, Poura, and Youga. Inata, Tambaro and Essakane are in the Sahel Region, while Kalsala, Sabce, and Tamparko are in the Centre-Nord Region. The other mines are in areas where the ISSP has not been active. As will be recalled from **Figure 1.1**, the Sahel Region had a higher percentage of incidents involving the ISSP than did Mali's Gao Region and Niger's Tillaberi Region, and it was the Oudalan province in the Sahel Region that experienced most of the violence. When comparing the Sahel Region to Centre-Nord and Est Region, 94 percent of the incidents occurred there while the latter two experienced three percent of the incidents, respectively.

A closer examination of where the mines are located finds little correlation between the ISSP's armed incidents and the mining sector. The Inata Mine is in the Soum Province, the latter of which comprises only eight percent of violent incidents involving the ISSP. However, when looking at where in Soum the ISSP conducted attacks, all incidents are not in proximity to the mine. In Soum, the incidents took place in Arbinda, Baraboule, Dijibo, Koutougou, Nassoumbou, Pobe-Mengao, and Tongomayel. The Tambaro Mine is in Oudalan Province; the latter accounts for 70 percent of violent incidents in the Sahel Region. However, none of the areas where attacks occurred are in proximity to the mine. Armed operations occurred in Deou, Gorom-Gorom, Markoye, Our Si, and Tin-Akoff. The Essakane mine, the third mine located in the Sahel Region, is in Seno Province. Seno Province comprised 19 percent of the total incidents; however, none of the areas where they occurred are in proximity to the mine. The Centre-Nord's Katasaka is in Yatenga Province, and there are no incidents of violence involving the ISSP. Some incidents are conducted by the ISSP in proximity to the Sabce and Taparko mines; these mines are in the Bam and Namentenga provinces, respectively. As should be recalled, the Centre-Nord only comprises three percent of the total violent incidents involving the ISSP. There was one incident in Bam and four in Namentenga. Finally, when examining the specific targets (see **Table 1.9**), there was only one incident where a foreign employee of mining company was targeted by the ISSP.

Utilizing the GI-TOC's Illicit Hub Mapping tool to explore Burkina Faso's illicit economy reveals no correlation between the ISSP's violent incidents and illicit activities. Criminal activity in three regions of particular concern in this study is primarily conducted by JNIM, local militias, and bandits. They engage in arms trafficking, illicit gold, and trade in counterfeit goods. Foreign mining companies operating in the areas under the control of armed groups are known to have reached agreements with them to operate and transport their goods safely. The southwest region of the country is also a hub of polycriminality, according to the Global Initiative Against Transnational

Organized Crime. Arms, fuel, and drugs comprise the bulk of goods smuggled into the country. Motorbikes, electronics, and food items from Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire are brought in for the domestic market and for transport to Mali. Goods coming from the southwest bound for Mali typically pass through the Sahel Region, which again links some of the armed groups. However, it does not link to the ISSP currently.

Considering the ISSP's operational profile and the nature of licit and illicit activities, there appears to be no immediate threat to Chinese national interests in Burkina Faso. China's trade with Burkina Faso saw continued growth between 2016 and 2023 (OEC, 2023b). Broadcasting equipment, non-fillet frozen fish, motorcycles and cycles are the main products exported. Shandong, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Hebei, and Chongqing are the primary provinces exporting goods to the country. China's main imports from the country are zinc ore, raw cotton, and other oily seeds. Zinc ore comprises 63.4 percent of the imports while raw cotton consists of 21.7 percent. Guangdong, Beijing, Liaoning, Anhui, and Zhejiang are the main importing provinces. China's imports from Burkina Faso have oscillated over the years (Trading Economics, 2023d). Power China and Beijing Urban Construction are two known investors, with the former investing in the energy sector and the latter in the health sector. The size of the Chinese community living in the country is insignificant, with the suspected population being somewhere between 300 and 1,000. Unlike in Mali, the lack of threat to Chinese interests by the ISSP in Burkina Faso is unlikely to change in near the future.

3.3. Niger

Niger's GDP grew steadily between 2016 and 2021, and then fell by 0.95 billion in 2022 (Trading Economics, 2023c). Services consist of 37.05 percent of its GDP, followed by agriculture at 36.48 percent and industry at 20.83 percent (O'Neill, 2023). The country's top five market partners include France, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and South Africa. China ranks fourteenth. France's market share is 37 percent and Mali's is 21 percent. Gold, other oily seeds, refined petroleum, and uranium and thorium ore are its main exports (OEC, 2023c). Gold comprises 71.41 percent of the exports. The UAE is Niger's largest Asian exporter with 70.8 percent. China's share is only 9.1 percent. The top five countries it imports from include China, France, India, Nigeria, and Germany, and the main goods imported include rice, cars, rolled tobacco, palm oil, and vaccines. The mining sectors and uranium hold the lion share of FDI (Lloyds, 2023). Uranium is expected to decline due to the closure of the Akouta mine, but Niger is expected to become an oil exporting country following the completion of the pipeline being built by China National Petroleum Corporation. China is Niger's second largest foreign investor after France (Hayley, 2023).

Uranium is industrially mined in Arlit, Akokan, and Azelik, all three of which are in the sparsely populated Agadez Region. The Arlit mine is the largest mine, but the

Akokan mine is the world's largest underground uranium mine (Hassoumi, 2017). The Azelik mine is popularly referred to as the Chinese mine since Chinese investors hold a 70 percent stake. Agadez also has artisanal mining sites that were discovered in 2014, namely the Djado, Mount Ibl, and the Tchibarkaten mines. Artisanal mining in the region was shuttered in 2017 for security reasons since they are hotspots for illicit gold trade, human smuggling and trafficking, drug smuggling, and banditry. The only mine that mines gold industrially is the Samira Hill Gold Mine, which is in Tera Department of the Tillaberi Region. As will be recalled from the preceding section, the Tillaberi Region experienced more violent incidents than the other regions in the country where the ISSP was engaged (See **Figure 1.1**). The Tera Department saw 24 percent of those violent events. Neither mining nor those involved in it were targets (see **Table 1.10**). The nascent oil and gas industry is expected to comprise a sizable portion of Niger's exports in the future. China holds concessions in Agadem, Bilma, Tenere, and Kafra. There were no reported incidents of violence involving the ISSP in any proximity to those concessions.

China's trade with Niger has shown growth over the years (Trading Economics, 2023e). Rice, other large iron pipes, and iron pipes are its main exports to Niger (OEC, 2023c). Exports come from Shandong, Henan, Zhejiang, Hebei, and Guangdong. Other oily seeds, tanned sheep hides, and jewelry are Niger's main exports to China. Other oily seeds comprise 98.6 percent of the total imports. Shandong, Anhui, Beijing, Hubei, and Fujian are the main importing provinces. Power China, China National Petroleum Corporation, and China National Nuclear are three top investors in the country, with the first two focusing on energy and the latter company concentrating on metals.

Taking into consideration all the above and the ISSP's operational profile, Chinese national interests are not under direct threat at present. At present, political instability poses a greater threat to Chinese investments and nationals living in the country but not *per se* to trade. Chinese interests in the country could potentially be threatened by the ISSP in the future, however. China has more to lose in Niger than it does in Mali and Burkina Faso with the spread of not only the ISSP's activities but the Islamic insurgency itself and the competition that comes from that between the various militant groups.

4. Conclusion

Taking all the aforementioned into consideration, it can be concluded that in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger the ISSP poses no immediate threat to Chinese interests. As mentioned in the introduction, Chinese interests are defined by trade, investments, and migrants living in each country. The ISSP's current operational activity is unlikely to alter China's economic relations in the region. The threat could change, however; and it is

more likely to do so in Mali and Niger than in Burkina Faso. Niger is the country of greatest interests given the nature of Chinese investment and its building of the pipelines.

Competition between the ISSP and JNIM, the Al-Qaeda affiliate operating in the region, and rivalries between them and other armed actors could change the nature of the threat posed. If the ISSP can gain ground in territories where JNIM and other armed actors are operating and where China has significant investment in the countries, then it is feasible to infer that it could become a threat. This study did not examine the threat posed by JNIM and the other armed actors. They need to be examined to have a better assessment of how political violence and strategic developments are likely to impact relations with China and if Chinese interests are at stake given their operational activity.

Despite this weakness, this study does fill an existing void in the literature and is important for pondering how Chinese companies can better protect their interests. As the terrorism threats increase in the region and given the difficulties the countries' military and security bodies are having containing the violence, those companies may need to consider whether to hire and how to effectively use Chinese private security companies (PSCs). Chinese PSCs are limited in what they can do operationally given existing laws. However, as expands its security cooperation, it will have to revisit the matter. Expansion of Chinese PSCs and increased support for the national armed forces and other non-state armed actors who are engaged with the ISSP could also result in Chinese interests being targeted in the future. This still seems unlikely given the ISSP's operational activity, but theatre dynamics are constantly evolving in the Central Sahel.

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Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that she has no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to her knowledge and there is no real, potential, or apparent conflict of interest known to her at the time of the study's publication.

Notes on Contributor

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Acknowledgements

Tables and figures are listed in the order they are referenced in the study for the reader's accessibility.

Table 1.1. Political Violence Involving ISSP in the Central Sahel, 2016-2023

Type of Political Violence		
Battles		**Percentage of Type of Violence and Fatalities**
Armed Clashes	370	
Non-State Actor (NSA) overtakes territory	2	
Government regains territory	1	
TOTAL	**373**	**66.13%**
FATALITIES	**2178**	**73.98%**
Explosions/Remote Violence		
Air/drone strikes	186	
Shelling/artillery/missile attack	3	
TOTAL	**189**	**33.51%**
FATALITIES	**763**	**25.92%**
Riots		
Mob Violence	2	
TOTAL	**2**	**0.35%**
FATALITIES	**3**	**0.10%**

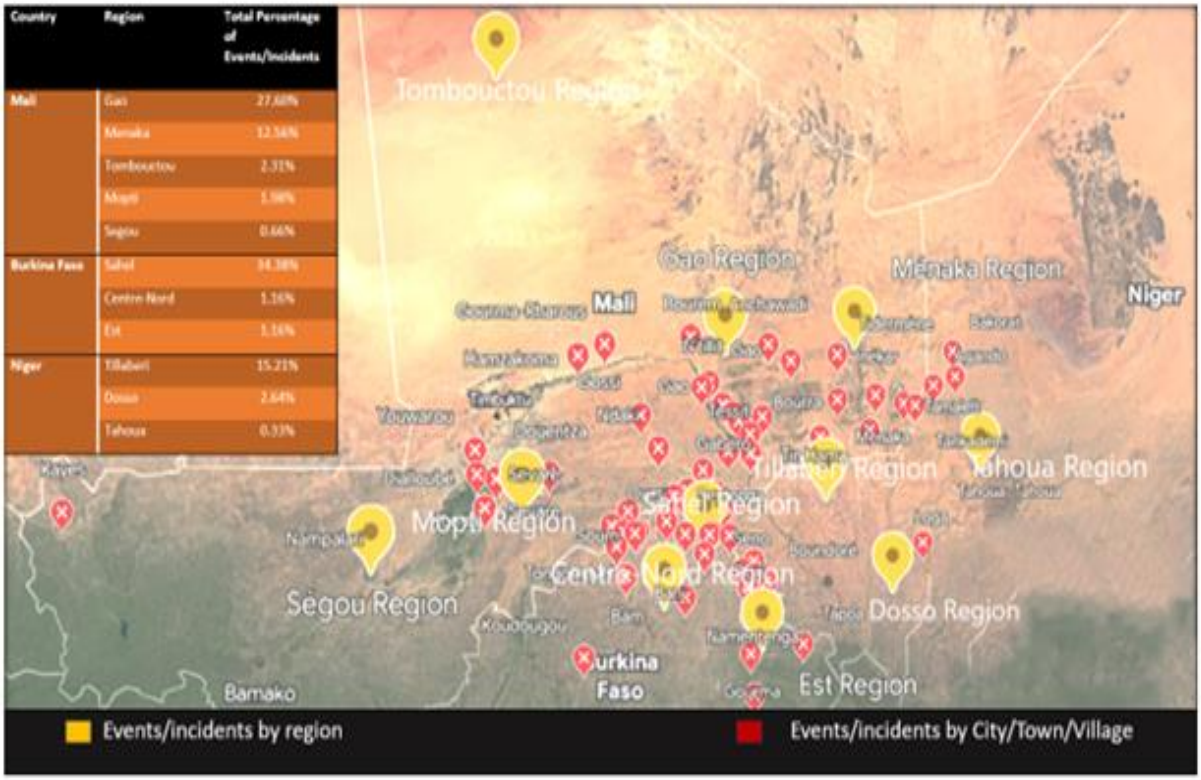
Source: Author-generated; event data from ACLED, 2023.

Table 1.2. Central Sahel Events by Actor Type and Specific Strategic Development, 2016-2023

	SPECIFIC STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT													
ACTOR TYPE	Disrupted Weapons Use		Arrests		Agreements		Change in Activity		Looting/ Property Destruction		Non-Violent Transfer of Territory	Other	TOTAL/ PERCENT BY ACTOR TYPE	
Government, Police, or Military Event	18		7		2		1		1		1	1	31	72%
MINUSMA Event	1		0		0		0		0		0	0	1	2%
Armed Group Event (ISSP or Other Groups)	4		0		0		1		1		3	2	11	26%
TOTAL/PERCENT BY SPECIFIC STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT	23	53%	7	16%	2	5%	2	5%	2	5%	4 9%	3 7%	43	

Source: Author-generated; event data from ACLED, 2023.

Figure 1.1. Areas of ISSP Operation in the Central Sahel, 2016-2023



Source: Author-generated using Google Earth; event/incident data derived from ACLED (2023) and START (2021) databases.

Table 1.3. Geographical and Temporal Shifts in Areas of Operations in the Central Sahel, 2016-2023

Country	Region	Percentage of Events/Incidents Across the Central Sahel, 2016-2023 (Figure 1)	Number of Events by Year							
			2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Mali	Gao	27.60%	0	1	18	6	81	34	24	0
	Menaka	12.56%	0	0	0	0	0	0	66	10
	Tombouctou	2.31%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
	Mopti	1.98%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Segou	0.66%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
Burkina Faso	Sahel	34.38%	0	0	1	2	56	77	46	26
	Centre-Nord	1.16%	0	0	0	0	3	1	3	0
	Est	1.16%	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0
Niger	Tillaberi	15.21%	0	0	10	2	23	9	19	29
	Dosso	2.64%	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
	Tahoua	0.33%	0	0	0	1	3	3	6	3

Source: Author-generated; event data from ACLED, 2023.

Table 1.4. ISSP Tactics by Country in the Central Sahel, 2016-2021

ISSP Tactics by Country	Mali		Burkina Faso		Niger		% of Tactics Across the Central Sahel
Armed Assaults	18	45%	13	39%	15	58%	46%
Assassinations	2	5%	3	9%	4	15%	9%
Bombings	8	20%	4	12%	2	8%	14%
Hijacking	0	0%	1	3%	0	0%	1%
Hostage-taking	4	10%	7	21%	3	12%	14%
Unknown	8	20%	5	15%	2	8%	15%
TOTAL	40		33		26		

Source: Author-generated; event data from GTD, 2021.

Table 1.5. ISSP Targets by Country in the Central Sahel, 2016-2021

ISSP Targets by Country	Mali		Burkina Faso		Niger		% of Targets Across the Central Sahel
Business	0	0%	3	8%	0	0%	3%
Education	0	0%	4	11%	0	0%	4%
Facility and Infrastructure	1	2%	3	8%	7	21%	10%
Government	1	2%	4	11%	1	3%	5%
Military	18	44%	7	19%	4	12%	26%
NGO	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0%
Non-State Armed Actors (Militias, JNIM and others)	5	12%	2	5%	0	0%	6%
Police	0	0%	5	14%	3	9%	7%
Private Citizen & Property	16	39%	8	22%	18	53%	38%
Religious Figures	0	0%	1	3%	1	3%	2%
TOTAL	41		37		34		

Source: Author-generated; event data from GTD, 2021.

Table 1.6. ISSP Tactics by Time in the Central Sahel, 2016-2021

ISSP Tactics by Year	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Armed Assaults	1	25%	5	83%	10	34%	8	31%	13	57%	9	100%
Assassinations	0	0%	0	0%	3	10%	4	15%	0	0%	0	0%
Bombings	1	25%	0	0%	5	17%	6	23%	2	9%	0	0%
Hijacking	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	4%	0	0%	0	0%
Hostage-taking	1	25%	1	17%	7	24%	3	12%	2	9%	0	0%
Unknown	1	25%	0	0%	4	14%	4	15%	6	26%	0	0%

Source: Author-generated; event data from GTD, 2021.

Table 1.7. ISSP Targets by Time in the Central Sahel by Year, 2016-2021

ISSP Targets by Year	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Business	0	0%	0	0%	1	3%	2	8%	0	0%	0	0%
Education	0	0%	0	0%	2	6%	0	0%	2	8%	0	0%
Facility and Infrastructure	0	0%	0	0%	3	9%	0	0%	1	4%	7	37%
Government	0	0%	0	0%	4	12%	1	4%	1	4%	0	0%
Military	1	25%	4	67%	5	15%	7	28%	12	48%	0	0%
NGO	0	0%	0	0%	1	3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Non-State Armed Actors (Militias, JNIM and others)	0	0%	0	0%	2	6%	2	8%	3	12%	0	0%
Police	2	50%	0	0%	2	6%	1	4%	2	8%	1	5%
Private Citizen & Property	1	25%	2	33%	14	41%	10	40%	4	16%	11	58%
Religious Figures	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	8%	0	0%	0	0%

Source: Author-generated; event data from GTD, 2021.

Table 1.8. ISSP Tactics and Targets in Mali, 2016-2021

Tactic	Target (Listed by Most to Least Targeted)	Specific Target
Armed Assault	Private Citizen	Individuals living in rival Tuareg encampments and villages
	Military	Bases, camps, and military personnel
	Non-State Armed Actors	Self-defense militia
	Government	Local government representative in rival Tuareg area
Bombing	Military	Bases, convoys, vehicles, and personnel
Hostage-Taking	Private Citizen	Prominent Tuareg community members and villages where there exist socioeconomic disputes
	Military	Soldiers
Assassination	Private Citizen	Deputy chief of rival Tuareg group fighting the ISSP
	Non-State Armed Actors	Military commander of rival Tuareg group

Source: Author-generated; event data from GTD, 2021.

Table 1.9. ISSP Tactics and Targets in Burkina Faso, 2016-2021

Tactic	Target (Listed by Most to Least Targeted)	Specific Target
Armed Assault	Private Citizen	Villages considered militia strongholds and traders
	Police	Police stations or posts
	Military	Military posts, detachments, and personnel
	Non-State Armed Actors	Self-defense militia
	Government	Customs post
	Education	Highschool building
Hostage-Taking	Private Citizen	Individuals living in areas held by rivals and at a market in a town under the control of self-defense militias
	Business	Foreign employee of a mining company and native miners working at a gold mine
	Health	Ambulance driver
	Education	School teacher targeted for teaching French
	Religious Figure	Foreign priest
Bombing	Military	Convoy and post
	Police	Convoy
	Business	Convoy
Assassination	Government	Former and current local government officials
Hijacking	Health	Ambulance

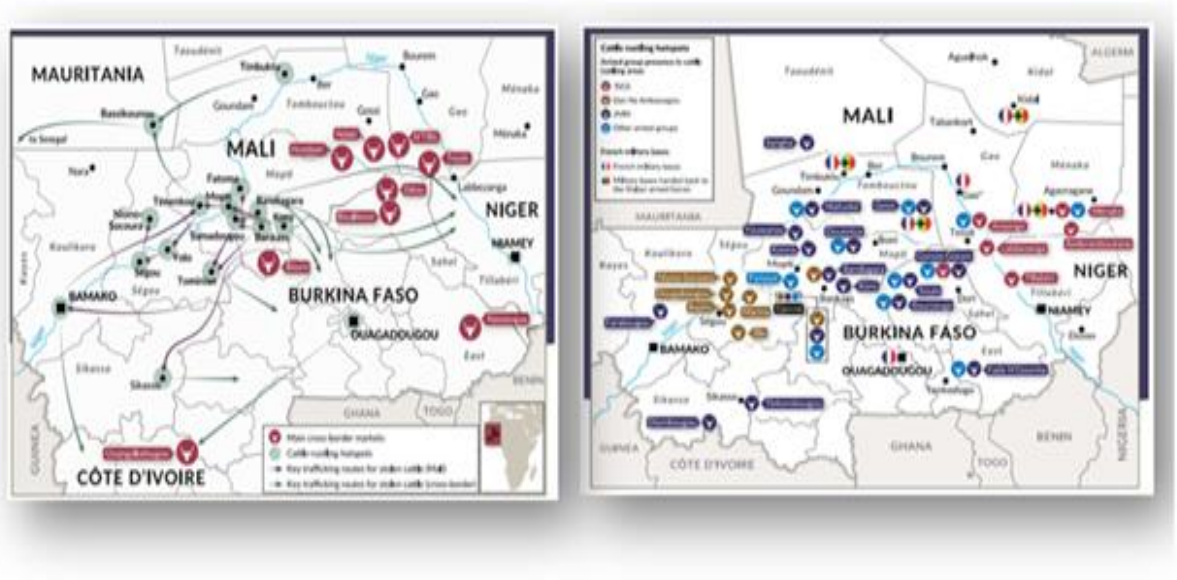
Source: Author-generated; event data from GTD, 2021.

Table 1.10. ISSP Tactics and Targets in Niger, 2016-2021

Tactic	Target (Listed by Most to Least Targeted)	Specific Target
Armed Assault	Private Citizen	Individuals living in areas under the control or influence of other non-state armed actors and others traveling in a convoy from a livestock market. The first incident is retaliatory in nature, while the second is suspected to be related to either livestock disputes or cattle rustling.
	Military	Bases, convoys, checkpoints, patrols, and on-duty soldiers.
	Police	Police stations and on-duty officers
	Government	Custom posts and the president of high court
	Civil Society	Foreign aid workers on a holiday
Assassination	Private Citizen	Village chiefs and a Tuareg leader
	Government	Parliamentary speaker
Hostage-Taking	Private Citizen	Off-duty military officer and a Tuareg leader
	Religious Figure	African priest
Bombing (All targets for this tactic are targeted equally)	Military	Military vehicle
	Police	Police Station
	Private Citizen	Vehicle traveling along the road

Source: Author-generated; event data from GTD, 2021.

Figures 1.2 and 1.3. Cattle-Rustling Hotspots and Armed Group Activity



Source: GI-TOC, 2022