

## Editorial

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This year, citizens in many countries head to the polls to elect governments. In many cases, the choices at hand reflect various strategic policy priorities. The main conundrum for many voters and parties is forging a degree of political stability. Geostrategic and security issues have increasingly emerged as burning issues, affecting most bi- and multilateral relations. The relevance of such perspectives is acknowledged by most of the articles in this issue as they explore a variety of critical security-related challenges. From the geopolitical effects of civil strife and coups to the pressing concerns around economic development, to the shifting dynamics of regional integration and growing migration, our contributors explore these themes and provide thought-provoking perspectives that are essential for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners alike.

*Theo Neethling* details how thirty years of underfunding has hindered both internal and external operations of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The SANDF has had to balance peacekeeping missions in places such as Lesotho, the DRC, and Burundi with domestic security tasks, but with an outdated force design and significant operational shortcomings. According to Neethling, these competing priorities are compromising the SANDF's effectiveness and sustainability.

*Sonja Theron* raises at a broader level some of the concerns illustrated by Neethling in his specific case study. The issue of an outdated force design can also be the result of an inadequate understanding of the complex dynamics that underpin conflict across the continent. For Theron, current theories in the field of war studies are insufficient to explain and address conflicts. She calls for a re-framing of war and strategic thinking to emphasise context-dependent approaches and innovative strategies that address the continent's unique complexities.

The recent military coups in the Sahel region are an example of these complexities. To illustrate the political instability and the regional implications that can result, *Frederick Appiah Afriyie* examines the case of Niger. He explores the causes, such as democratic backsliding and terrorism, and highlights the impact of U.S. security assistance and diplomatic relations. To counter these dynamics, the study emphasises the need for decisive action by international and regional organisations.

However, Russia's influential operations in West Africa, particularly the Sahel, should not be overlooked. *Lukas Horak, Kristyna Drmotova, Petr Stodola and Libor Kutej* explore Moscow's tactics to counter Western presence and strengthen ties with local governments. They use Mali as a case study and examine how Russia has used historical and modern information-psychological warfare, as well as non-military tools like economic collaborations and mining investments, to assert dominance and reshape military and diplomatic relations. A recent reminder that this remains a matter of life and death was illustrated by the widely reported killing of Malian soldiers and those from the former Wagner group who were ambushed by fighters from an ethnically Tuareg separatist group.<sup>1</sup> In response, Mali's government accused Ukraine of aiding the attackers and violating Malian sovereignty before cutting diplomatic ties.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates the implications of conflicts beyond a local dimension. The article, therefore, also considers Russia's broader involvement in Africa and the potential partnerships with North African countries.

At the same time, China's influence in Sub-Saharan Africa is expanding through connectivity, institutional arrangements, and power dynamics to position Beijing as a central player in the region's political economy. The country's economic activities, infrastructure projects, and resource acquisition are significant, and challenge Western dominance. *Inesta Brunel Lendzoumbou* explores these dynamics and focuses on China's debt diplomacy and global power shifts.

*Farrukh Ahmad Awan and Muhammad Shoaib Pervaz* exemplify this with another South African case study. They examine Pakistan's foreign policy shift towards Africa as a sign of the continent's growing trade and military importance. They argue that the close bilateral political, economic, and military relations with South Africa benefit from the growing impact of the Pakistani diaspora in South Africa.

Pressing concerns around economic development are a key factor that contributes to political instability across the region. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its promise to reinvigorate trade has raised hope as well as criticism. *Lincoln Cave* highlights the critical role of regulatory compliance in the success of

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1 Christopher Michael Faulkner, 'Wagner Group setback in Mali challenges Moscow's strategy in Africa and the region's faith in Russian mercenaries', *The Conversation*, 9 August 2024, <https://theconversation.com/wagner-group-setback-in-mali-challenges-moscows-strategy-in-africa-and-the-regions-faith-in-russian-mercenaries-236285>.

2 Shola Lawal, 'Mali's spat with Kyiv: Is the Russia-Ukraine war spilling over into Africa?', *Al Jazeera*, 8 August 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/8/malis-spat-with-kyiv-is-the-russia-ukraine-war-spilling-over-into-africa>.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and addresses challenges like security threats, climate change, and infrastructure deficits. He uses South African case studies to underscore the importance of governance and accountability in PPPs. He recommends adopting a compliance management program, fostering a culture of accountability, and enforcing consequences for failures to manage PPPs effectively in Africa.

Successfully promoting regional integration also includes understanding the rise in African migration, particularly intra-African movements. As a research report, *Sergio Carciotto, Daniel Adeoluna Adeniyi, and Mulugeta Dinbabo* emphasise the need for a new narrative on migration in Africa to inform better decision-making at the regional level. The annotated bibliography covers various pillars of the African Union's Migration Policy Framework, highlighting topics such as migration governance, labour migration, diaspora engagement, border governance, irregular migration, forced displacement, internal migration, and migration diplomacy. They identify future research directions across various thematic areas like migration governance, labour migration, diaspora engagement, border governance, irregular migration, forced displacement, internal migration, migration and trade, and migration diplomacy.

*Masilo Lepuru* completes this issue with a review of uMbuso weNkosi's *These Potatoes Look Like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home and Death in South Africa*. The book discusses the historic injustice of land dispossession in South Africa through the lens of African spirituality, adding to the ongoing debate on land ownership and justice in post-apartheid South Africa. The spiritual connection between the land, the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born, highlights the need to understand land beyond its material value.

We hope this issue serves not only as a scholarly resource but also as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue and action. As always, the Strategic Review for Southern Africa remains committed to fostering informed debate and contributing to the region's development through rigorous research and analysis. We welcome scholarly comments and exchanges promoting relevant discourses further.