



MAY: Africa is a large continent and a diverse continent. Many different peoples, ethnic groups, tribes, these terms overlap but are not synonymous. They speak more than a thousand languages in Africa. They are organized into more than 50 nation states. Most of those nation states achieved independence in the aftermath of World War II as European imperialism and colonialism died out, and few African lands has political stability and prosperity followed.

MAY: And today, Africa is threatened by new predators, violent and vicious jihadists kidnapping, killing, and committing a long list of other crimes. Africa also was threatened by what I'm going to call neo-imperialism, not European variety. Dr. J. Peter Pham was the first ever United States Special Envoy for the Sahel region of Africa. Before that, Ambassador Pham served as the US Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region of Africa. He's also been a denizen of think tanks. Currently, he is a Distinguished Fellow at the Atlantic Council. But his first DC think tank affiliation, I'm proud to say, was as an adjunct senior fellow at FDD.

MAY: In addition, he was a tenured associate professor of Justice Studies, Political Science, and Africana Studies at James Madison University, and director of the school's Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs. He's the author of more than 300 essays and reviews and the author, editor or translator over a dozen books primarily on African history, politics, and economics. I'm Cliff May, and I'm pleased that we're going to be talking with him today here on *Foreign Podicy*.

MAY: Welcome, Ambassador Pham. Let's start with the penetration of jihadists into Africa. There's Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Islamic State is in the Sahel, such countries as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. A jihadi terrorist groups also have been active much further south, for example, there's Ansar al-Sunna in Mozambique. What does the trend line look like to you?

PHAM: Well, the trend line, not surprisingly, is a grim one. And we've known this all along. Probably about 15, 16 years ago, I pointed out that in what was then Al-Qaeda's monthly magazine sought out jihad a fellow by the name of Abu Azzam wrote a piece about Africa being the next land of the jihad, laying out the strategic case actually quite well for why Africa should be a focal point, both in terms of resources, meaning human resources as well as material resources to be had, geography, strategic interests.

PHAM: He made a pretty compelling case. And so, it's been in the target sites of jihadists globally for some time. And not surprisingly, as they've waxed and waned elsewhere, as the Islamic State has met at least defeat on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, increasingly you see more activity in Africa. Some of this is based on longstanding activism seeds planted along while back. Some of it is exploiting local conflicts but it's certainly taken off and as you laid out, Cliff, this arc ranging from North Africa across the Sahel all the way down to now as far south as Mozambique.

MAY: And the damage there that's being done by these jihadists, I don't know if people understand it. For example, in Nigeria, as I understand it, 350,000 people, 350,000 have been killed by jihadists with children under five, under five accounting for 9 out of 10 killed and according to the UN 170 dying every day. I mean, this is not prominent, certainly, in the media. I guess one question is, I mean, is there any significant and successful pushback? I know that you know. I know the Nigerian army is trying to fight Boko Haram, I'm just not sure how successful the African military forces and governments are against these jihadists.

PHAM: Well, there has been some success, although the success often has unintended consequences. For example, after fits and starts, there has been a joint force developed among the G5, the five principal Sahelian countries,



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Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad, which has managed to inflict some damage to both the Al-Qaeda affiliate in the region as well as the Islamic State affiliate.

PHAM: But the irony of some of this progress, which has occurred in Mali and Niger in particular, is that they pushed on those two sides, the jihadists have spilled into a country that was largely untouched for a long time, Burkina Faso. In the year I served as special envoy for the Sahel, literally, a million people were displaced in Burkina Faso during 2020. So, it's extraordinary the damage and how it continues to spread.

MAY: These jihadi groups, how are they being funded? Is coming out of the gulf states, out of rich princes? Are they living off the land? I mean, how do they manage to have weapons, have ammunition, have food, have logistics to be as effective as they are?

PHAM: Well, a couple things need to be understood, Cliff. One is the cost of maintaining a terrorist group or jihadist insurgency in these areas is relatively low. These are exceptionally poor countries. They're at the bottom of the UN human development. So, the amount of money required is very minimal and the cost of weapons, first, they flow out of Libya after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi plus the local manufacturer of weapons which has increased exponentially over the last years.

PHAM: The cost, it's relatively cost-effective, if you will, to engage in this. So that doesn't require much money. And a lot has been gained Al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Islamic Maghreb, for example, in the Sahel, has over the years banked away for years a huge reserve based on kidnapping for ransom of Westerners whose governments pay millions of dollars in ransoms, to working with drug traffickers offering protection, for cocaine smuggling routes, et cetera, which also raised money.

PHAM: And there's kidnapping for ransom, which has taken off like gangbusters in Nigeria. Just since the beginning of this year alone, over a thousand schoolchildren have been kidnapped in Nigeria in mass kidnappings. And the government, whether state or federal, have paid ransoms just to avoid the political embarrassment that further enriches some of these groups. And that's just a thousand schoolchildren. I think the statistic is close to 3,000 Nigerians all together been kidnapped for ransom. And then there's the taxation of areas they control, the so-called zakat that they impose upon communities in their areas.

MAY: Kind of tax. Yeah. A religious tax, I guess, you'd say. Yes.

PHAM: So, all together, it doesn't require much money and there are plenty of opportunities to gain it. And there's exploitation of natural resources as well. We see that not only in the Sahel with gold but also Eastern Congo where an affiliate of the Islamic State has arisen in the east out of groups that been there for some time. And that's a mineral-rich area, a lot of artisanal mining going on. So again, another opportunity to make money.

MAY: You mentioned, and I mentioned that children are so often the victims of these jihadist groups. But there's also this in Burkina Faso, which is also in West Africa, used to be called Upper Volta years and years ago, there was recently a massacre in which more than 130 people were killed. It was carried out mostly by children between the ages of 12 and 14, according to the government. And I know about this, that these assailants raided a village. In June, they open fired on residents, they burned homes, worst attack in years. And again, the majority of the attackers, according to the Burkina Faso government, were these children who have been recruited and trained. I mean, it's really a form of just dreadful child abuse.



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PHAM: It is. And one of the things that we have to remember is nothing occurs in isolation. And these jihadists are learning lessons from earlier insurgents and rebels. This is one tactic we've seen, and you've reported as a journalist from West Africa, Cliff. We saw this 20, 25 years ago in the civil wars of West Africa, in places like Sierra Leone, where that madman Foday Sankoh recruited children and then forced them to commit atrocities as a way of breaking their bonds with their communities to make them fearful of ever going back and therefore keeping their loyalty. So, these jihadists easily learned lessons. They're not ashamed to learn best practices, if you will. And I think that's what we're seeing them emulate in many of these places.

MAY: Right, right, right. No, absolutely. This puzzles me, too. So, in West Africa, in the Sahel, you have a country like Nigeria that south is mostly Christian, some animists, the north is Muslim. Years ago, as you say, when I was a correspondent there, relations were not always entirely amicable, but they were generally peaceful, though. Then you get the radicalization often from foreign sources of the Muslims, and suddenly they're burning the churches of their Muslim neighbors or they're killing people because they hold a beauty contest, which is haram, which is forbidden. What surprises me a little bit, a place like Mozambique, I would not have thought there were many Muslims to radicalize in a place like Mozambique, which is so much further, further south. Am I wrong about that or are they infiltrating in a different way?

PHAM: Well, the very northern part of Mozambique, Cabo Delgado province, has historically always had a large Muslim community. It's the remnant of what was once the great Omani-Swahili Empire around the Indian Ocean. And it's a community that has largely been neglected their minority within Mozambique as a whole politically marginalized for a variety of reasons, not all having to do with religion or ethnic but more ethnic identity and location. But that marginalization, that sense of political isolation underdevelopment certainly gives fertile ground for the outside elements to come in, radicalize and build upon local grievances. This is the cleverness, if you will, of the jihadist in penetration of Africa is exploiting in every place a slightly different localizing their global jihad.

MAY: Not terribly well known is that the US does have some military deployments in Africa. Small, very, as I understand it, these are training and assistance missions, scattered number of places. Can you tell us a little bit about that? And also, not the least, are these deployments effective?

PHAM: Bang for buck, I think one would argue some of the best values that we had in our military budget is the very, very, very small amount that we spend on the US-Africa command, which is the military organization responsible for the entire African continent. Its budget is miniscule compared with CENTCOM or INDOPACOM. Its forces are very small but the bang for the buck is extraordinary. We're talking about deployments but usually in very small numbers.

PHAM: Our largest installation in Africa is Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, which has a number of functions. And that's a very small footprint. But the point mainly, as you say, training equipment, advising, sometimes even use advising by remotely. In fact, the airstrike called out earlier this week upon some Shabaab terrorists attacking a Somali unit that was trained by the US was all done with remote advising, wasn't even accompanied advising, which is kind of an interesting modern twist on technology and deployment.

PHAM: But I think very, very effective. And, certainly, I will make the argument and have made it both in government out that the small investment we make in terms of the fight against jihadists against terrorists, but also in great power competition against China and other rivals, the small investment in the military and Africa is handsomely paid back.



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MAY: The French have historically had a great, I would say, affection for their former colonies. And you've had French forces for a long time in Chad that has been the place where they base their antiterrorist operations for Western Africa and Sahel, French Foreign Legion. Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron said he was ending France's counterterrorism operation in the Sahel as part of a plan to replace it with a broader international force. I'm kind of puzzled whether there's really something going on here that's useful or whether he's hiding the fact that he's kind of giving up and going home?

PHAM: Well, I think he's finally realizing the limit of capability. France is in recent years –And this gets to whatever one may think or argue or quibble with former President Trump complaining about European allies not spending sufficiently on the common defense. About how he went about it or whatever, there's a great truth and a kernel truth in all that. And the fact that is the French military is not up to the hauteur, if one can use the French term, of their predecessors. Their capabilities are much more limited. They're stretched, especially with the deployment of troops in the French homeland to guard against terrorist attacks. They're stretched to the limit. And their capabilities are much more limited than their ambition.

PHAM: So, this is, I think, an acknowledgement, a face-saving acknowledgement that they've reached a limit. There's also another part of this. I would also say the French have, and I saw this, very often sacrifice long-term sustainability and strategic success for short-term, if you will, solutions driven by or reported solutions driven by the political calendar back at home. In this case, Macron's reelection next year is an attempt to get reelected next year. So, things are being short-term considerations rather than long-term capacity building. We can get into those weeds. But very often, they took the shortcut, and I'm not sure that's sustainable or in everyone's common interest in the long term.

MAY: The just last point on this is if I am the jihadi leader in say Mali and I hear the French are sort of withdrawing. I got to figure this is good news for me that my chances of making progress are going to increase markedly over the years ahead.

PHAM: Certainly. And I think part of that, again, getting back to what I just said, has to do with rather than investing in building up local forces, the type of training equipment mentioned when we were talking about –The French operation Barkhane, which has achieved a number of successes, and we've worked with them, and they eliminate some high value terrorists. But often, doing it themselves gets it done quickly but it's at the cost of building up local partners who won't be able to sustain this in the long term.

MAY: And when the French say, well, it's going to be an international force, who does that mean? It's not going to be the Germans, I don't think. It's not going to be the English, I don't think. And there's not much appetite in the US either among Republicans or Democrats. I wouldn't imagine that you can make the case, I'm happy to have you do so, there should be for increasing our military commitment to African countries who are trying to stave off the jihadist threat.

PHAM: Well, again, my point of view is that what we should invest in both as the United States along is long-term capacity building, engaging the African countries and building up what we used to call internal defense with the Special Forces. That's the long-term investment that will pay off. What the French have done in recent years has got the grab bag of various European countries to sign up and send deployments on six-month, one-year rotations to help beef them up. But at one point, you almost feel sorry for the African partners who for six months their training mission is led by the Spaniards and six months later the Czechs are leading it and with a variety of doctrine training, their heads are spinning in the process. So, on paper, the force levels are the same, but the constant churn isn't helpful either.



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MAY: All right. So, I want to move on to the other threat that I mentioned in the introduction. And that is while the US and the French and others may be very much limiting their commitments to Africa, Beijing, the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping, he sees Africa as a big opportunity, and particularly here what they call the Belt and Road Initiative, which claims to be helping with infrastructure and development.

MAY: My FDD colleagues, Bradley Bowman and Morgan Viña, last month, published an essay and it detailed how China's rulers are, I'm going to quote here, "using UN peacekeeping, in particular, to cloak and facilitate the mercantilist extraction of natural resources from Africa while gaining valuable deployment experience for the People's Liberation Army and attempting to shift international norms in a direction hostile to human rights." In other words, Beijing is looking for resources in Africa, natural resources, farmland, they are also using UN peacekeeping which the U.S. pays the largest share of, and they're using it for their own nationalistic and mercantile purposes rather than sincerely for African development. Do you agree with all that?

PHAM: Yes. I totally agree with Morgan and your other FDD colleague on this one. It's something I warned about way back when China first got involved in UN peacekeeping for the first time in Liberia back in 2003. I already saw that with construction that they built which benefited actually subsequent Chinese investment. The construction carried out under UN peacekeeping auspices. So, they already established that early on.

PHAM: The interesting thing, as you say, is how they use UN peacekeeping, was that leaves us, the United States, footing the bill for it. We pay roughly a quarter of all UN. So, if you can get it under UN peacekeeping, they get to send us a quarter of the bill for it, which is almost it's literally insult on injury. But long term, I think the debt that's piled up. It's not just the building of infrastructure which Africa needs, but the quality of the infrastructure and then the debt that's piled which is unsustainable.

PHAM: A good example, the Republic of Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, it's a country of about five million people. The debt to China is estimated, is not very transparent, but best estimate is \$6 billion in debt that five million people are carrying on their backs. That's not sustainable. Djibouti, less than a million people, billions in debt, and it's a very vital strategic country. It's Ethiopia's access to the sea. It's also the location of the one permanent U.S. base on the African continent.

MAY: And the Chinese are using the port facilities for military purposes there. Are they not?

PHAM: They are. And irony of ironies, the port facilities they're using were constructed in part by the US Navy, the Seabees. But there is an example. I wrote a piece 13 years ago at the time the outgoing Bush administration invited the Chinese to be "responsible stakeholders" and to help in anti-piracy operations. I warned at the time this was shortsighted because there was an opening.

PHAM: And true enough, 13 years later, what's happened? China has since then maintained a permanent naval presence off the east coast of Africa that wasn't there before they were invited to join us in anti-piracy operations. The first ever Chinese military base outside of China was built in Djibouti. A long-range expeditionary capability that the People's Liberation Army Navy didn't have pre-2008, they now have it. So, all these are knock on effects of a, again, shortsighted decision made in a moment to perhaps spare some costs.

MAY: And one other example I'm going to mention to you, and I'd like to hear your comments on, the People's Republic of China that they're building a rail line, the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway. Now, it sounds great



because Nairobi is in the highlands, and this is more or less in the center of the country. Mombasa is in the shore. It's very important to have good transportation and communication between the two for all sorts of economic reasons. There is a train that goes between the two cities. I've taken it many, many years ago. It was kind of rundown even then, although wonderful viewing of the plains and the animals and all that. The Chinese say, see how we're helping Kenya to develop, this is wonderful.

MAY: But according even to the *Daily Nation*, which is the most circulated newspaper in Kenya, this project is alleged to be unimaginably corrupt and overpriced, according to this report in this Kenyan newspaper. Hundreds of millions of Kenyan shillings have been spent entertaining Chinese officers, over a billion shillings for grass along the runway, putting, again, what you say putting the Kenyans in significant debt and depriving them of sovereignty over the long term. Now, China's refuted these reports as false and one-sided, but I have little trust in what the Chinese Communist have to say about these projects.

PHAM: No, and often now, it's not transparent even what the real costs are down like. In many cases, we've discovered that what countries have done is mortgaged their future natural resources in exchange for infrastructure that may be of dubious quality or even if it's of decent quality, they've mortgaged it at highly unfavorable terms. I remember one, at that time, recently elected African president, democratically elected, who showed me confidentially the contract his predecessor had signed with China, which if they fell in arrears in repaying their debt, the Chinese were entitled to take their oil.

PHAM: But they weren't going to take their oil at the market price of crude. They were going to take the oil repayment at \$10 a barrel. I don't suspect that you and I will live to see \$10 a barrel of oil in our lifetimes. So, it's a wonderful deal. Essentially, the returns on that deal are astronomical for the Chinese. Even assuming, for the sake of argument that the infrastructure they gave was of the value they claimed it was worth, which I think is a debatable proposition.

PHAM: So, there are all sorts of these or there's a case in the Congo which, fortunately, the government of President Félix Tshisekedi is now investigating, but signed by his predecessor which was supposedly the Chinese would get access to a mine and then turn it over to the Congolese in 15 years and then the Congolese would own it. Well, in 15 years, they'll probably have emptied it of anything of value. And so, the Congolese get a hole in the ground in exchange for supposed infrastructure that will be built, which is a dubious proposition itself.

MAY: One thing I want to just emphasize here, imperialism, predatory imperialism. When people talk about it, they're talking about the Europeans in the last century or the century before, this is predatory, it seems to me predatory imperialism taking place right now, which has not caught the attention, which is not seemed to be a major cause of concern among those in Europe and America who say, "I am anti-imperialist." But for the current incarnation of it, they seem to miss. Plus, it's not just, I think, imperialism, it's also colonialism in this respect.

MAY: When the Chinese come in with these projects, they generally don't employ and train a lot of Africans to carry them out. They bring in their own workers, and they bring in their own technologists and engineers and others, and often they set them up in what amount to settlements, what amounted to little colonies in Africa. And African local laws often don't apply there. The people don't dare. The Chinese do what they want to do. And whether or not the Chinese will come back to China when these projects are finished or whether they'll just stay on in these settlements is not clear. Am I exaggerating here, Peter?



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PHAM: No. It's hard to come by data. But anecdotally, one sees that happening. Oftentimes, these contract workers, we'll call them that, from China working on construction, whatever it is, and then afterwards settling down. And with the help of helpful access to credit and supplies going into business and often driving local African entrepreneurs out of the market, because they don't have access to the same suppliers, the same favorable credit terms, et cetera. On the road between Johannesburg and Pretoria in South Africa, there's a place called that's known as China Mart. And it's a huge wholesale operation, which anyone can go and buy to stock up their local shop. But interestingly enough, the Chinese shopkeepers, et cetera, get access to credit that African shopkeepers don't.

MAY: I was not aware until you signaled this to me that in addition to China, Russia has taken an interest in Africa. And it may not be a healthy interest. Talk a little bit about what Russia is doing in Africa.

PHAM: Well, immediately after the Cold War, Russia retreated from Africa, closed a number of embassies and downgraded relations. But under Putin as it's grown assertive elsewhere, it has reopened the closed embassies, but it's done it very strategically in its reengagement. Russia doesn't have the resources the old Soviet Union did to pump into Africa. So, it chooses its engagements very carefully to get maximum effect for its ruble, so to speak. A good example is what's happened in the Central African Republic, a country that's wracked by civil conflict, poverty, all sorts of challenges, and therefore a very minimal investment, Russian military contractors led by the Wagner Group with—

MAY: Could you explain what the Wagner Group is? People may not know it and it's interesting.

PHAM: It's an energy group led by so-called Putin's chef, guy named Prigozhin who also has supplied Russian mercenaries for Syria and other conflicts. But they've went in there and have essentially taken over the state to the point where publicly, the national security adviser of the president, of the Central African Republic, is the guy whose name is Valery Zakharov, a very Central African name, therefore, and literally is the national security adviser of the country.

PHAM: And in fact, to get access to president Touadéra, one is essentially constrained to go through the Russian security and advisors that now surround him, very low cost. And what are they after? One, on the strategic geopolitical level, that of course exercises the French in a way that it's hard to describe for those who haven't seen it. And so, the French end up pouring resources into trying to conquer this and drag other allies along with them.

PHAM: And so, for a very low investment, who ties down resources from western countries that might be deployed against them elsewhere. Secondly, they're the natural resources of the country which these allegedly private Russian interest now gain access to. So, one has to, in a way, admiringly say, it's a brilliant geopolitical and geoeconomic play on the part of Putin causes maximum disruption, maximum angst for very minimal investment. So, it's very forward looking.

MAY: Another subject that I want you to address a little bit, Peter, that I didn't mention in the introduction, it's a homegrown problem, I guess, you might say, which is separatism, tribalism, ethnic conflicts, intranational conflicts, many African nations are plagued by such conflicts right now.

PHAM: Well, this is one of those legacies of the colonial period that keep on giving, so to speak. The borders of African countries were drawn up by the colonial powers at the end of the 19th century, without respect to ethnic groups, tribal groups, or even in some cases preexisting political entities or even proto-states or even states. And so, independence who had these heterogeneous populations thrown together. And in a few cases, you had visionary independence leaders who worked very hard and built a sense of national cohesion out of it.



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PHAM: You see that in places like Ghana, Tanzania where there is a pride and a sense of nationhood that was built up despite the colonial legacy. Then in many other places, leaders fell back to what they were most comfortable with. Their own ethnic group, their own tribe. And so, politics became tribal. Voting patterns are predictable along ethnic lines. You have tensions that are now cropping up again and again in newer forms. And that failure to build cohesion is now we find it exploited whether by politicians seeking their own personal gain, whether it'd be outsiders or jihadists trying to exploit openings where they can.

PHAM: We see that in Somalia where Shabaab often goes for minority clans or those out of power as recruiting targets. We see that in the Sahel where communities that are in conflict, the jihadists will favor one or the other and exploit those divisions, those grievances. We certainly see that in Mozambique where, as I mentioned earlier, the sense of marginalization of Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, has been exploited by this Islamic State affiliate to now essentially not only engage in insurgency, has displaced well over a half a million people but also threatens the economic well-being of the country and the two largest investments that the country has ever had, in projects by Total and Exxon Mobil in natural gas development.

MAY: Peter, I take your point and I don't disagree with you, but I'm going to push back just a little bit. So, in a country like Nigeria, it is indeed difficult for a Muslim Hausa or Fulani in the north to feel united with a Yoruba in the south. And for even a Yoruba in the south united with an Igbo and Biafra to the east, it's hard for them all to feel like fellow Nigerians, lots of things to balkanize them.

MAY: But two things, one is that it's not like the colonials who were drawing up the borders and who are really introducing the very concept of nation states into Africa. I don't think there was quite the concept. Empires, yes, nation states, no, that they could have. Because if you take a country like Nigeria, if you wanted to divide it along ethnic tribal lines, there'd be dozens of countries in Nigeria, too many to do. At the same time, take Somalia, which one could argue Somalia is a country that Somalis have much in common culturally, linguistically in other ways, and yet it's today split into essentially three different Somalias.

MAY: I'm not sure you can blame that on the legacy of colonialism. And Ethiopia itself was really an empire. It was conquered by European Empire Fascist Italy, for what, I don't know, less than 10 years, I think, yet the various peoples of Ethiopia, and that's what they are, continue to fight among themselves. So, I'm not disagreeing with you entirely, but I'm saying it's not just the legacy of colonialism that's at work here.

PHAM: No, it's also the failure to build nation states. At some point, I think, one has to get past the discussions of history always influences the present, but one has to also have – The statesmen who've been there since independence, they have a responsibility of their own and one sees those failures, unfortunately, far too often more than the successes.

MAY: Yeah. I think we should talk about South Africa a little bit. In recent days, there's been rather have been riots, hundreds of people killed. This is, I think, in response to decades of really enormous corruption and maladministration. South Africa was usually in the news when the problem was apartheid. Now that the problem is not apartheid, now that the problem is indigenous, the news media seemed to me to be much less interested.

PHAM: Well, I think the problem has been that in South Africa you've had essentially, for all intents and purposes, since the arrival of majority rule, effectively a one-party government with the exception of the Western Cape, which has been rolled by the Democratic Alliance, a liberal opposition party. For the most part, most of South Africa has been governed by one party, the African National Congress, the ANC. But the ANC itself is a rather antiquated dinosaur.



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PHAM: It may have succeeded in putting an end to apartheid, but it replaced it with a system where deploying the cadres were being a party member being connected to the party was more important than actual competence for taking on jobs. And there's a vast amount of corruption. In fact, the most recent riots looting that you're referring to came about because the Constitutional Court of South Africa ordered former president Jacob Zuma jailed for 15 months for refusing to appear when he was properly summoned to a judicial investigation of corruption that he had engaged in while in office.

PHAM: And in response to that, Zuma and his supporters who still constitute an important block within the ANC stoked up their base which is predominantly Zulu, the ethnic group to which Jacob Zuma belonged, and as a result, tens of thousands of businesses have been looted, many of them never probably to return throughout not just KwaZulu-Natal but also in Johannesburg and other areas.

MAY: I mentioned there's more than 50, I think the UN figure is 54 countries in Africa, they're all interesting, they're all complex. Almost all of them are troubled. Maybe go through just a few and you'll give me just some brief thoughts. One of the things that seem to be a problem brewing is the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Renaissance dam. You want to tell us just a little bit about that?

PHAM: Well, Ethiopia over the course of the last – Now, a couple things. I think one has to step back. Ethiopia contributes well over 80% of the Nile waters, yet it uses very little of them, up to date. And so, the late former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles started a project where Ethiopians themselves without World Bank, without their international aid, bought bonds to build this enormous, and it is a remarkable feat of engineering. I've been out there. Just 10 miles from the Sudanese border, this massive dam, which is a hydroelectric dam, by the way, so the waters will flow to regulate the flow of the waters and to generate electricity, which will be enough to cover Ethiopia's needs and actually have some for export. In fact, they've even built transmission lines to export power to Sudan as well.

PHAM: Now, there's a catch to this. And this is what often doesn't get told. The catch to this is that back in the 1950s, back when it was still a colonial rule before the independence of Egypt and Sudan, Great Britain partitioned the waters that have been allocating it between the two countries, even though the water came from Ethiopia for the most part and some from Uganda and Rwanda and other countries on the other part.

PHAM: And rather than partitioning the waters by percentage of the flow, they gave absolute numbers, the bulk to Egypt and a small portion to Sudan. Now because the waters of the Nile flow in a – The rains come, they come in a big flood, and then it's dry for eight months. Sudan has never used its full quota of the water that it's entitled to. It just comes all at once useless and then goes away and it's dry. But with the Ethiopian dam, in the long term, what's going to happen is that the water is going to flow evenly for 12 months, which means Sudan is going to get the water and it will be able to use the water that it's allocated under the treaty year-round.

PHAM: What's known as the Gezira area of Sudan between the Blue Nile and the White Nile, which has one growing season currently will have three growing seasons. So, it's great for Sudan. The problem is Egypt has been benefiting from Sudan's inability to use its water. Egypt consumed its entire allotment of the Nile plus roughly two-thirds of the Sudanese allotment. So, the Sudanese start using their allotment that they're entitled by treaty to which what happened eventually with Ethiopian dam, Egypt water supplies cut by 20%.

MAY: Wow. That is fascinating. All right, I'm going to ask you about one more country. I'll tell you why. And then as my extra question, I'm going to ask you what I haven't talked about, what countries are very much in your mind that



you'd like to say a little bit about. The country that I'm going to talk about a little bit is Chad, because I spent quite a bit of time there when I was a correspondent for the *New York Times* in Africa covering civil wars but with the rebels backed by Libya under Muammar Qaddafi at that time.

MAY: And I particularly remember going out into the desert with combatants to see battlefields where they had been fighting. And the little mission I was on was led by a kind of romantic young officer with sunglasses and a long scarf by the name of Idriss Déby, who later as you know became the president, pretty much the president for life. But his life was recently ended. He was out there in the north with his troops and it appears he was shot and killed by the rebels.

MAY: His son, General Mahamat was installed by the military as the country's leader after him and the head of the armed forces. I'm curious to know your thoughts. Can General Mahamat manage to hold the country together or is it going to fall apart under him? What do you see happening with Chad, which although it's not a well-known country, it has been an important country for France and the West in terms of the fight against jihadism?

PHAM: Chad has certainly been a linchpin of security in Central Africa as well as the Sahel. And the late president Idriss Déby certainly cultivated that assiduously to make himself the indispensable man in the region, and certainly contributed Chadian forces have fought in Mali and in other countries against jihadist and other sorts. So, made itself, but I think this is where long term and short term which we've been talking about come to it.

PHAM: He made himself so valuable and the French relied so much on him that, in fact, at his death, French President Macron showed up at the funeral and eulogized the president for life who last year made himself a marshal complete with baton and cape, eulogize him in a way that was, frankly, almost embarrassing. But I think it's very shortsighted because long term is that sustainable? Certainly, for the short term, we hope that the son manages to hold it together. But whether it is a stable structure, I have my reservations. I hope for the best, but I worry about sustainability, which is I think a key component.

MAY: So, what countries or what country in Africa have I not brought up and not mentioned that's on your mind that you're either worrying about or studying or thinking about a lot?

PHAM: Well, Cliff, we've somewhat dwelt on all the challenges. The jihadism, the terrorism, the political instability, civil conflict, all these things. I like to almost conclude on a more positive note and make the argument that Africa is important for our strategic interest, not just in the negative sense of combating jihadism, combating instability but for strategic reasons going into the 21st century and beyond, the mineral wealth of Africa. Think about the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a place I spent a lot of time in during my government service, produces roughly two-thirds of the cobalt in the world that we need. China currently produces 65% of the rare earth elements we need for permanent magnets.

MAY: Which are useful in cars, useful in phones, useful in batteries, I mean, we don't understand how important these are.

PHAM: Right. And outside of China, there are only three places in the world that currently produce those rare earth elements. Mountain pass in California which is Chinese-owned, Australia and Burundi. So, one can go on and on, on the strategic mineral side. On the population side, by 2050, one in four working-age persons in the entire world is going to be an African. That's either a tremendous opportunity in both or tremendous challenge. It could go either way. So, for all



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these and many other strategic reasons, I think Africa has an enormous potential and certainly is in our interest to keep it more front and center and certainly not way back in the backburner.

MAY: Enormously important points you're making there. Ambassador Pham, always an education to talk with you and fun to. Let's continue the conversation. Until then, thanks so much for joining us today.

PHAM: Thank you, Cliff. I look forward to continuing our conversation.

MAY: And thanks to all of you who've been with us as well today here on Foreign Podicy. Thank you for listening to Foreign Podicy. If you found the program worthwhile, we suggest you subscribe to Foreign Podicy on iTunes, Spotify, Google Play, Stitcher, or wherever you prefer to listen to your podcasts. Send us your feedback, your questions, your ideas to foreignpodicy@fdd.org. For more information about this episode and others and about our distinguished guests, visit us online at fdd.org. Until next time, I'm Cliff May. And you've been listening to *Foreign Podicy*.