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Côte d'Ivoire

Côte d'Ivoire, the world's top cocoa producer, has a rapidly growing economy and has been a rising U.S. security partner in the region. Of the \$161 million in U.S. bilateral assistance allocated in FY2023, more than 90% went to health initiatives. In 2022, the Biden Administration named Côte d'Ivoire, as part of a five-country Coastal West Africa grouping, as a focus of engagement under the Global Fragility Act of 2019 (Title V, Div. J, P.L. 116-94), for which Congress has provided funding and oversight.

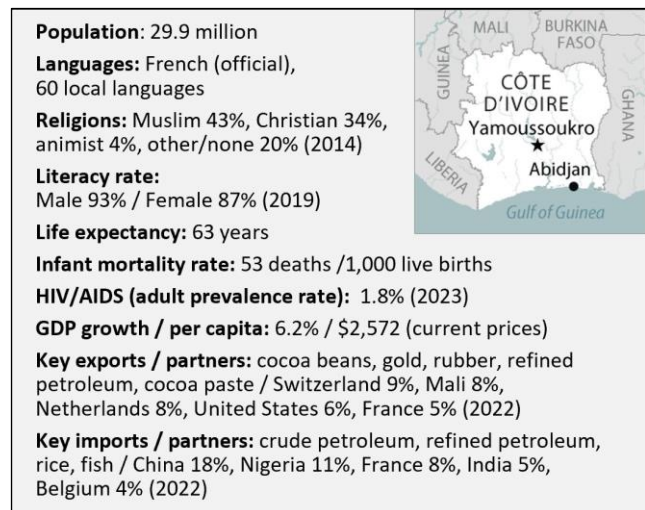
Côte d'Ivoire has experienced economic growth and relative stability under President Alassane Ouattara, in office since 2011. However, political tensions persist, stemming in part from his contested third-term election in 2020 and calls within his party for him to run again in 2025. Potential spillover from Islamist insurgencies in Mali and Burkina Faso, which was examined in several hearings in the 118th Congress, threatens the northern part of the country. Côte d'Ivoire's government appears to have responded more effectively to this risk than some others in the region. As Congress considers West Africa as a whole, threats to security in the region may be a concern.

Politics

A turbulent election in 2025 could reignite tensions within Côte d'Ivoire, and regional instability could undermine democratic norms. Presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire have sometimes prompted political violence. Disputes over migration, nationality, and citizenship rights have fueled tensions between the predominantly Muslim north and the largely Christian south, culminating in civil war in the 2000s. In 2010, then-President Laurent Gbagbo refused to concede electoral defeat to Ouattara, sparking a new outbreak of violence. Gbagbo ultimately ceded power after intervention by rebels and French and UN troops. Gbagbo was acquitted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity in 2010-11.

Côte d'Ivoire's 2025 election features contentious dynamics: President Ouattara (age 83) has signaled an interest in running for a fourth term. Given the controversial constitutional reset of term limits, this move could risk unrest. Opposition parties have stated concerns about the voter registration process and other electoral preparations. Potential candidates include Tidjane Thiam, an international banker who took leadership of the country's largest opposition party in 2024. Former President Gbagbo, his ex-wife Simone Gbagbo, and former rebel leader Guillaume Soro have all signaled an intent to run; whether the electoral commission will validate their candidacies is unclear. The election may be targeted by disinformation campaigns, particularly from Russia, which has been involved in such efforts across the continent.

Figure 1. Côte d'Ivoire at a Glance



Source: CRS map. Data from CIA *World Factbook*, International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook* database (October 2024 update), UNAIDS. 2024 estimates unless otherwise indicated.

Foreign Affairs

While Côte d'Ivoire engages with various international actors, regional cooperation within Africa has been an important focus of its foreign policy. The country maintains strong relationships with Western countries, particularly France, and with China.

Tensions with Sahel Juntas. West Africa is experiencing a growing political divide. This division stems from the rise of military-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and their decision in early 2024 to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Côte d'Ivoire's relations with neighboring Burkina Faso have been particularly strained, marked by mutual accusations of destabilization and the detention of each other's security personnel.

France. While several Sahel countries have severed connections with France, President Ouattara has maintained warm ties with Paris, which he restored after a rift under Gbagbo. The two countries have strong trade and investment links, although France is reducing its military presence amid the withdrawal of French troops from the Sahel since 2022. In late 2024, President Ouattara announced a complete French troop withdrawal (about 600 personnel) and handover of French bases to Ivoirian control by February 20, 2025. The two countries continue to administer the International Academy for the Fight Against Terrorism (AILCT), a training center near Abidjan inaugurated in 2021.

China. The People's Republic of China (China, or PRC) is among Côte d'Ivoire's top import partners, and has

financed electrification and transportation initiatives, sporting venues, and other infrastructure projects—including a bridge in Abidjan named after Ouattara. PRC firms also operate several mining projects in the country. Ouattara's government has pursued military equipment from China, underscoring deepening bilateral ties. In January 2024, President Ouattara hosted PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Abidjan. In 2021 polling by Afrobarometer, 71% of Ivoirians responded that PRC economic and political influence was positive; 66% characterized U.S. influence as positive.

Security Conditions

Côte d'Ivoire's internal security has improved since the political struggles of the 2000s, including the 2010-2011 post-election violence that led to some 3,000 deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. However, significant challenges remain. Land disputes, exacerbated by ethnic and political tensions, continue to spark intercommunal violence.

The U.S. intelligence community warned in early 2024 that instability in the Sahel could extend to coastal West Africa. Côte d'Ivoire experienced its first Islamist attack in 2016, when Al Qaeda-linked militants killed 19 civilians near Abidjan. Like other coastal countries, it has faced threats from the Mali-based regional Al Qaeda affiliate, known as JNIM. Between 2020 and 2021, roughly 20 attacks targeted military posts along Côte d'Ivoire's northern border. Such incidents have since declined: 2023 and 2024 saw no reported terrorist attacks in the country, but the Sahel's conflicts have reportedly inflamed local tensions. Islamist insurgents have reportedly exploited grievances among the Fulani, a pastoralist, largely Muslim ethnic group often subjected to discrimination, to boost recruitment.

The Economy

Côte d'Ivoire is West Africa's second-largest economy after Nigeria. Its GDP is projected to grow by 6.4% in 2025. Côte d'Ivoire is the world's leading cocoa producer and typically the source of 40% of global cocoa supply, although adverse weather disrupted production in 2024. Other key exports include refined petroleum, rubber, cashews, bananas, palm oil, gold, and manganese. The energy sector is growing, with several offshore oil and gas discoveries in the past five years. Abidjan is a regional financial center, hosting the West African Economic and Monetary Union's stock exchange and the African Development Bank, of which the United States is a major shareholder. Côte d'Ivoire's credit profile, upgraded in 2024, has attracted substantial foreign direct investment in energy, agriculture, finance, and digital sectors.

Child Labor in the Cocoa Industry

Child labor, long a concern for some Members of Congress, remains prevalent in Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa industry, with many children engaged in hazardous work on family farms, and some in forced labor. The 2001 Harkin-Engel Protocol, a voluntary agreement among major cocoa companies named after its congressional champions, sought to eliminate the worst forms of child labor in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. In late 2024, the U.S. Department of Labor,

with the governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana and the World Cocoa Foundation, announced a new framework to address child labor in the West African cocoa sector.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

U.S.-Ivoirian relations strengthened during Ouattara's three terms, as U.S. policymakers faced rising challenges elsewhere in West Africa. Then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Côte d'Ivoire in 2024 emphasizing cooperation on economic growth, democracy, regional security, climate change, food security, and health.

U.S. Assistance. In FY2023 (latest public data), the United States allocated \$161 million in bilateral aid to Côte d'Ivoire, with 97% directed toward health programs, most for HIV/AIDS. Other aid included \$3 million for democracy and governance programs, and \$500,000 for International Military Education and Training (IMET). Côte d'Ivoire has also received aid under regional and global programs, including the Department of Agriculture's Food for Progress program, as well as security assistance managed by the Departments of State and Defense. Announced pauses of federal funding, the reorganization of U.S. agencies, and the recall of some staff posted abroad may affect the implementation of FY2024-funded U.S. foreign aid and humanitarian assistance programs.

Security cooperation increased amid crises in the Sahel. Côte d'Ivoire has hosted or co-hosted Flintlock, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)'s flagship special operations exercise, every year since 2022 and is slated to do so again in 2025 and 2026. AFRICOM Commander General Michael Langley visited Abidjan as U.S. troops prepared to leave neighboring Niger in April 2024, outlined \$65 million in 2024 funding for counterterrorism and northern border security, and called Côte d'Ivoire's military "a cornerstone of regional stability." AFRICOM later confirmed that U.S. special operations forces had relocated from Niger to Côte d'Ivoire. Côte d'Ivoire is also scheduled to join the National Guard's State Partnership Program in 2025.

Global Fragility Act (GFA). The Biden Administration's GFA strategy for Coastal West Africa focused on bolstering social cohesion, state accountability, and security force effectiveness. Over \$300 million in related funds had been allocated for the region as of 2024. In the 118th Congress, the Senate Committee on Appropriations directed that support under the Prevention and Stabilization Fund "be made available to implement the GFA in a manner that prioritizes efforts to strengthen government legitimacy and capacity."

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). Côte d'Ivoire began a six-year, \$537 million MCC compact in 2019 aimed at improving road infrastructure in Abidjan and expanding job training. In 2024, the MCC approved a regional MCC compact to bolster Côte d'Ivoire's ability to export electricity to other countries in West Africa.

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