

No Competition Without Presence Should the U.S. Leave Africa?”

By Katherine Zimmerman

American blood and treasure should be prioritized to secure U.S. national interests. The United States military is not the world’s police force, and where others can share the burden, the United States should add only its unique capabilities. But defending U.S. interests extends even into faraway lands, including Africa. While Africa may never be a top national security concern for the United States, a convergence of gains by state and nonstate actors alike there affect U.S. security and economic interests globally. Yet the Pentagon’s recent effort to rebalance its resources against great power competitors—especially China and Russia—after almost two decades of counterterrorism dominance places the commitment of U.S. military resources to Africa in question. Drawing down too far militarily in Africa risks losing influence on the continent to those very same state actors, erasing hard-fought counterterrorism gains, and compromising U.S. global interests.

America’s global competitors—China, Russia, and transnational terror organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—are growing in strength on the continent. Chinese investment in Africa has outpaced that of the United States for the past decade,¹ and corrupt Chinese practices benefit Chinese companies at the expense of Africans and fair economic competition.² Chinese security initiatives chip away at the influence of U.S.-run partner capacity building programs, and Russian military sales and business deals show renewed Kremlin interest in old Soviet stomping grounds.³ Transnational Salafi-jihadi terror organizations have increasingly insinuated themselves into local conflicts, imperiling the stability of African states.

Meanwhile, European allies face their own national security challenges in Africa. Many of their interests largely align with American interests, creating an opportunity for the United States to support and partner with its allies on the continent. Some interests derive from Europe’s colonial history in Africa, the legacy of which is far from positive, however. Migration through North Africa to Europe is a key concern, especially given the current stress on European economies. Coupled with the rising strength of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa, Europe faces an increasing risk of terror cells embedding in migrant flows. France, which is conducting counterterrorism operations in West Africa, requires American support to sustain operations at the current scale.⁴ These interests, in addition to global health concerns and promoting good governance and

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democratic values, mean the United States should not pull resources from Africa.

America's military investment in Africa yields wide-ranging dividends that help advance American interests from counterterrorism to democracy promotion to global health initiatives. United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA) build relationships through security cooperation and partnership training programs that are some of the most crucial U.S. relationships in Africa outside embassy walls.⁵ They support allies and partners in counterterrorism operations, allowing non-U.S. troops to lead the ground effort. All the while, U.S. military engagements continue to promote American values and principals. Most importantly, they help to secure the theater for all other U.S. lines of effort—diplomatic, information, economic, and political—to protect and advance American interests in Africa.

The debate over U.S. resource commitments in Africa shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the competition for influence on the continent and the strategic risks that the United States will incur should it draw down its already modest military presence. A comparatively small U.S. military investment in Africa buys an outsized share of U.S. influence and crucially enables American soft power to shape the future trajectory of the continent in America's interest.

What's at Stake in Africa?

In a world where spheres of influence are shifting, the lines in Africa have yet to be drawn. African countries help secure three of the world's major maritime chokepoints—the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and the Bab al Mandab Strait—through which one-third of global shipping moves. Chinese and Russian interests in places such as Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia are well understood, and the reasons to preserve American influence

there known. China and Russia now seek to build their influence on NATO's southern flank, and the United States has been slow to react. Public health initiatives, major development projects, democracy promotion, and more recently, counterterrorism efforts have largely comprised U.S. engagements in Africa.⁶ The plurality of African states maintained their neutrality during the Cold War—seeking to play the powers off each other without choosing sides—and have adopted similar approaches today as the United States frames its engagements in terms of great-power competition.⁷ U.S. engagements have not sufficiently kept pace with the changing landscape in Africa. Meanwhile, China, Russia, and Salafi-jihadi groups are seizing opportunities.

The world's fastest growing population and economies—before the coronavirus pandemic—are in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa's population growth rate is more than twice that of South Asia.⁸ Current projections have Africa's population doubling to 2.5 billion people by 2050, when Africa will be home to about a quarter of the world's population.⁹ Such projections undoubtedly mask internal variations across the continent, where fertility rates vary as do levels of urbanization and ethnic diversity. Yet the expectation is that growth will occur in the urban space and the labor force will be younger.¹⁰ Today, Africa's economic power remains untapped, only accounting for about 3 percent of global GDP.¹¹ If managed properly, a growing population, however, and better integration into the global economy could expand Africa's middle class, increasing the continent's total spending power.¹² African economies could also be primed for companies looking to diversify supply chains from China in a post-coronavirus world.¹³

Africa's potential economic growth and its natural resources still present ripe opportunities for trade and investment. If GDP growth had continued apace, however unlikely in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, Africa would have outperformed other emerging and developing countries

(excluding China and India) and the world economy over the next few years.¹⁴ American foreign direct investment in Africa—the largest single source to the continent—peaked in 2014 and flattened since, whereas Chinese investment has risen steadily.¹⁵ China recognized Africa’s potential and has become its largest trading partner over the past decade. Sino-African trade fell by 14 percent in the first quarter of 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic hit, however, and may continue to shrink.¹⁶ Yet China’s Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2014, has facilitated the strengthening of Sino-African relations through infrastructure development and trade initiatives.¹⁷ China is the biggest bilateral creditor to several African countries and now holds a source of leverage over those nations desperate for debt relief.¹⁸

Economics are not the only factor. Beijing has begun improving African governments’ capacity for intelligence and surveillance using emergent technologies, like facial-recognition software, that will enable those governments to protect Chinese investments and better control their own people.¹⁹ The coronavirus pandemic will increase demand for this technology.²⁰ Russia, too, has sought to mitigate the impact of economic sanctions through investments in Africa—investing in mining operations and developing new export markets, particularly for Russian arms.²¹ From a national security perspective, China or Russia successfully cornering the market on some critical reserves of minerals of which the United States is a net importer from African countries could disrupt supplies.²²

Rising insecurity could undercut Africa’s economic growth, however, and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic will reverberate through African economies. The world’s most fragile states—marked by weak state legitimacy and/or capacity—are concentrated in Africa, including seven of the top ten.²³ They face significant challenges. The coming youth bulge will boost economic growth only if African states are able to capitalize on

it. Africa’s growing youth population will unquestionably strain demands on public goods and services; healthcare, education, and basic infrastructure.²⁴ Desertification driven by climate change will further reduce arable land, stoking local conflict between pastoral and agrarian communities.²⁵ Both the youth bulge and climate trends will contribute to internal migration patterns and drive urbanization, further taxing state infrastructure. The pull of economic opportunity drives much of Africa’s internal migration as well as migration to Europe.²⁶ Armed conflicts persist in places like the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan. Active Salafi-jihadi groups, including ones now affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, further exacerbate the destabilizing effect of the conflicts.²⁷

The Salafi-jihadi threat inside Africa is expanding. The ties between local Salafi-jihadi groups and transnational networks are strengthening as those groups embed further in complex conflicts. In East Africa, al-Qaeda’s largest and most active affiliate al-Shabaab leads an insurgency against the Somali government and poses a regional terror threat.²⁸ It has targeted and killed U.S. military personnel in Somalia and Kenya.²⁹ Alarming, al-Shabaab seeks more advanced attack capabilities that signal ambitions to conduct mass-casualty attacks on civilian aircraft, including trying to acquire Chinese-made, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, and possibly train pilot-terrorists emulating the 9/11 attack.³⁰ A Salafi-jihadi group newly affiliated with the Islamic State in Mozambique poses a growing insurgent threat in the country’s northeastern most province.³¹ Using the same group name, the Islamic State has claimed attacks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.³² In North Africa, both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State retain sanctuaries. Al-Qaeda has prioritized control of trafficking routes over terror attacks whereas the Islamic State has conducted attacks in Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia.³³ In West Africa,

al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are pushing into neighboring states from the Sahel as they strengthen and improve their own attack capabilities.³⁴ The Islamic State is also seeking to connect its Sahel- and Nigeria-based branches.³⁵

China and Russia each see opportunities to expand their influence in Africa through security assistance and weapons sales. The Kremlin has signed new agreements with African countries in recent years, including over 19 agreements on military-technical cooperation.³⁶ Russian private military companies (PMCs) extend the Kremlin's reach, entering countries to protect Russian investments and prop up regimes.³⁷ Russian PMCs train Central African Republic army recruits and are almost certainly behind the downing of a U.S. drone in Libya.³⁸ Chinese security assistance and arms sales are integrated into the Belt and Road Initiative. China has also bought influence through financial and military assistance to African Union peace and security initiatives, along with increasing

its contributions to UN peacekeeping missions—sprinkling members of the Chinese security forces across Africa.³⁹ China's most concerning investment has been its new military base in Djibouti, which provides the Chinese military with the ability to monitor and even interfere with U.S. military activities out of Camp Lemonnier.⁴⁰

A negative feedback loop is occurring where some African states are becoming increasingly authoritarian as aggrieved populations mobilize against the state. Salafi-jihadi groups, especially in West Africa, have intentionally stoked intercommunal tensions and antigovernment sentiments to mobilize insurgencies to create opportunities to expand their influence into vulnerable communities. The heavy-handed state response, labeled as counterterrorism, punishes communities exploited by these groups and only further inflames the insurgency. The more transactional nature of Chinese and Russian engagements does little to foster good governance. Their weapons sales do not come with the same



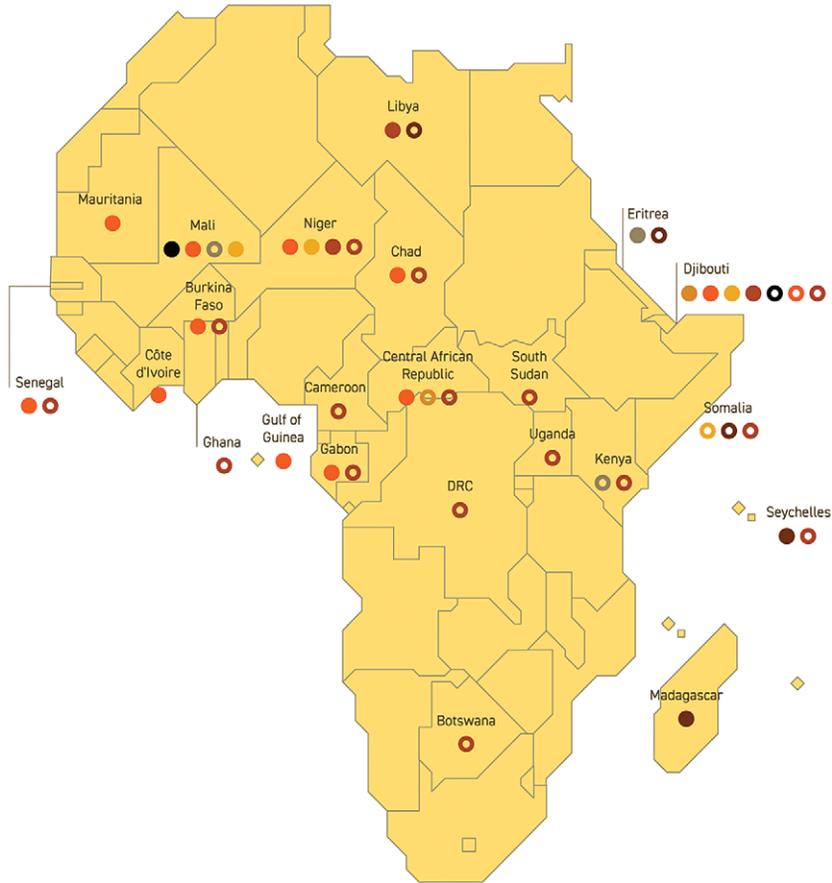
These Russian aircraft are being used to support private military companies (PMCs) sponsored by the Russian government. (Credit: U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs)

Figure 6.7

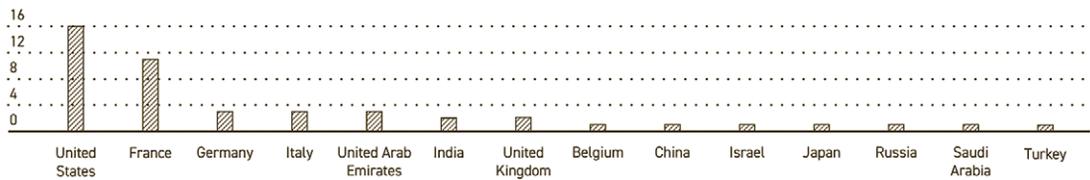
Defense partnerships: Military outposts in Africa

As commercial engagement has increased so has security collaboration, with many African countries hosting a number of European and Asian military outposts. Djibouti's location on the Red Sea makes it a particularly strategic security partner. Even so, the United States remains the partner with the most military outposts in the region, followed by France.

- Belgium
- China
- France
- Germany
- India
- Israel
- Italy
- Japan
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- Turkey
- United Arab Emirates
- United Kingdom
- United States



Military outposts by foreign country



Source: Andrews Atta-Asamoah, "Proceed with caution: Africa's growing foreign military presence," Institute for Security Studies, August 27, 2019.

Defense outposts, military outposts in Africa (Andrew Atta-Asamoah, Brookings Institution)

restrictions as with U.S. sales and end-use monitoring is not strictly enforced. Russian PMCs operate with shadier parts of regimes, using the relationship to advance other Russian interests, and Chinese improvements to intelligence capabilities improve the state's ability to target dissenters. Both China and Russia are strengthening dictatorships at the cost of democracy and liberal principles in Africa.⁴¹

Africa is a key theater to protecting U.S. national security interests worldwide. The United States will not win the global competition for influence with China or Russia in Africa outright, but it could face serious setbacks there. The United States must retain its influence in terrain far more critical to both of these competitors in Europe and Asia to keep its edge against them. Chinese or Russian gains in Africa, however, could start to tip the scales. The same is true for al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—neither will be defeated globally if eradicated from Africa, but their African safe havens strengthen their global networks.⁴² Combined, these state and nonstate competitors increase volatility and enable authoritarian trends.⁴³ The United States must ensure that even as it rebalances its security resources and encourages burden-sharing with allies and partners, it invests enough to protect its interests in Africa.

AFRICOM's Ways and Means

The Trump administration laid out its strategy to secure American interests in Africa in late 2018.⁴⁴ The idea of competing with China and Russia runs through the strategy, similar to the National Defense Strategy. AFRICOM updated its mission statement to reflect U.S. strategic priorities in early fall 2019, shifting its priorities toward countering malign actors.⁴⁵ Whereas previously strengthening partners and their capabilities came first, now countering transnational threats and malign state actors (read: China and Russia) takes precedence.

AFRICOM's current activities fall under three general categories. The first is the traditional role

that AFRICOM has played; building partnership capacity. Since its inception, AFRICOM has invested in improving African partners' security forces and defense institutions. The second category is counterterrorism operations and support activities. These include direct-action operations and support—training, advising, and assisting—to counterterrorism partners. The third category is infrastructure and logistics. AFRICOM's posture on the continent not only provides it a platform from which to conduct operations but also supports other U.S. government departments and agencies. Beyond these regular activities, AFRICOM also sustains crisis response forces in Germany, Spain, Italy, and Djibouti to react to developing crisis situations.⁴⁶

Building Partnership Capacity

AFRICOM works to strengthen and increase the capacity of African security forces to improve the overall security environment on the continent. Its Theater Security Cooperation Programs (TSCP) reinforce partnerships with African nations, improve their ability to respond to threats, diminish threats to U.S. interests, and help establish better security conditions to foster economic development. TSCP range in nature and include military training, capacity building, leadership development, professionalization, and humanitarian programs.⁴⁷ The Command also sponsors regional military exercises such as *Operations African Lion* and *Flintlock* to improve the interoperability of African forces and reinforce professionalism across the ranks.⁴⁸ AFRICOM also works with partners on counter-narcotics and -trafficking activities, in addition to counterterrorism.⁴⁹

Counterterrorism Operations

AFRICOM conducts direct-action operations and supports counterterrorism partners to degrade Salafi-jihadi groups on the continent. Nearly all of the direct-action operations are drone strikes targeting senior leaders and operatives, training

camps, or massed forces in Somalia and Libya.⁵⁰ U.S. counterterrorism support to African partners runs the gamut from security force assistance in the form of equipment or training to improve the capabilities of partnered forces, to conducting advise, assist, and accompany missions, to intelligence and logistics support. Embedded advisers make partners more effective and very likely improve respect for human rights norms.⁵¹ AFRICOM has prioritized the East Africa theater, which hosts the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) at Camp Lemonnier, an operational headquarters stood up in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. From there, U.S. forces are countering al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's largest and most active affiliate, and the Islamic State in Somalia.⁵²

In East Africa, U.S. forces partner with Somali security forces and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and are deployed to Kenya and Djibouti to conduct and support counterterrorism as well as counterpiracy operations. The majority of U.S. forces in Africa—about 3,000 troops—are posted at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti with CJTF-HOA, where they support counterterrorism operations in the region as well as training for partners. AFRICOM has built a specialized Somali force—the Danab Advanced Infantry Brigade—to serve as an elite counterterrorism unit within the Somali National Army (SNA).⁵³ About 500 U.S. Special Operations troops are deployed along with Danab units to advise, assist, and accompany them in operations against al-Shabaab.⁵⁴ AFRICOM has also provided training for AMISOM troop-contributing countries such as Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda to improve their operational capabilities against al-Shabaab, and has the authority to assist AMISOM forces on the ground.⁵⁵ About 300 troops and contractors are in Kenya, where they train, advise, and share intelligence with Kenyan forces.⁵⁶

In West Africa, the United States supports the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Multinational Joint Task

Force (MNJTF), regional partners, and NATO ally France, which leads counterterrorism operations in the Sahel. About 800 to 1,400 troops are deployed in the region, most based in Niger.⁵⁷ AFRICOM supports the French military with strategic airlift, aerial refueling, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). It provides bilateral support, varied in scope, to the G5 Sahel Joint Force troop-contributing countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) in the form of training and equipping units.⁵⁸ Additionally, a small U.S. contingent works with Nigerians in the Intelligence Fusion Center to combat Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West African branch.

The current counterterrorism framing and approach will not ultimately defeat the Salafi-jihadi groups.⁵⁹ The strategy focuses on defeating the terror and security threats groups and individuals pose by degrading leadership, disrupting operations, and eliminating sanctuaries. The result is a securitized response that has yielded limited results, driving an argument to reduce resources further and target only those elements that pose direct threats. Overlooked are how the groups gain influence initially and expand, and the role of local conditions in creating the opportunities for Salafi-jihadi groups to strengthen.

Infrastructure and Logistics

AFRICOM's posture on the continent supports a theater-wide logistics network as well as complements the posture of United States European and Central Commands. Two forward operating sites frame the continent; one in the Gulf of Guinea at St. Helena on Ascension Island, and the other off the Bab al Mandab Strait at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, which supports multiple combatant commands. Counterterrorism requirements largely inform the rest of AFRICOM's enduring footprint on the continent, which includes cooperative security locations in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; N'Djamena, Chad;

Chebelley, Djibouti; Manda Bay and Mombasa, Kenya; and Agadez and Niamey, Niger. AFRICOM added four additional locations in 2019 based on assessed threats to U.S. embassies, including Libreville, Gabon; Accra, Ghana; Dakar, Senegal; and Entebbe, Uganda. These positions, plus non-enduring contingency locations, constitute a lily pad of basing that stretches across the continent. Other U.S. agencies and departments use AFRICOM's logistics capabilities to support their programs in Africa.

AFRICOM's Crucial Role

AFRICOM's resources may decrease as the Pentagon seeks to prioritize the competition with China and Russia. Yet AFRICOM already operates in a resource-constrained environment and has to make tradeoffs in terms of its posture and operations.⁶⁰ Resource prioritization across the geographic commands has meant AFRICOM has always operated at economy-of-force levels to some degree. Africa's geographic expanse and extreme environment along with weak infrastructure add operational difficulties, and its vastness dilutes the direct impact of U.S. military resources. The Pentagon reduced the number of personnel assigned to AFRICOM by 10 percent from about 7200 to 6500 troops as part of the 2018 Force Optimization plan.⁶¹ Currently, the Pentagon is undertaking a "Blank Slate Review" of AFRICOM to inform decisions about future resourcing and align expenditures with the 2018 National Defense Strategy.⁶² The Pentagon must weigh not only the impact on current operations and AFRICOM's own objectives but also the strategic impact on U.S. objectives outside the military's domain in Africa, which is where the true cost to the United States lies.

Need to be on the Field to Compete

A steady stream of reports indicate that Secretary of Defense Mark Esper will further reduce AFRICOM's personnel, which will likely accompany additional cuts to security cooperation programming. Such

cuts will reduce the U.S. presence on the continent and create opportunities for Beijing or Moscow. Whether shifting the small amount of resources saved from Africa to another theater—Asia or Europe—will result in more than marginal gains is unclear. But the United States cannot compete in Africa if it does not have a presence.

Certainly, AFRICOM could scale back some of its security sector assistance without significantly risking American interests. AFRICOM conducts its partnership programs under a patchwork of authorities and funding streams. The operational or even strategic effect of these programs is not always clear nor is the lasting impact known. The tactical nature of some of the U.S. programs to build partnership capacity means their elimination will not be felt beyond the specific partner. The value-add of security sector assistance to reduce political violence and improve local stability remains an open question. A 2018 RAND study found that many of the U.S. training activities are one-off events rather than AFRICOM's envisioned "train-the-trainer" approach, diminishing the overall impact of the training and resulting in only temporary gains.⁶³ NATO allies with vested regional interests in Africa also conduct training and exercises with partners. Better coordination with these allies might minimize the effect of reduced U.S. programming.

Beijing's and Moscow's influence in Africa is growing, due in no small part to an effort on their end to invest time and resources in renting influence in African governments. Their efforts include military sales and security sector assistance in tandem with soft power engagements.⁶⁴ Both have eyed expanding their naval presence at African ports, which would support their commercial investments. AFRICOM (and the U.S. government writ large) should not try to match this move-for-move, especially since what the United States offers and what China or Russia offers are fundamentally different. Moreover, neither China nor Russia burden

themselves with ensuring that their partners follow international norms and respect human rights. The United States must never abandon its own values in an effort to squeeze out competition. But even without hope of winning the match for arms sales and security assistance against China and Russia directly, the United States must remain in the game by pursuing its own interests with African partners.

Cutting U.S. security assistance programming to the bare minimum carries costs beyond the dollars saved and absence or degradation of specific military capabilities. Some programs that might have little-to-no value in furthering security objectives may preserve U.S. influence within a country, supporting the overarching objective of advancing broader U.S. strategic aims. The programs provide a source of leverage to encourage or cajole governments that need security assistance to adopt other political or economic reforms or to support U.S. initiatives in international organizations.⁶⁵ U.S. security assistance programming can help pave the way for security through civilian-led initiatives. It also limits the overall influence of China or Russia by protecting against African dependence on either and keeping the option open for countries to choose aligning with the United States. China and Russia may offer faster, short-term fixes on a more transactional basis, but China's debt diplomacy and Russia's profiteering are not in countries' long-term interests. The United States must recognize that African countries will often accept whatever assistance might come their way—for many, a bad deal is better than no deal.

Counterterrorism Partnerships Support Multiple Priorities

Current U.S. counterterrorism operations in Africa would be almost impossible without America's partners. They, rather than U.S. forces, have taken the lead. African Salafi-jihadi groups—al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen, and the Islamic

State branches—do not yet pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. The groups' more localized threat and less-developed capabilities resulted in far fewer U.S. resources going toward the fight against them, which in turn generated AFRICOM's light-footprint approach to the problem. Many U.S. partners would not be able to achieve what they have against local Salafi-jihadi groups without U.S. inputs. Moreover, these counterterrorism partnerships support priorities beyond just neutralizing this threat.

The effectiveness of AFRICOM's counterterrorism operations is mixed. U.S. operations have targeted the global elements of Salafi-jihadi groups to diminish the transnational threat. None of the current counterterrorism efforts is on course to defeat the local groups, however. The United States has supported partners in the fight against al-Shabaab in Somalia for over a decade. Al-Shabaab no longer controls the majority of the country or the major populated areas, but its external attack capability remains worrisome. The security forces of America's partners—Kenyan, Ugandan, Burundian, and Somali troops among others—are more capable and conduct successful ground campaigns against al-Shabaab. However, insufficient ground forces preclude further progress. U.S. counterterrorism operations in Libya have degraded the Islamic State branch to a shadow of its former self since 2016, though the group is actively seeking to reconstitute.⁶⁶ Finally, the U.S.-backed French-led operations in the Sahel may have slowed the expansion of and degraded the leadership network of Salafi-jihadi groups but the trajectory of violence remains discouraging. Notwithstanding their operational effectiveness, U.S. counterterrorism operations have built and strengthened intra-African relationships when the U.S. and its allies have facilitated multinational task forces and cross-border coordination that might not have been readily achieved without an external push.

Counterterrorism partnerships bolster American influence with partnered countries. They

facilitate the establishment of and reinforce relationships with African partners, serving to address immediate local security needs, while also establishing an American role and presence that competes with global actors like Russia. Scoping American counterterrorism support only to areas where Salafi-jihadi groups directly threaten the U.S. homeland alienates partners on whom America relies to pressure terrorist groups—partners who have to deal with the security challenges regardless of whether the Americans are present or not. The United States should recognize that partners’ interests include eliminating the Salafi-jihadi-generated violence and insecurity in their own territory, not just the cells threatening America, and that the local Salafi-jihadi base bolsters the broader threat network.⁶⁷ If partners are incapable of defeating the groups, they might lift pressure and incentivize the groups to focus efforts on Americans as the “far” enemy.⁶⁸ Moreover, African partners might misread the withdrawal and perceive it as the United States pulling away from them.

In Libya, the withdrawal of U.S. troops after they achieved counterterrorism objectives against the local Islamic State branch eliminated any platform for future U.S. military or even diplomatic efforts. Moscow moved to fill some spaces the United States abandoned by meddling more directly in the civil war after flirting with various factions over the years. Russia has now gained a toehold on the southern Mediterranean Sea and its presence could constrain U.S. operations in Libya and threaten regional maritime interests. The U.S. diplomatic mission to Libya has been in Tunis, Tunisia, since its temporary relocation there in July 2014.⁶⁹ Security conditions severely constrain the movements of the U.S. ambassador to Libya and other diplomats and aid workers. AFRICOM sustained a small counterterrorism presence to combat the Islamic State until April 2019, when the troops withdrew due to the volatile environment.

By September 2019, up to about 200 Russian mercenaries linked to the Wagner Group and other PMCs deployed to bolster one faction in the Libyan Civil War.⁷⁰ By the end of 2019, about 800 to 1,400 Russian mercenaries were in Libya, and in May 2020, Russian military fighter aircrafts deployed to Libya—a move indicative of Moscow’s backing of the PMCs and reminiscent of Russian maneuvers in Syria.⁷¹ The United States reacted by considering the possible future deployment of a contingent from AFRICOM’s new Security Force Assistant Brigade (SFAB) to Tunisia, though this does not directly contest the Russian position in Libya.⁷²

Cuts to AFRICOM would likely reduce U.S. support to French operations in West Africa while leaving counterterrorism operations in East Africa relatively unaffected.⁷³ Already, resource constraints have caused AFRICOM to downgrade its counterterrorism objectives in West Africa from “degrading” to “containment.”⁷⁴ The French have led operations in the Sahel since 2013 and began a procurement process to regain operational independence as they boost defense spending to meet NATO treaty requirements. They are unable to sustain their current level of counterterrorism operations without U.S. intelligence and strategic airlift.⁷⁵ AFRICOM brings additional capabilities with its support that the French will lose; leadership, trust capital with partners, and the ability to pull together broader coalitions. The United States will in turn incur the risk that the already escalating Salafi-jihadi threat in the Sahel destabilizes the region and more dangerously, expands to transnational terror attacks. The move also undercuts America’s entire counterterrorism partnership model that successive administrations have sought to generate as a replicable and sustainable effort with America’s allies and partners. The French require a small investment from the United States—\$40 million annually in direct support—to operate, and in return, spend about \$700 million on their

military operations in the Sahel. Allies like France might be less willing to commit to a fight militarily if they cannot rely on critical U.S. enablers to give them a better edge on the battlefield. Moreover, the Defense Department's de-prioritization of the Sahel is at odds with the State Department's re-direction of the global coalition against the Islamic State to the Sahel as a primary theater.⁷⁶

A Hard-Power Platform for American Soft Power

The U.S. military is a critical enabling factor in Africa for American diplomatic, political, economic, and development initiatives. Both the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have said that they would be able to do more in Africa with a larger military platform—and the security that comes with it.⁷⁷ U.S. foreign assistance programs aimed at relatively rapid stabilization and strengthening of governance capacity, along with the U.S. military's contributions, is one of America's

comparative advantages over China and Russia. Shrinking the U.S. military presence will reverberate through U.S. programs, diminishing America's soft power efforts—already strapped by funding cuts and top-level vacancies in the State Department and elsewhere. It will collapse foreign assistance programming and limit face-to-face engagements, especially given the extreme aversion to risking the lives of U.S. personnel. Many U.S. diplomats and aid workers face restraints on their movement and are limited to secure zones around such places as the U.S. embassy, a legacy of the 2012 Benghazi attack that killed U.S. Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. U.S. military personnel thus have become the American face outside official embassy events and African capitals as security in areas of Africa has deteriorated, though increasingly, military personnel face restrictions in their own movements, part of the legacy of the 2017 Tongo Tongo attack that killed four U.S. soldiers in Niger.



1250 people displaced by Boko Haram violence wait for medical screenings and education during a humanitarian assistance mission led by Cameroonian soldiers and funded through the USAFRICOM Humanitarian and Civic Assistance Program. (U.S. Africa Command)

The now-tired adage that there is no development without security and no security without development rings true in Africa, and is at the heart of the necessity of a civilian-military relationship to secure U.S. interests in key theaters. In Somalia, for example, frictions between the shorter military timeline and longer political timelines has prevented the consolidation of the battlefield successes against al-Shabaab. A lack of political consensus over the local administration of territory persists, sparking conflict at times, and local security forces alone are incapable of “holding” the recaptured terrain. USAID, which has personnel embedded at AFRICOM, has been unable to expand its programming into new areas without such a hold force.⁷⁸ Moreover, USAID personnel are generally restricted to the embassy compound, and by the end of May 2020, USAID will only have one consultant able to leave the compound to monitor programs—a severe handicap for implementation.⁷⁹ The U.S. military, which trains Somali forces in southern and central Somalia, provides a secure footprint beyond the capital, Mogadishu, to extend USAID’s reach and visibility in the country, enabling the soft side of U.S. foreign policy.

Shrinking the hard-power platform for U.S. foreign policy in Africa through the reduction of the military footprint could create dangerous conditions that drive diplomats from critical areas. Libya, as noted, is increasingly harder for U.S. civilian and military personnel to visit after the military withdrew and Russian PMCs moved in, along with escalations in the Libyan Civil War. A similar draw-down in West Africa may add further constraints to the U.S. civilian presence in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which is already effectively restricted to the capitals due to insecurity and terror attacks. Rather than a sphere of U.S. influence, the United States might instead see small pockets of influence, leaving opportunities for China, Russia, or a Salafi-jihadi group to fill the gaps.

What Should the U.S. Military Do?

The U.S. military must sustain its resources in Africa but fundamentally change its approach to do more with what it has or risk losing to its competitors. China, Russia, and the Salafi-jihadi movement are all poised to seize opportunities as they present themselves—and America’s absence will only make those occurrences more frequent. AFRICOM’s posture is not the sum of the United States in Africa but AFRICOM broadens and deepens the U.S. presence especially in critical terrain such as East Africa, the Sahel, the littoral states around the Gulf of Guinea, and elsewhere. Certainly, the Trump administration’s push to cut foreign assistance and vacancies that riddle the State Department negatively affect America’s ability to secure its interests in Africa. Global demands on limited Defense Department resources must be acknowledged, as must Secretary Esper’s effort to ensure that U.S. defense resources are correctly aligned with the foreign policy priorities of today and the future.⁸⁰ Yet without the platform of American hard power in Africa, American soft power will be greatly diminished. Sustaining that hard-power platform, however, cannot mean continuing with the status quo.

Counterterrorism operations in Africa do not compete directly with Chinese or Russian interests. Neither power is in Africa to counter Salafi-jihadi groups. But defeating Salafi-jihadi groups is in America’s interests and the relationships with counterterrorism partners are valuable.⁸¹ The United States should not compete with China or Russia on their terms, and should therefore not cede influence unnecessarily by withdrawing from large regions of the continent. The inclination to rebalance the U.S. military posture and array forces directly against China and Russia misses the comparative value that a few thousand troops on the African continent has in furthering U.S. interests versus their value deployed into theaters where the engagement with China or Russia is more direct. Those troops

dispersed across a continent provide the platform needed to extend U.S. influence through both hard and soft power into Africa.

Inevitably, the United States will need to accept greater risk in Africa given fixed resources and developments in other theaters. Some have presented the options as binary; the United States must accept more risk on the counterterrorism front, especially in Africa, after two decades of accepting too little risk against these nonstate actors at the expense of contesting state actors. In Africa especially, U.S. military operations and programs advance multiple interests, however, including both weakening Salafi-jihadi groups and building U.S. influence. Shifting resources from counterterrorism is not as low-risk as some who cite the lack of terror attacks this past decade assume. The United States will end up tapping the very same intelligence assets that kept the terror threat low to counter Chinese and Russian ambitions. Relying, therefore, on intelligence to assess the risk of an imminent terror attack against the homeland—a key metric in resource-prioritization—assumes quality intelligence where major collection gaps are more likely. Thus, how the United States frames its approach in Africa will be important in determining what types of and how much risk it incurs.

Today, counterterrorism operations across Africa are a crucial means by which the United States competes with China and Russia. They build security partnerships that extend American influence. But they also reinforce a securitized response that has not been effective overall because the underlying conditions remain unaddressed. In West Africa, the Salafi-jihadi network is expanding and strengthening. Al-Qaeda- and Islamic State-linked groups have relative freedom of movement in the border areas, where the reach of the state is weakest, and their influence is growing within their targeted communities. In East Africa, al-Shabaab controls less terrain but still poses a terror threat within the region and seeks to extend its reach farther afield.

Only in Libya have the United States and its partners successfully degraded a group. But also, only in Libya did the United States then withdraw just to watch Russian PMCs maneuver into the space.

Secretary Esper would be better advised to drive reforms that advance multiple U.S. interests, especially diplomatic, political, and economic aims, rather than pulling resources from AFRICOM. AFRICOM should improve security assistance coordination with America's allies to optimize the distribution of this critical resource among African partners. Those partners might otherwise perceive receiving training from multiple western militaries as a sign of prestige. The United States should invest what other partners cannot or will not replicate. The Secretary must also encourage a transformation in how the U.S. military combats Salafi-jihadi groups.⁸² Salafi-jihadi groups operate across domains. They gain influence by offering pragmatic goods or services—defense and dispute resolution, for example—in communities made vulnerable by conflict and insecurity.⁸³ The Defense Department, which has borne the cost of counterterrorism, should push the State Department to lead a coordinated soft power offensive to improve local governance and provide redress for key grievances that make Salafi-jihadi incursions welcome in many communities. Foreign assistance programs should also contest the growing authoritarian tendencies reinforced by Chinese and Russian intervention. Such an approach will require change in how the interagency develops strategy and operationalizes programming. The United States must cultivate a new landscape instead of repeatedly mowing the same grass.

The knowledge and tools needed to transform the interagency approach to counterterrorism exist. Eliminating Salafi-jihadi groups' ability to exploit local conditions by improving local communities' resiliency begins to address the underlying issues that have empowered these groups. Effective local partnerships will also be necessary. Initiatives like

the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review and the congressionally mandated Task Force for Extremism in Fragile States, among others, developed recommendations for a strategic way forward in fragile and complex environments. The 2019 Global Fragility Act provides a framework and coordinating authorities to develop and integrate a State Department-led interagency approach.⁸⁴ Some military requirements to combat the groups remain, and U.S. special operations forces in Africa should continue to advise, assist, and accompany partner forces on counterterrorism missions. Yet they should also use their unique vantage point to push up intelligence to the civilian side about how Salafi-jihadi groups have gained influence on the ground (rather than simply collect on the threat network), feeding into the design of U.S. foreign assistance programming and other public diplomacy efforts.

American hard power is a crucial element of U.S. foreign policy. Without the relatively light U.S. military footprint in Africa, American soft power efforts would be stymied. Reallocating defense resources from AFRICOM to compete with Chinese and Russian influence elsewhere misses the greater marginal value of a few thousand U.S. troops in Africa compared to other theaters. To sum up the argument of this article, the minuscule dollars and troops supporting U.S. efforts in Africa accomplish much more in terms of influence and effects than their redeployment to other theaters will in the competitive global field. Reducing those assets too much will strain AFRICOM's ability to operate effectively. To increase America's bang for the buck AFRICOM must innovate and transform its counterterrorism approach in partnership with the State Department and USAID in order to achieve enduring gains against the Salafi-jihadi movement, and cultivate strong African partnerships to counter Chinese and Russian influence on the continent. **PRISM**

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⁶²A steady stream of reporting indicates that the Blank Slate Review of AFRICOM will result in a further reduction in resources, though the review is incomplete and Secretary Esper has not yet made final decisions surrounding resources. Drawing down in Africa would follow a pattern of decisions on the force posture, including the withdrawal from Afghanistan, status of forces in Iraq (expected to be a draw down), and reduction in forces posted in Germany.

⁶³Notably, security-sector assistance has had a positive impact when peacekeeping missions are present, which should play into calculations over which programs to sustain. Stephen Watts, “Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Sean Mann, Michael J. McNerney, and Andrew Brooks, *Building Security in Africa: an Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance to Africa from the Cold War to the Present*, RAND, 2018, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2400/RR2447/RAND_RR2447.pdf.

⁶⁴European Parliamentary Research Service, “China’s Growing Role as a Security Actor in Africa,” August 10, 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642232/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)642232_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642232/EPRS_BRI(2019)642232_EN.pdf); and European Parliamentary Research Service, “Russia in Africa: A New Arena for Geopolitical Competition,” November 8, 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642283/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)642283_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642283/EPRS_BRI(2019)642283_EN.pdf).

⁶⁵China has used its economic influence in Africa to leverage votes at the UN other international organizations. See David H. Shinn, “China in Africa,” statement before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, May 8, 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Shinn_Testimony.pdf.

⁶⁶Sudarsan Raghavan, “Libya’s Civil War Creates Opening for ISIS Return as Counterterrorism Effort Falters,” November 24, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/libyas-civil-war-creates-opening-for-isis-return-as-counterterrorism-effort-falters/2019/11/21/e78745c0-056c-11ea-9118-25d6bd37dfb1_story.html.

⁶⁷Katherine Zimmerman, *America’s Real Enemy: The Salafi-jihadi Movement*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, July 18, 2017, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/americas-real-enemy-the-salafi-jihadi-movement>.

⁶⁸Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) observed that the Saleh regime was not actively prioritizing counterterrorism operations in the late 2000s and became al Qaeda’s most capable group in terms of external attacks. Al Qaeda leadership sought to prevent AQAP from pushing for Saleh’s overthrow in 2011 for fear (and rightly so) that the next regime might focus more on counterterrorism. Al Qaeda leadership has also discussed a similar relationship with the Mauritanian government, though the government contests this. (See the declassified documents from the May 2011 raid on the Osama bin Laden compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, for more.)

⁶⁹US Embassy in Libya, “U.S. Citizen Services,” <https://ly.usembassy.gov/u-s-citizen-services/>.

⁷⁰Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, *Lead Inspector General for East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations Quarterly Report to the United States Congress (October 1, 2019, through December 31, 2019)*.

⁷¹The Economist, “Foreign Powers are Piling into Libya,” December 12, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/12/12/foreign-powers-are-piling-into-libya>; US Africa Command, “New Evidence of Russian Aircraft Active in Libyan Airspace,” press release, June 18, 2020, <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32941/new-evidence-of-russian-aircraft-active-in-li>; and US Africa Command, “Russia Deploys Military Fighter Aircraft to Libya,” press release, May 29, 2020, <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32887/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-to-l>.

⁷²US Africa Command, “AFIRCOM Commander Reaffirms Bilateral Partnership with Tunisia,” press release, May 29, 2020, <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32888/africom-commander-reaffirms-bilateral-partner>.

⁷³Author’s conversations on trends within the command with AFRICOM personnel May 2019 in Stuttgart, Germany.

⁷⁴Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, *Lead Inspector General for East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations Quarterly Report to the United States Congress (October 1, 2019, through December 31, 2019)*.

⁷⁵Katherine Zimmerman, “Why the US should spend 0.3 percent of its defense budget to prevent an African debacle.”

⁷⁶Humeyra Pamuk, “U.S. Creates New Envoy Positions to Counter Rising Terrorism in the Sahel,” Reuters, March 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-sahel/u-s-creates-new-envoy-position-to-counter-rising-terrorism-in-sahel-idUSKBN20T2ZJ>.

⁷⁷House Armed Services Committee hearing, “National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and Africa,” March 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fw2baHfgyOU&feature=youtu.be&t=7057>.

⁷⁸Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, *Lead Inspector General for East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations Quarterly Report to the United States Congress (October 1, 2019, through December 31, 2019)*.

⁷⁹Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, *Lead Inspector General for East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations Quarterly Report to the United States Congress (October 1, 2019, through December 31, 2019)*.

⁸⁰Beyond the scope of this argument are questions of force modernization and acquisition, training and readiness, force size, demands on US special operations forces, and now the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, among many other considerations. Like all bureaucratic organizations, the Defense Department has legacy programs and inefficiencies and has been slow to reorient under new conditions.

⁸¹Sam Wilkins, “Does American Need an Africa Strategy?” War on the Rocks, April 2, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/does-america-need-an-africa-strategy/>.

⁸²For a more detailed exposition of how to transform the US approach to combating al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other Salafi-jihadi groups, see Katherine Zimmerman, *Beyond Counterterrorism: Defeating the Salafi-jihadi Movement*.

⁸³Katherine Zimmerman, *America’s Real Enemy: The Salafi-jihadi Movement*.

⁸⁴President Donald Trump signed the Global Fragility Act of 2019 into law as part of the 2020 Appropriations Act in December 2019. The text is available in H.R. 1865: <https://rules.house.gov/sites/democrats.rules.house.gov/files/BILLS-116HR1865SA-RCP116-44.PDF>.