

REFRAMING U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY TOWARD AFRICA

-By John Griswold

How can the U.S. military best support the achievement of national strategic objectives in Africa? While much of the foreign policy discourse since President Biden's inauguration has focused on China's growing military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific, curbing the effects of climate change, and the implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, scant attention has been paid to U.S. engagement in Africa.^[251] It is noteworthy that the Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG) mentions a continent of more than 1.3 billion people — whose population is expected to double by 2050 — in one paragraph out of 23 substantive pages.^[252]

America's apathy comes at a perilous point for many African states. Democratic backsliding continues in African countries once considered to hold promise, with recent coups in Guinea and Sudan, the latter only a recent graduate from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism.^[253] Economic powerhouse Ethiopia, home to headquarters of the African Union and the continent's flagship international airline, Ethiopian Airlines, teeters on the brink of civil war.^[254] The U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in early 2021 calls into question America's commitment to the multinational effort to combat al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, and to democratic governance in Somalia more broadly.^[255] ISIS and its affiliates continue to operate in sub-Saharan Africa, from the Sahel to Mozambique.^[256] All the while, China and Russia continue to exert economic and military influence throughout the continent.^[257]

Despite the myriad challenges and absence of high-level attention to the continent, the U.S. military can play a foundational role in enabling the U.S. government to achieve its interests in Africa. U.S. military engagement in Africa requires reframing — not a wholesale rethink — to place an unwavering focus on improving governance with concerted effort dedicated to strategic and operational thinking. In doing so, America's military presence can more effectively compete with Chinese and Russian military overtures while improving governance and tackling some of the root causes of violence and instability across the continent. Rebalancing effort from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency toward a governance-focused framework better aligns the U.S. military approach with the shared interests of the U.S. government and its African partners.

DEFINING U.S. INTERESTS IN AFRICA

The Biden administration's INSSG provides a useful thumbnail sketch of key U.S. interests on the





Refugees in the Ouallam refugee camp in northern Niger. May 30, 2022 // UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

continent. Four themes emerge: improving cultural connections with African civil society; improving economic partnerships while alleviating human suffering; conflict prevention and termination; and “combating the threats posed by climate change and violent extremism “in the face of undue foreign influence.”^[258] These four themes evoke central tenants of the Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy:

The United States seeks sovereign African states that are integrated into the world economy, able to provide for their citizens’ needs, and capable of managing threats to peace and security. Improved governance in these states supports economic development and opportunities, diminishes the attraction of illegal migration, and reduces vulnerability to extremists, thereby reducing instability.^[259]

Of the themes found in the Biden INSSG, the latter two stand out as opportune areas for the direct application of military capabilities. The military instrument can play a supporting role in the pursuit of mutual economic prosperity and the promotion of cross-cultural

engagement; however, these should be treated as ancillary goals better suited to the influence of American soft power.^[260] Both the Trump and Biden administrations identified U.S. security interests tied to countering violent extremism and improving the ability of African nations to provide security for their populations.

THE CURRENT APPROACH

In the spring of 2021, General Stephen Townsend, then-commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), outlined his approach to the continent in his annual posture testimony to Congress. The AFRICOM campaign plan has four interrelated campaign objectives: gain and maintain strategic access and influence; disrupt violent extremist organization (VEO) threats to U.S. interests; respond to crises to protect U.S. interests; and coordinate action with allies and partners to achieve shared security objectives.^[261] The overall approach nests well with both the Trump and Biden administrations’ national strategic objectives; the command’s partner-centric focus has been its trademark since AFRICOM was established in 2007.^[262]

While the AFRICOM campaign objectives demonstrate a focus on key U.S. interests, they devote less focus on the root causes of instability. Consider the role of U.S. forces in combating violent extremism: recent discussions of great power competition make U.S. counterterrorism capabilities the centerpiece of the U.S. approach to competition in Africa. In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, former Special





Operations Command Africa Commander Marcus Hicks, and Field Grade Officers Kyle Atwell and Dan Collini, argued that, “successful great-power competition in Africa hinges on the United States’ ability to win over African governments with a holistic counterinsurgency strategy, one that addresses the root causes of terrorism and lays the political, economic, and developmental groundwork for future stability and prosperity.”^[263] Researcher Katherine Zimmerman argued for an active U.S. presence on the continent, critical not only in global competition with China and Russia, but also in countering *Salafi-jihadi* movements in Africa.^[264] In his posture testimony, General Townsend stated that, “In Africa, counter VEO efforts are strategic competition.”^[265]

This argument confuses means with ends. U.S. military presence in Africa carries significant heft, but presence alone does not lead to attaining strategic objectives. The role of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Africa is illustrative. SOF provide unparalleled capability to target terrorist organizations, as evidenced by the rapid adaptation the SOF community demonstrated in Iraq from 2005–2009.^[266] There is an indisputable need to maintain and judiciously employ SOF capabilities to counter terrorist threats to U.S. interests. However, it is unclear that a counterterrorism or counterinsurgency approach can succeed in Africa, where violent extremism has deep roots in local grievances, issues surrounding access to natural resources such as water rights, Salafist religious extremism, or endemic corruption and governance issues.^[267] The recent failure of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine to produce a tangible victory in Afghanistan, let alone security for the Afghan population, provides a counterexample to arguments touting the efficacy of the U.S. approach to counterinsurgency.

Similarly, competition with China and Russia in Africa is not an end unto itself. U.S. military activities focused on a “competition objective” are unlikely to produce a tangible benefit for the African partner, nor are such efforts likely to deter China or Russia from pursuing military gains in support of their own national objectives. If U.S. interests in competition are meant to improve American access and influence for diplomatic and economic gain — as well

as for the military’s operational access — episodic or transactional approaches are unlikely to yield the same lasting results as efforts focused on institutional change.

REFRAMING THE U.S. MILITARY APPROACH: GOVERNANCE AS A CENTRAL MOTIVATING IDEA

The United States aims to solve the core problem of a failure of capable and accountable governance in Africa. By acknowledging this strategic challenge, contextualizing it by country and region, and applying the appropriate military capabilities to the problem, the United States is more likely to achieve its objectives of reducing violent extremism and conflict in Africa. Placing governance at the heart of a strategy — while retaining objectives to build access and influence, counter VEOs, etc. — can provide clarity for the effective alignment of ends, ways, and means in pursuit of U.S. national interests in Africa.

The civil war in Ethiopia illustrates the challenges associated with governance failures that undermine both domestic and regional peace and stability. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed leads the Ethiopian National Defense Force against the minority ethnic Tigray population. Abiy’s inability to effectively bargain with and integrate ethnic Tigrayans into the Ethiopian political structure caused increased regional instability in what was once considered to be a rock of stability in East Africa.^[268] As the host of the African Union and a hub of regional economic activity, Ethiopia exerts geopolitical influence well beyond its borders.

Ethiopia’s civil war also has far-reaching implications for countering the threat posed by al-Shabaab in neighboring Somalia. A key regional partner and contributor to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), U.S. military engagement and partnership with Ethiopia to counter violent extremism in the Horn

of Africa and beyond remains on hold in the wake of purported human rights violations by Ethiopia against Tigrayans.^[269] Additionally, significant cuts to U.S. economic assistance, trade, and other aspects of the U.S.-Ethiopian relationship due to the ongoing civil war may face further reductions.^[270] Taken together, Ethiopia's belligerence has destabilized the region, despite U.S. efforts to resolve the conflict.^[271] Ethiopia's actions have not only left the United States without a key counterterrorism partner, but have eroded American influence and opened the door for middle powers and even adversaries to gain influence, all the while undermining regional stability.^[272]

Neighboring Somalia also demonstrates the limits of a counterterrorism strategy. Prior to the late-2020 decision to remove U.S. forces from the country, the U.S. military waged a long-running campaign to disrupt al-Shabaab and give the Government of Somalia the time and space to establish effective governance. Despite progress in building partner military capacity, al-Shabaab has persisted for over two decades and remains capable of conducting cross-border attacks against U.S. interests and those of U.S. regional partners.^[273] The failure of the Somali government to effectively govern is a central cause of continued conflict. While the U.S. military continues to support Somali National Army forces, no amount of military force can compensate for the absence of credible local governance.

CONCLUSION

U.S. policy objectives — and the U.S. military's approach to their pursuit in Africa — do not require a wholesale rejection of current operations, activities, and investments. A more clearly articulated statement of the U.S. military's strategic mission will reveal some ways to better align ends, ways, and means to address the problem. Undeniably, there is a role for direct military action to counter imminent threats to U.S. interests. But rather than an approach centered primarily on U.S. or allied counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations, U.S. military strategy should even more tightly weave its efforts to improve governance with those of the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

This approach will involve the deployment of forces to help bring about security sector reform within African defense ministries and security services — a non-traditional role that will require adjustments to the value the armed services place on institutional development. It will involve greater assistance in the development of institutions that respect the rule of law, enhancing the prospects for healthier civil-military relations. It will also involve working with traditional U.S. allies to reshape their own practices to help improve the capacity of local forces, not only to fight ISIS-inspired or al-Qaeda-

affiliated terrorist groups, but also to build trust with their own populations — helping to inoculate them against virulent extremist ideology.

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