

**A TRANSFORMATIVE NEW APPROACH OR A REPEAT OF FAILURES PAST?
ASSESSING A DECADE OF U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY IN AFRICA**

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Abstract:

The past decade has witnessed a sea change in U.S. military engagement in Africa. With the establishment of a new permanent command, significant increases in security assistance, and the pioneering of new tactics driven by technical innovations in intelligence analysis and drone warfare, the U.S. military has become an integral player in the continent's security. Nevertheless, there exist few assessments of the extent to which increased U.S. military engagement is paying dividends. This article examines precisely how the current U.S. military strategy in Africa is different from those in the past and whether it is meeting the stated U.S. objectives of neutralizing transnational threats while contributing to the continent's political stability. It finds that U.S. performance is mixed, with recent successes at containing the spread of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliated groups coming at the potential detriment of longer term regional security. The article concludes with recommendations aimed at helping the armed forces of the U.S. and other regional actors better fight terrorism while managing political risks.

Introduction

On May 5, 2017, Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator Kyle Milliken was killed during a military operation targeting al-Shabaab militants in Bari, Somalia. Milliken and his fellow special operations troops were conducting a joint raid with Somali forces against a building housing al-Shabaab's al-Andalus radio station.¹ Milliken's death marked the first time in twenty-five years a U.S. service member had been killed in a combat mission on African soil. In 1993, some 19 U.S. servicemembers were killed and another 73 wounded 40 miles to the West of Bari, in the Somali capital of Mogadishu during the infamous "Black Hawk Down" incident.

Milliken's death, along with those of four additional U.S. soldiers who were recently ambushed and killed during a special forces raid in Niger, raises new questions about the U.S. military's role in Africa. The spread of transnational terrorism, growing regional economies, and increased engagement by America's geopolitical rivals such as China have led U.S. officials to re-assess Africa's strategic importance. In 2007, the United States founded U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), for the first time giving Africa its own area of command responsibility within the U.S. defense establishment. In addition, the U.S. military now operates out of an official base and dozens of other small facilities and staging areas that collectively host thousands of troops. The rising U.S. military presence has completely transformed the tenor of U.S. engagement in Africa, from a policy that was mostly driven by aid workers and diplomats to one where U.S. soldiers play an increasingly central role.

Nevertheless, the U.S. military's expanding operations in Africa remain controversial, beset by basic questions concerning their size, mission and effectiveness. According to a recent

¹ Helene Cooper, Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "Navy SEAL Killed in Somalia in First Combat Death There Since 1993," *New York Times*, May 5, 2017.

mission statement, AFRICOM's central objectives are to "with partners, disrupt and neutralize transnational threats, protect U.S. personnel and facilities, prevent and mitigate conflict, and build African partner defense capability and capacity in order to promote regional security, stability and prosperity."² Yet critics do not agree on whether the U.S. military's engagement with the continent prevents terrorism through operations against the continent's most menacing terrorist groups³ or fuels it by helping to radicalize a generation of young recruits.⁴ They do not agree whether the U.S. contributes to the continent's political stability by enhancing the capacity of partner states to manage to their own internal security⁵ or generates political instability by abetting corruption and enabling repressive allies.⁶ And they do not even agree on whether or not the U.S. military presence in Africa is large and unprecedented⁷ or merely a modest continuation of prior security commitments.⁸

This article offers a preliminary attempt to frame and to answer these questions. It finds that the U.S. military presence has neither contributed to African regional security as much as its

² U.S. Africa Command 2017 Mission Statement, December 8, 2017, <http://www.africom.mil/about-the-command>.

³ Andre Le Sage, "Africa's Irregular Security Threats: Challenges for U.S. Engagement", *Strategic Studies Forum* 255 (2010), pp. 1-12.

⁴ Abdoulaye Saine, "The U.S.'s Global War on Terror in Africa," in Kelechi Kalu and George Klay Kieh (eds), *United States - Africa Security Relations: Terrorism, Regional Security and National Interests* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), pp. 109-112.

⁵ Theresa Whelan, "Exploring the U.S. Africa Command and a New Strategic Relationship with Africa", Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on African Affairs, August 1, 2007.

⁶ Sean McFate, "Briefing: US Africa Command: Next Step or Next Stumble", *African Affairs* 107, no. 426 (2007), p. 120; Gilbert Taguem Fah and L. Gilbert, "Dealing with AFRICOM: The Political Economy of Anger and Protest," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no. 6 (2010), pp. 81-93; John Mukum Mbaku, "The Political Economy of U.S.-Africa Security Relations," in Kalu and Kieh (eds.), *United States - Africa Security Relations*, pp. 140-141.

⁷ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Obama's Africa Policy: The Limits of Symbolic Power", *African Studies Review* 56, 2 (2013), pp. 165-178; See also chapters 1-4 and 7-8 in Kalu and Kieh (eds.), *United States - Africa Security Relations*, pp. 1-108, 147-168.

⁸ J. Peter Pham, "The Development of the United States Africa Command and its Role in America's Africa Policy Under George W. Bush and Barack Obama.", *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 5, no. 3 (2014), pp. 245-275; Jessica Piombo, "Addressing Security Threats in Africa," in Jessica Piombo ed., *The US Military in Africa: Enhancing Security and Development?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2015), pp. 1-9; James Forest, and Rebecca Crispin, "AFRICOM: Troubled Infancy, Promising Future", *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 1 (2009), p. 7.

supporters hoped nor undermined it as much as critics feared. Rather, the legacy of the U.S. military engagement in Africa in the 21st century is complex, and depends on a recognition that in helping African partner states to cope with mutual threats, the U.S. has done little to influence the political conditions that created them. For the U.S. to achieve its longer-term security objectives on the continent, I argue that its defense policy will have to shift from a strategy that overemphasizes crisis response and enhancing partner military capacity to one that more actively provides incentives for countries to prevent human rights abuses, tamp down on corruption, and end discriminatory recruitment practices within their armies.

This article is divided into four additional sections. In the next section, I describe how the current U.S. military strategy in Africa is different from previous eras. I argue that, while the level of U.S. military engagement is unprecedented by historical standards, it is modest when compared to other regions of the world and novel in its emphasis on minimizing the presence of U.S. troops and maximizing support to partner countries. In the third section, I investigate the extent to which this strategy has neutralized terrorism, arguing that while U.S. military presence has been crucial in preventing insurgents as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State from gaining hold of significant territory, it has done little to prevent such groups from forming and becoming well-organized terrorist movements in the first place. In the fourth section, I examine the ways in which U.S. military assistance to repressive dictators and fragile states may be indirectly fueling terrorism and political violence on the continent. In the final section, I offer a series of recommendations aimed at reforming U.S.'s military engagement in Africa, including improving U.S. Africa Command's analytical capabilities and adopting policies that provide stronger incentives for African security forces to remain apolitical and respect human rights.

The Changing Face of U.S. Strategic Engagement in Africa

From its founding a decade ago, the size of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the scope of its mission has been controversial. For its defenders, AFRICOM represents the vanguard of a new form of U.S. strategic engagement that prioritizes a light footprint and the priorities of African partner nations. According to Jessica Piombo, AFRICOM was intended to be different than other commands because “working to protect US security interests within Africa meant attempting to reduce the sources of insecurity and helping to strengthen African security capabilities, as well as assisting vulnerable communities to protect themselves against threats.”⁹ For J. Peter Pham, AFRICOM’s approach has won acceptance in Africa because “African states and individuals discovered that it was not what they feared it to be, but rather a continuation of already-existing security engagements and an opportunity to enhance their interests even as America pursued her own.”¹⁰

For critics, the setting up of a new geographic command was seen as a blatant attempt to militarize U.S. policy towards Africa. Due a post-colonial history of selective engagement, support for dictatorships, and neglect, Africans “don’t trust the military as a partner in development, and fear mission creep for AFRICOM and militarization and securitization of economic relations with the U.S.,” affirms Paul Tiyambe Zeleza.¹¹ George Klay Kieh argues that “the increasing emphasis on militarization has transformed various African states into ‘battlefields’ for waging wars with various terrorist groups.”¹² For these scholars, a rise in the

⁹ Piombo, “Address Security Threats in Africa”, p. 7.

¹⁰ Pham, “The Development of the United States Africa Command,” p. 275.

¹¹ Zeleza, “Obama’s Africa Policy” p. 174.

¹² George Klay Kieh, “Rethinking U.S.-Africa Security Relations: The Lessons,” in Kalu and Kieh (eds), *United States - Africa Security Relations*, p. 202.

influence of the U.S. military in shaping policy towards Africa is having predictable and destructive consequences.

The reality is that the United States has significantly increased its military presence in Africa, but also that the approach is different from times past. As the rest of this section argues, the current U.S. security strategy towards Africa can best be described as a hybrid one that combines high levels of military assistance and operational support to African armies with a minimal presence of U.S. ground forces. The strategy serves a threefold purpose: to place African partners on the front lines in confronting shared threats, to minimize the risk to U.S. troops, and to maximize U.S. comparative advantages in intelligence gathering, air power, and special operations. This is a fundamental departure from the U.S. strategy during the Cold War, which relied primarily on military assistance, or the immediate post-Cold War era, which placed more of an onus on U.S. soldiers to fight on the front lines and lead stability operations.

From the late 1950s until the late 1980s, U.S. engagement with the region was “largely defined by Cold War logic” and “remained relatively limited.”¹³ For forty years prior to deployment of troops to Somalia, major U.S. military engagements of note were a series of brief skirmishes and air strikes against Libya in the 1980s and hundreds of millions of dollars of military aid deployed to support anti-communist allies as Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Sisoko and the Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi.¹⁴ After U.S. troops left Somalia in 1994, U.S. military presence dwindled to virtual non-existence: the U.S. had no permanent military presence, no bases, and no more than a few hundred troops stationed on the continent at any given time. At

¹³ Letitia Lawson, “U.S. Africa Policy Since the Cold War,” *Strategic Insights* 6, no. 1 (2007).

¹⁴ *Ibid*; see also Lauren Ploch, *Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the U.S. Military in Africa*. (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), p. 11.

the time, the Defense Department admitted that it saw “very little traditional strategic interest in Africa.”¹⁵

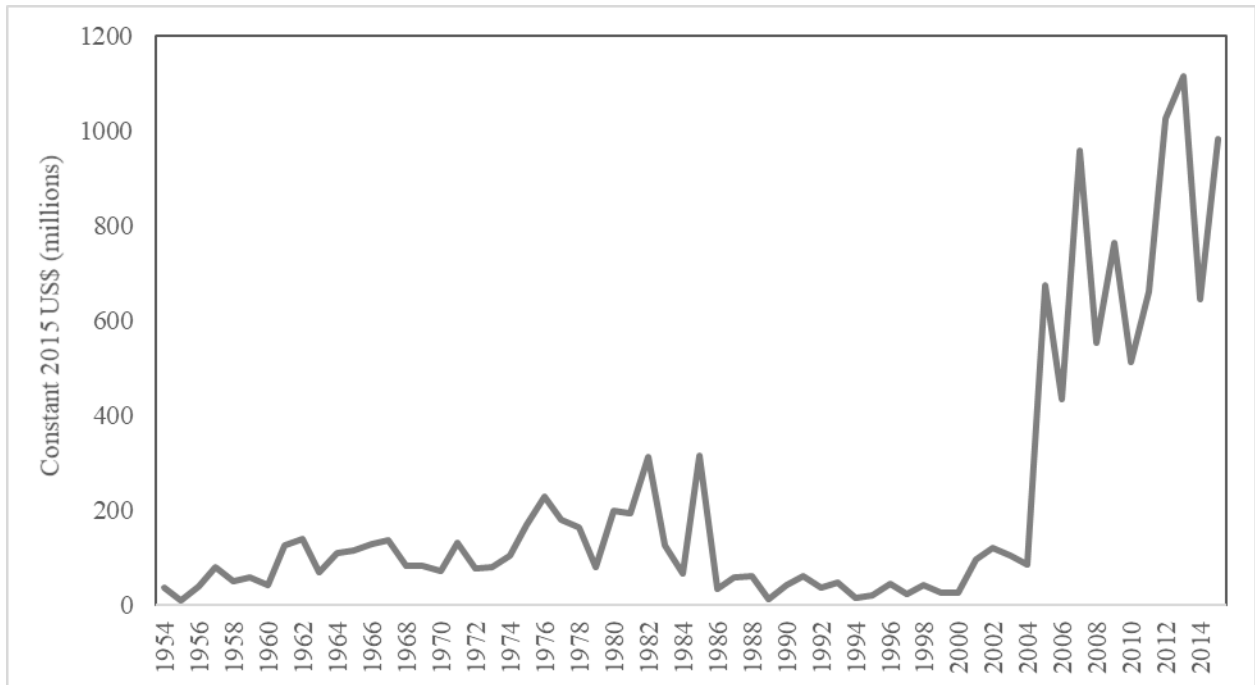
Compared to the U.S. military’s historic level of engagement, the contemporary presence in Africa is massive. As Figure 1 illustrates, prior to 2005, U.S. military assistance never topped \$300 million. Since the founding of AFRICOM in 2007, U.S. military assistance has never dropped below \$500 million, and at times has surpassed \$1 billion. The increases in U.S. military assistance have also come with vast increases in U.S. military infrastructure on the African continent. From virtually no military presence in the aftermath of Black Hawk Down incident in 1993, AFRICOM, which is headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, maintains one permanent base at Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti and dozens of additional outposts such as camps, port facilities, and fuel bunkers in as many as 34 countries.¹⁶ The Foreign Service Officer David Brown estimates that the total number of AFRICOM personnel assigned to Africa at any given time is around 9,000, half the number of diplomats assigned by the State Department to staff the entire world.¹⁷

Figure 1. U.S. Military Aid to Sub-Saharan Africa, 1954-2015

¹⁵ Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, quoted in David Wiley, "Militarizing Africa and African Studies and the US Africanist Response," *African Studies Review* 55, no. 2 (2012), pp. 147-161.

¹⁶ Nick Turse, “The U.S. Military’s Best Kept Secret,” *The Nation*, November 17, 2015. <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-us-militarys-best-kept-secret/> (accessed December 8, 2017).

¹⁷ David Brown, *AFRICOM at 5 years: The Maturation of a New U.S. Combatant Command*. (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), p. 32. In addition to personnel at the base in Djibouti, which he estimated at approximately 2,000, he estimated approximately 2,000 personnel for other major operations centers in Molesworth, Tampa, and Stuttgart, AFRICOM’s headquarters. Brown’s estimates do not appear to account for the number of Special Forces troops assigned to Africa nor private defense contractors, which could bring the total significantly higher.



Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, “Greenbook” (U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington, DC, 2017).

From these and other bases, U.S. military forces conduct a wide array of operations beyond traditional train and equip missions. The United States flies surveillance drones out of facilities in Tunisia, Niger, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia,¹⁸ and flies manned surveillance aircraft in Uganda and Burkina Faso.¹⁹ At times, the U.S. uses both drones and manned aircraft to conduct lethal operations against terrorist and insurgent groups; to date, nearly all such missions have taken place against Al-Shabaab in the horn of Africa or against the Islamic State in Libya, though lethally-armed drones have recently been approved to operate in Niger. Finally, U.S. special forces do more than just train African groups, and consistently accompany African armed forces in raids against high value targets or conduct such raids themselves. According to

¹⁸ Ty McCormick, “Exclusive: U.S. Operates Drones from Secret Bases in Somalia,” *Foreign Policy*, July 2, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/02/exclusive-u-s-operates-drones-from-secret-bases-in-somalia-special-operations-jsoc-black-hawk-down/>; Adam Entous and Missy Ryan, “U.S. has Secretly Expanded its Global Network of Drone Bases to North Africa,” *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2016.

¹⁹ Craig Whitlock, “Pentagon Setting Up Drone Base in Africa to Track Boko Haram Fighters,” *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2017.

the head of U.S. special operations command in Africa, special forces operators now carry out approximately 96 activities on any given day.²⁰

The increases in military assistance combined with permanent U.S. military presence on the continent represents a historic departure from previous defense policies. Never before has the United States been so engaged with so many different armed forces in Africa, and never before has the U.S. offered operational support to African partner states to such a degree. In both absolute and relative terms, the permanent U.S. military presence on the African continent is heavier than it has ever been.

Nevertheless, the current U.S. security commitments towards Africa remain modest by the standards of the U.S. Defense Department, justifying the argument that operations are “low-cost” and “small-footprint” laid out in the 2012 U.S. Strategy Towards Africa.²¹ First, despite the absolute increase in aid, it would be a stretch to conclude that Africa is high on the list of U.S. strategic priorities. U.S. security assistance to Africa remains below 10% of total U.S. military assistance (see Figure 2). For the FY 2017, for example, the \$1.2 billion in aid to be disbursed in continental Africa of responsibility is a distant third behind the \$8.2 billion commitment to the Middle East and the \$4.8 billion commitment to South Asia.²² A second mitigating factor is that the increase in U.S. military assistance to Africa is in part driven by the continent’s expanding economies and emerging strategic importance. Between 2000 and 2015, total African GDP more than doubled, and total African military spending experienced a similar increase, from US\$18 to

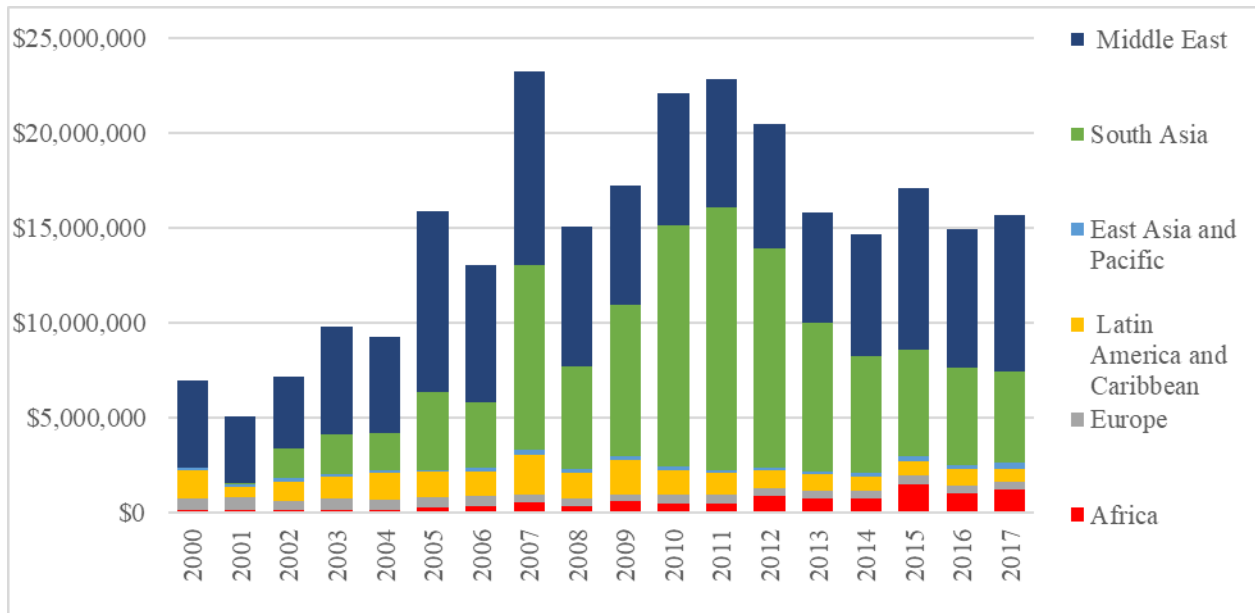
²⁰ Nick Turse, “The War You’ve Never Heard Of,” *Vice News*, May 18, 2017, <https://news.vice.com/story/the-u-s-is-waging-a-massive-shadow-war-in-africa-exclusive-documents-reveal>.

²¹ The White House, “U.S. Strategy Towards Sub-Saharan Africa” (The White House, Washington, DC, 2012).

²² Figures for Africa include AFRICOM’s area of responsibility which includes all of Africa except for Egypt. Africa remains a distant third in terms of U.S. military assistance commitments even when Israel and Egypt, the two largest recipients of U.S. military aid, collectively representing around \$5 billion, are excluded.

US\$40 billion, according to the World Bank.²³ With these figures in mind, the U.S. military assistance commitment of around \$1 billion appears paltry.

Figure 2. Regional Distribution of U.S. Military Aid (thousands of US\$), 2000-2017



Source: Center for International Policy, “Security Assistance Monitor” (Center for International Policy, Washington, DC, 2011).

More fundamentally, the current U.S. military commitment to the African continent is puny in terms of personnel. The 9,000 men and women in uniform assigned to work on African issues may seem large in comparison to the U.S. diplomatic corps but are a tiny fraction of the 1.2 million active duty U.S. soldiers, some 200,000 of whom are deployed overseas. Permanent U.S. military presence in Africa is dwarfed by the 62,000 active duty U.S. soldiers currently deployed in Europe, the 25,000 in the Middle East, and the 73,000 in Asia. In fact, the 2,581 active soldiers currently deployed to Africa represent the least amount of any region; countries

²³ World Bank, “World Development Indicators” (World Bank Institute, Washington, DC, 2017). Figures are constant US\$2000 dollars.

including Qatar (3,216), Italy (12,088) and South Korea (24,189) host more U.S. troops than the entire continent.²⁴

The relatively low number of overall troops operating in Africa reflects a broader shift in U.S. military doctrine that evolved in the aftermath of the wars in Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan, where deployments of large numbers of U.S. troops failed to stabilize each country. In fact, Somalia was the high-water mark for active U.S. deployment of combat troops on the African continent, with some 28,000 U.S. ground troops present at the height of the conflict.²⁵ Similar to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. mission there ended in failure after the deaths of 18 soldiers and wounding of 72 others during an operation in Mogadishu led the U.S. administration to decide that the loss of U.S. life for so murky a cause was deemed an unacceptable risk.

The need to ever again deploy so many soldiers to Africa is precisely the kind of scenario that the current U.S. security strategy towards the continent seeks to avoid. Through what former AFRICOM Commander General David Rodriguez called a “command approach driven by a light, adaptable footprint enabling joint operations, protection of U.S. personnel and facilities, crisis response, and security cooperation,”²⁶ the U.S. hopes to minimize the potential of being dragged into a long, costly war while maximizing the U.S.’s ability to remain engaged largely outside of the public eye and over a long period of time. Yet the question remains: is the current U.S. military strategy in Africa effective in achieving its objectives?

²⁴ Kristen Bialik, “U.S. Active-Duty Military Presence Overseas is at its Smallest in Decades,” *Pew Research Center*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/22/u-s-active-duty-military-presence-overseas-is-at-its-smallest-in-decades/>.

²⁵ Kenneth Allard, *Somalia Operations: Lessons Learned* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1995), p. 17.

²⁶ David Rodriguez, “U.S. Africa Command 2017 Posture Statement” (Washington, DC: Senate Armed Services Committee, 2017), p. 5.

Tactical Successes in Confronting “Transnational Threats”

Perhaps the central reason for the U.S. military’s build-up in Africa is to confront extremist groups, which the current posture statement refers to as “the greatest threat to U.S. interests emanating from Africa.”²⁷ The first three of five total “lines of effort” listed in the U.S.’s theater campaign plan concerns efforts to contain such groups, including: “1) Neutralize al-Shabaab and transition security responsibilities in Somalia to the Federal Government of Somalia; 2) Degrade violent extremist organizations in the Sahel Maghreb and contain instability in Libya; 3) Contain and degrade Boko Haram.”²⁸ The U.S.-supported operations against the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabaab in Somalia, the Islamic State in Libya, and Islamic State-affiliated Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin, each Islamist insurgent movements with transnational connections, is neither particular controversial nor surprising, and their defeat or marginalization would represent a considerable boost to regional security.

In each of these three lines of effort, the United States can credibly claim a degree of success. After al-Shabaab seized large swaths of territory in 2011, the U.S. provided extensive financial and logistical support to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and conducted drone strikes and special force raids against al-Shabaab militants. A September 2014 strike that reportedly combined both drones and manned aircraft killed hundreds of al-Shabaab fighters, including the group’s leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane.²⁹ Though the group still controls some territory and retains the capability to launch spectacular strikes, as evidenced by the October 16th truck bombing that killed over 300 in Mogadishu, attacks have declined in recent years, and the

²⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

²⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, “Al-Shabaab in Somalia: Recent Developments,” October 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/al-Shabaab-in-somalia>.

group has been pushed out of nearly all the major cities it once held during the peak of its insurgent campaign in 2011.³⁰

The U.S. played a similar role in stemming the spread of the Islamic State in Libya. At the request of the Libyan government, the U.S. launched an operation called Odyssey Lightning which killed close to a thousand militants in 495 precision airstrikes during a three-month span between August and December of 2016. The strikes, which were conducted using a combination of Marine-piloted harrier jets and Reaper drones, were successful in driving the Islamic State out of its main stronghold in Sirte.³¹ Of the three major lines of effort, the U.S. has been least involved in efforts to combat Boko Haram. Nevertheless, efforts to provide military assistance and intelligence to Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad have helped contain the threat. After seizing a territory the size of Rwanda in early 2015, combined efforts of the four regional militaries dislodged the group and prevented it seizing control of Maiduguri, the capital of Nigeria's Borno state.³²

In each case, then, U.S. efforts can be said to have been crucial in preventing groups allied with transnational Islamist insurgent movements from controlling large swathes of territory and major population centers for very long. Moreover, the current level of U.S. effort is sustainable. The U.S. appears to fully recognize that much broader political efforts will be necessary to ultimately defeat these groups, efforts that are not achievable through military means alone nor likely to succeed in short periods of time. The combination of military assistance, special force

³⁰ See, for example, BBC News, "Who are Somalia's Al-Shabaab?" December 9, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15336689>.

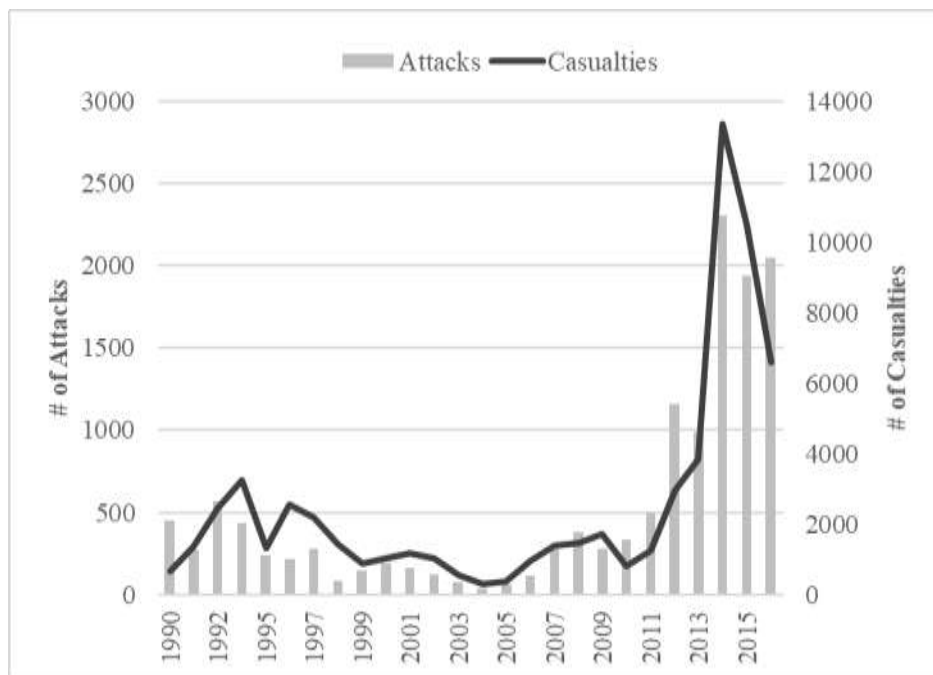
³¹ Alexandra Gutowski and Bill Roggio, "U.S. Resumes Strikes Against Islamic State in Libya" *Long War Journal*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/09/us-resumes-strikes-against-islamic-state-in-libya.php>.

³² Nathaniel Allen, "Unusual Lessons from an Unusual War: Boko Haram and Modern Insurgency" *Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2017), pp. 115-133.

operations, and air strikes in collaboration with partner states does appear sufficient to contain the threat.

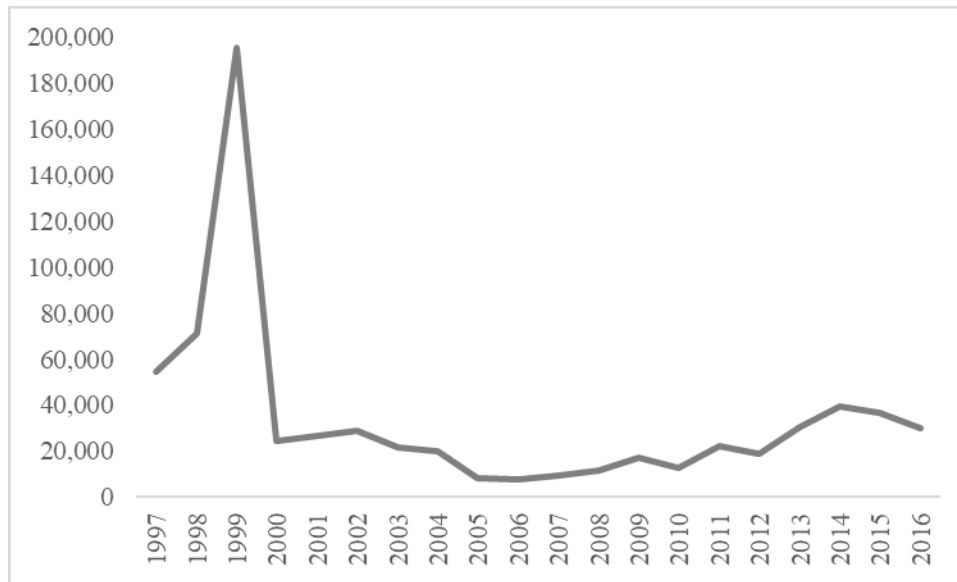
Nevertheless, the U.S. military presence has done little to stem the overall spread of terrorism across Africa. Driven in no small part by the rise of both Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, the number of both terrorist attacks and casualties in Africa have significantly increased. From fewer than 500 deaths and 50 attacks during the nadir of terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2004, the spread of terrorism reached a high point in 2014, with over 2,300 attacks and 13,000 casualties (see Figure 3). The rise of these extremist groups has fueled a rise in conflict across the continent. Though the number of conflict-related deaths in Africa has not reached their peak of the late 1990s, the close to 40,000 deaths in 2014 is far more than the 7,900 that were killed in 2006, the year before AFRICOM was founded (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Number of Terrorist Attacks and Casualties in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2016



Source: University of Maryland, “Global Terrorism Database” (University of Maryland, Greenbelt, MD, 2017).

Figure 4: Conflict-Related Deaths in Africa, 1997-2016



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project, “Africa Data” (ACLED Project, 2017).

The rise recent rises in conflict-related casualties alongside the growth in U.S. military commitments does not provide a definitive link between U.S. action and the spread of extremism. Depending on how the issue is framed, the U.S. decision to increase in military engagement in Africa could either be viewed as a cause of the spread of transnational terrorists, a response to it, or a prescient anticipation of a rising threat. Nevertheless, the fivefold increase in battle-related deaths and the twenty-fold increase in deaths from terrorist attacks since the year AFRICOM was founded demands a closer look at the ways in which the U.S. military presence might be undermining African political stability.

Consequences for Political Stability

The considerable amounts of aid the U.S. is giving to repressive regimes alongside the recent rise in terrorism and conflict raises an important issue: is the U.S. currently sacrificing longer term political stability for short term strategic interest? Critics have long argued that two aspects

of U.S. military engagement in Africa are destabilizing: its support for repressive authoritarian regimes and the extensive military assistance the U.S. provides to Africa's weak and fragile states. These arguments are supported by both qualitative observations and quantitative evidence that these aspects of U.S. military engagement are at best ineffective at securing the peace and at worst do more harm than good.

One way in which the United States may be fueling violence is in its support of repressive dictatorships. During the Cold War, the United States gave substantial foreign assistance to prop up repressive anti-communist allies such as Hissène Habré in Chad, Samuel Doe in Liberia, Siad Barre in Somalia and Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). The United States turned a blind eye to the excesses of leaders in each one of these regimes as they used U.S. assistance to enrich themselves, repress political adversaries, and create loyalist military forces who wantonly abused human rights.³³ As the Cold War ended, the U.S. funding to these regimes dried up, helping to precipitate horrific civil wars in which, by the mid-1990s, every one of these former allies was ousted.³⁴ Yet with the DRC and Somalia still locked in intermittent civil war, the continuation of violently repressive authoritarianism in Chad, and Liberia's GDP per capita yet to recover to what it was in the late 1980s, the legacy of each regime lingers.

Today, history may be in danger of repeating itself. According to the USAID Greenbook, five of the top ten recipients of U.S. military aid over the last fiscal year were repressive authoritarian regimes in Cameroon (#2), Uganda (#4), Ethiopia (#5), Djibouti (#7) and Chad

³³ See Michael Clough, *Free at Last? U.S. Policy Toward Africa and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 1992).

³⁴ See, for example, Jeffrey Herbst, "African Militaries and Rebellion: The Political Economy of Threat and Combat Effectiveness." *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3, p. 366.

(#9). As in the past, such regimes have taken advantage of U.S. support to crack down on the political opposition and violate the human rights of their citizens. Ethiopia, for example, passed anti-terrorism laws in order to curry favor with the United States, and has abused its broad provisions to detain, torture and force confessions from members of the political opposition, journalists and others.³⁵ In 2013, members of the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Unit trained with troops from Cameroon's elite Rapid Intervention Battalion, only have members of that battalion implicated in the unlawful killing of civilians that same year.³⁶ As Stephen Tankel points out in his new book, U.S. policymakers seem to consistently fail to grasp that partners often have very different threat assessments and that the U.S. only has limited ability to change its partners calculus.³⁷

The linkage between the repression enacted by these regimes, terrorism and violent conflict is not abstract. According to a recent UN report that interviewed hundreds of individuals in Africa that joined extremist groups, for 71 percent, the incident that prompted them to join included government action such as the killing or arrest of a family member or friend.³⁸ Moreover, a RAND report, which is the most comprehensive quantitative analysis on the effects of U.S. security assistance to date, found no relationship between security assistance and improvements in state fragility in Africa and the Middle East, and suggested that authoritarianism, low state reach, and the concentration of already-fragile states is to blame.³⁹ In

³⁵ Lewis Gordon, Sean Sullivan, and Sonal Mittal, "Ethiopia's Anti-Terrorism Law: A Tool to Stifle Dissent" (Oakland, CA: The Oakland Institute, 2015).

³⁶ Nick Turse, "The United States is Training Militaries with Dubious Human Rights Records – Again," *The Nation*, December 10, 2015.

³⁷ Stephen Tankel, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

³⁸ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (New York, NY: UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa, 2017), p. 5.

³⁹ Michael McNerny, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas Szayna, Derek Eaton, Caroline Baxter, Colin Clarke, Emma Cutrufello, Michael McGee, Heather Peterson, and Leslie Payne. *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014).

fact, the relationship between U.S. security assistance and the stability of fragile states was negative, though statistically insignificant.

This relationship, as observed by Stephen Watts, “poses a stark dilemma for those responsible for U.S. security sector assistance to the USAFRICOM area of responsibility: The countries that are most in need of assistance are usually the ones least able to make positive use of it.”⁴⁰ There are multiple mechanisms through which the security assistance the United States gives to fragile states in Africa are potentially destabilizing. First, it is not just the armies of authoritarian regimes in Africa who abuse civilians. From the extra-judicial killing by the Nigerian army of some 800 Boko Haram members prior to when the insurgency turned violent⁴¹ to the massacres, arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances carried out by U.S.-trained anti-terror police unit in Kenya,⁴² security forces in Africa’s fragile democracies violate human rights with nearly the same regularity as those in dictatorships. The problem is not simply that U.S. security assistance may be abetting authoritarian repression, but security assistance may be empowering armies continent-wide to continue to abuse citizens with impunity.

Moreover, many of the problems of indiscipline, corruption, and abuse are so ingrained that no amount of training or equipment from the United States will solve them. The Nigerian military, for example, remains a shadow of its former self. After fighting a fairly sophisticated civil war between 1967 and 1970, as of mid-2015, the military contained over 10,000 airmen but just seven operational aircraft and,⁴³ according to one report, lacked the capability to conduct

⁴⁰ Stephen Watts, *Identifying and Mitigating Risks in Security Sector Assistance for Africa’s Fragile States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

⁴¹ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Nigeria’s Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis* (London, UK: Chatham House, 2014), p. 11.

⁴² Human Rights Watch, “Kenya: Killings, Disappearances by Anti-Terror Police,” August 18, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/18/kenya-killings-disappearances-anti-terror-police>.

⁴³ *Premium Times*, “EFCC Detains Ex-Chief of Air Staff, Adesola Amosu, over N29 billion Arms Deal,” January 28, 2016.

even basic forward operations.⁴⁴ In the early stages of the fight against Boko Haram, Nigerian soldiers were sent to the front-lines with no rations and thirty bullets apiece.⁴⁵ The issues in supplying and equipping front-line troops were less issues of immediate capacity and more one of a corrupt institutional culture, where military officials skim off the top of major contracts, sell spare parts for cash, and where legislative appropriations never reach the front-lines. As Mara Karlin argues, these are higher order issues that critically affect the capacity of the military to do its job but are not addressed by current U.S. military assistance programs.⁴⁶

Finally, the effect of attempting to train, supply, and equip armies who lack the basic professional capabilities and political incentives to use them appropriately cannot just be ineffective, but harmful. U.S. supplied arms fall into the hands of terrorists, like the hundreds of millions of dollars of guns, rockets and ammunition meant for Ugandan and Burundian troops that were sold to al-Shabaab insurgents between 2007 and 2009.⁴⁷ U.S.-equipped soldiers defect to insurgents for political reasons, like the U.S- special forces trained Niger Rapid Intervention Company, who is suspected of defecting *en masse* to an al-Qaeda affiliated group in 2007.⁴⁸ U.S. trained-officers fed up with their country's inability to provide basic equipment mutiny, like

⁴⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Nigeria: The Challenge of Military Reform," (Washington, DC: ICG Africa Report No. 237, 2016), p. 14.

⁴⁵ Michelle Faul, "Army Chief Orders Review of 600-plus Nigerian Soldiers Condemned in War on Boko Haram," *Associated Press*, August 2, 2015, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/08/02/nigeria-review-of-soldiers-condemned-in-boko-haram-war>.

⁴⁶ Mara Karlin. "Why Military Assistance Programs Disappoint: Minor Tools Can't Solve Major Problems." *Foreign Affairs*, November / December 2017. See also Mara Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ David Axe, "U.S. Weapons Now in Somali Terrorists' Hands," *Wired*, August 2, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/08/u-s-weapons-now-in-somali-terrorists-hands/>.

⁴⁸ John Alexander, "Africa: Irregular Warfare on the Dark Continent" (*Joint Special Operations University Report* 09-5, Hulbert Field, FA, 2009), p. 36

the one staged by junior officers in Mali in 2012, which morphed into a successful coup attempt that threw out the country's elected leader weeks before he was to leave office.⁴⁹

The current U.S. military engagement strategy may help serve U.S. strategic interests and be essential to combating the spread of terrorism across Africa. But it also carries obvious strategic risks. These risks, if not managed carefully, threaten a pyrrhic victory, as tactical advances that keep terrorist groups at bay also serve to empower repressive regimes and fuel local conflict.

Policy Recommendations

In the aftermath of Miliken's death and the emergence of threats elsewhere, the Pentagon has reportedly been considering steep cuts to U.S. Special Operations forces in Africa.⁵⁰ Though the United States could afford to be more balanced in its overall engagement,⁵¹ a policy of total retrenchment will neither serve to stabilize the continent nor will it serve the strategic interests in the United States. In the first place, though there is some evidence to support the claim that military assistance fuels conflict by empowering the continent's more repressive regimes, a sudden loss of U.S. military support would likely be even more destabilizing. The last thing the continent needs is a re-run of the post-Cold War period, when a sudden shift in the strategic

⁴⁹ Baz Lecocq, Gregory Mann, Bruce Whitehouse, Dida Badi, Lotte Pelckmans, Nadia Belalimat, Bruce Hall, and Wolfram Lacher, "One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts: A Multivocal Analysis of the 2012 Political Crisis in the Divided Republic of Mali." *Review of African Political Economy* 40, no. 137 (2013), p. 346.

⁵⁰ Thomas Gibbons and Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon May Cut Commando Forces in Africa After Major Military Review," June 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/africa/commandos-africa-pivot-major-powers.html>.

⁵¹ See Steven Feldstein, "Terrorist Trends in Africa Justify the U.S. Military's Expansion," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 9, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/09/do-terrorist-trends-in-africa-justify-u.s.-military-s-expansion-pub-75476>.

priorities of the United States fueled the outbreak of unparalleled civil conflict.⁵² If there is anything to be learned from that period, as well as the recent experience in countries such as Libya and Syria, is that order is generally better than disorder, and that it is better to attempt to force repressive authoritarian regimes to change peacefully and with tools other than naked violence.⁵³ Moreover, even if the U.S. attempted to pull back its support of the continent's more repressive regimes, it is highly likely that geopolitical rivals with even less scruples, such as Russia or China, would fill the void.

What is more desirable is a policy that better balances the need to cope with the continent's immediate political crises while minimizing the risks to the continent's longer term political stability. Here, several recommendations are in order. First, as recommended by Watts, AFRICOM's analytical capabilities need improvement.⁵⁴ The U.S. and other security sector actors do not practice rigorous monitoring and evaluation techniques that are now standard in other forms of aid. Likewise, military assistance programs tend to lack even basic "theories of change" that link the outcomes Washington expects to achieve to the inputs provided to African partners. In addition, before distributing military assistance, officials out to carefully and systematically weigh the risks, not just to immediate U.S. interests, but to longer term ones. Rewarding specialization, hiring more regional experts, and embedding U.S. personnel by expanding the U.S. Ministry of Defense Advisors program in Africa would help AFRICOM gain much needed local knowledge.

⁵² See Herbst, "African Militaries"; see also Stathis Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict" *American Political Science Review*, 104, no. 3 (2010), pp. 415-429.

⁵³ See also Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁵⁴ See Watts, *Identifying and Mitigating Risks*.

Most likely, such risk assessments would push the United States to change the composition of military aid away from fragile authoritarian states and towards less fragile democracies. There is little evidence to suggest that giving weapons by themselves to fragile states is effective. Abundant, cheap, and poorly secured arms have helped lead to defections, incentivized the creation of local militia, and fueled local conflicts. Moreover, it is difficult to see how weapons systems do much good if, as is often the case, they are not kept in working order, sold off by corrupt officials, or fail to reach the front lines because of political wrangling. Rather, U.S. security engagement with such countries should focus on introducing more accountability into the security sector, particularly on issues such as justice reform and basic law enforcement, which appear to be more effective than providing military equipment in helping to stabilize fragile states.⁵⁵ In distinction to past U.S. military engagement with African countries, the current posture might actually be well-suited to such a model. By allowing armies of fragile states to focus on the basics and providing the training, intelligence, and at times, the firepower needed to confront truly existential threats, the U.S. can help ensure that its equipment and weapons do not get into the hands of hostile actors while helping such states build order.

It is likewise clear that U.S. military aid to repressive regimes or armies that abuse human rights may fuel conflict by empowering African soldiers to commit atrocities against their populations. Again, the U.S. cannot completely disengage here. The dictatorships that the U.S. works the closest with each play critical roles in regional security - the armies of Chad and Cameroon have been crucial in containing Boko Haram, Ethiopia hosts the African Union, and the U.S.'s only official base in Africa is located in Djibouti. Nevertheless, Washington is fully capable of toeing a harder line against some of the abuses committed by its partners. The Leahy

⁵⁵ McNerny et al, *Assessing Security Cooperation*.

laws, which prevent the U.S. from giving military aid to countries whose security forces abuse human rights without a special waiver from Congress, were put in place for a reason and ought to be respected more consistently. In addition, the U.S. needs to put far more emphasis than it currently does on democracy promotion, whose funding levels have plummeted in recent years. The recent rise in violence as a result of increased oppression could be equally attributed to the refusal of the United States to stand by its democratic principles as it could be on the increase in military assistance.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, AFRICOM needs to place a more holistic view of military professionalism at the center of its agenda for “strengthening” the armed forces of partner states. The focus on enhancing the military capabilities alone of such states is not sufficient, and at times counterproductive. Instead of concentrating most of its efforts on reinforcing partner capacity to deal death and destruction, the U.S. should seriously think about means through which it can encourage partner African states to build armies that refrain from committing human rights abuses, limit corruption, and end discriminatory recruitment and promotion practices that often privilege one or several ethnic groups. Where it has the leverage, the U.S. should insist that the armies it works with take steps to promote these practices, and threaten to lessen aid or to enact other forms of sanction if partner states refuse to make genuine efforts at reform. And even in cases where it does not, Washington could do far more to reward the few countries on the continent whose armed forces are doing things right. One way would be to establish a program that provides aid, cash, military assistance or other benefits to countries who meet basic criteria of civilian control, merit-based promotion, and respect for human rights, akin to the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation’s approach to selecting candidates for U.S. poverty alleviation assistance.

The U.S. military presence in Africa is likely to stay for the foreseeable future. With reforms, the U.S. can ensure that this presence both secures its interests and contributes to the continent's peace and security over the long term.