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U.S. Security Policy in Africa

Background

The United States has been involved in African security since the 1960s but the continent has never been a top priority for Washington. Geography, history, and the structure of the global economy have compelled American policymakers to focus on other places. For the United States Africa has always been an "economy of force" theatre.

During the Cold War the United States' primary concern was limiting Soviet influence in Africa, largely out of concern that Moscow might somehow deny the continent's raw materials to the West. After the demise of the Soviet Union, U.S. policy shifted. Concerned that inadequate political, economic, and security institutions made Africa vulnerable to humanitarian disasters like the ones in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda, the United States established programmes to support the development of African security forces, particularly at peacekeeping. Neither the United States nor African nations wanted a large American military presence in that part of the world hence capacity building was seen as a way to promote security with a very small U.S. footprint.

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, American policy in Africa focused on counterterrorism and counter-extremism. While capacity building in African security forces remained the priority, the U.S. military began playing a more active role, including some direct attacks on extremist groups. In 2007, the Pentagon created the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) to integrate and improve American security programmes in Africa. But unlike the U.S. military's other geographic commands, AFRICOM had very few assigned combat troops and most of its staff was stationed outside the continent. It was also more interagency than America's other geographic commands, reflecting the need to integrate U.S. programmes and efforts.

Developments

The election of Donald J. Trump in November 2016 signalled great changes in U.S. security policy around the world. President Trump approached security policy like a businessman rather than a career politician. The American approach to the world had long emphasized stabilizing and strengthening regional security systems rather than simply producing direct, tangible benefits to the United States. Trump - as his campaign slogan "America first" indicated - was committed to moving away from system building in favour of a more narrowly defined promotion of U.S. national interests.

For the first two years of his administration, President Trump concentrated on security challenges like the Islamic State, Iran and North Korea. This left limited time for Africa. Then in December 2018 Ambassador John R. Bolton, President Trump's National Security Adviser, introduced the administration's new strategy for

Africa.[1] While sustaining counterterrorism and counter-extremism efforts, Bolton indicated that the United States would devote greater effort and funding to countering what the Trump administration saw as more assertive Chinese and Russian actions in Africa. He also indicated that the United States would examine the effect of U.S. security and economic assistance to Africa and cut programmes that the administration considered wasteful.

Synthesis

The new Trump strategy for Africa is part of a broader reorientation of American security policy from promoting systemic stability and countering violent extremism to countering China and Russia.[2] Experts have reservations about applying that to Africa. As during the Cold War, few of Africa's people or leaders are interested in being part of the global competition between the United States and Russia or China. Some may tilt one way or the other to advance their national interests while others will do so simply by staying out of great power manoeuvring.

In addition, China and Russia have some inherent advantages in Africa. Beijing, which integrates its economic investment and security strategies, can invest for political purposes like cultivating relations with an African government. Since American investment is primarily from the private sector rather than the government, the United States is less inclined toward politically motivated investment. And Russia's advantage is a willingness to provide military and security assistance with few strings attached - something that appeals to Africa's less democratically inclined regimes.

At this point, though, it is not clear how extensively President Trump will change U.S. policy in Africa. Pressing threats in other parts of the world give Trump and his senior advisors little time that they can devote to Africa. This may make a complete and lasting transformation of American policy on the continent unlikely. But diminished U.S. involvement is probable. For instance AFRICOM - already the smallest of America's regional military commands - recently announced that it was cutting its forces so that the U.S. Department of Defense could use them in other parts of the world. At the same time, there is some continuity in American policy. AFRICOM continues to stress what General Thomas Waldhauser, its commander, calls a "partner-centric approach" and "persistent pressure on terrorist networks."[3]

In the coming years Africa will continue its quest for good governance, greater security, and expanded economic opportunity while navigating the challenges of generational leadership transitions, the dislocations of climate change, the spread of violent extremism, and the unwillingness of Europe and the United States to accept large numbers of African migrants unable to find economic opportunity in their own nations.

As it has for the entire post-Cold War period, the United States is likely to continue its modest role in Africa but is unlikely to make the continent a high priority. America will remain a player in African security, but from a global perspective that part of the world will remain an "economy of force" theatre for Washington. Ultimately, the United States can and should assist to help Africa's leaders and people in their journey toward a more secure and prosperous continent, but can only do so in a limited way.

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[1] Remarks by the National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy, December 13, 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/.

[2] See *National Security Strategy of the United States of America,* https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf; and *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

[3] Statement of General Thomas D. Waldhauser, Commander, United States Africa Command, Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 7 February 2019, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/waldhauser_02-07-19, pp. 4-5.

Recommended reading:

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1. Reuben E. Brigety, "A Post-American Africa," *Foreign Affairs*, August 28, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-08-28/post-american-africa.

2. Witney Schneidman and Landry Signe, "The Trump Administration's Africa Strategy: Primary or Partnership?" *Africa in Focus*, December 20, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/12/20/the-trump-administrations-africa-strategy-primacy-or-partnership/.

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