

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## **America's Africa Enigma: Why U.S. Troops are Taking Unnecessary Risks**

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For Washington's foreign policy establishment, no nation is too unimportant to be considered vital to America's security. No territory is too insignificant for the United States to dominate. No spot on earth is too distant to station an American soldier. How else to judge the hysterical criticism of the Trump administration's proposed military drawdown in Africa?

Despite the fiscal crisis, strategic overreach, endless war, and political division, "the Blob," as Washington's foreign policy community is known, refuses to consider a world where Uncle Sam does not treat every region and nation as his personal sphere of interest. Washington is determined to protect more than a score of rich allies in Europe, multiple wealthy clients in Asia, and a gaggle of Middle Eastern nations.

Could the Pentagon at least draw down its forces in Africa? Reduce the number of American personnel stationed there? The Blob says no.

Roughly seven thousand American personnel are stationed across Africa, primarily in Djibouti, Niger, and Somalia. Defense Secretary Mark Esper is considering rebalancing U.S. defense resources, shifting toward containment—not that he has used that word—of China and Russia. To advance that process, last fall the Pentagon asked each regional command for its resource needs. Explained Esper: "We've begun a review process where I'm looking at every theater, understanding what the requirements are that we set out for, making sure we're as efficient as possible with our forces."

The 2018 National Defense Strategy sought to prioritize potential great-power conflict over counterterrorism and whatever else the Pentagon currently does, such as extended and fruitless nation-building. America's comparative advantage is thwarting major threats by major states. However, the actual need for Washington to take on that role is less clear.

Russia barely qualifies as a threat. Its nuclear weapons are enough to deter America but insufficient to contend for global control, as did the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Moscow is powerful enough to beat up on its smaller neighbors, such as Georgia and Ukraine, and intervene in small regional firefights, such as Syria, but not able to dominate a continent, either

Asia or Europe. Why, then, seventy-five years after the end of World War II, are Europeans not expected to defend themselves?

China appears more threatening but not to the United States. Beijing will not be launching a naval armada to conquer Hawaii and invade the West Coast. The bilateral contest is over American military superiority along China's coast. It is a convenient capability to possess but not essential. Maintaining that dominance will become ever more expensive to maintain: it will always be cheaper for the Chinese military to sink a U.S. carrier than for the United States to build and protect one. Washington would not stand still if the People's Republic of China (PRC) extended its control up to America's borders. The PRC will not rest until it is capable of deterring U.S. intervention.

Washington has an interest in the preservation of the independence of states in East Asia, but that is best accomplished by backing up nations that create their own deterrents to Chinese adventurism. Beijing can certainly make American intervention more costly, but its neighbors can make any Chinese aggression more expensive. The PRC's assertive activities have created significant blowback such as Japan steadily expanding its military activities, the Philippines welcoming Tokyo's increased military role, Vietnam putting security before ideology and confronting the PRC, Indonesia rejecting Beijing's expansive territorial claims, and India being welcomed into the region. There's no need for America to be on the frontlines.

Still, it makes sense to treat China and Russia as greater security issues than Syria and Afghanistan. The former two theoretically could do America significant harm and pose far more significant challenges than the latter two. Dispersing U.S. manpower and materiel around the globe to fight "endless wars" dissipates America's strength. Russia, and especially China, have been far more circumspect in wasting valuable resources in stupid, unnecessary wars.

It is unsurprising, then, that the Pentagon wants to redirect resources. However, the reaction, especially on Capitol Hill, has been barely suppressed horror. How could the administration leave any spot on earth without an American garrison? Doesn't the president realize there are bad people in Africa? Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, made the usual extreme but vacuous claims: Any drawdown of our troops would be shortsighted, could cripple Africom's ability to execute its mission and, as a result, would harm national security.

But what are America's alleged interests and how would they be harmed by a U.S. troop pullout?

China and Russia return as bug-a-bear. Inhofe complained that "both countries view Africa as a critical battlefield to fulfill their global ambitions and challenge U.S. interests." Sen. James Risch (R-Idaho) and Rep. Michael McCaul (R.-Texas) argued that "Both China and Russia are increasing their presence throughout Africa. U.S. presence is vital to countering those efforts." Rep. Michael Waltz (R-Fla.) worried that Moscow could gain a port in Libya. "I'm looking at a small footprint and what it costs us now versus what it could cost us in the long run by pulling back."

Moscow and Beijing have expanded their operations in Africa, but the Cold War should have taught the United States that military competition in Africa tended to be no-win. A few soldiers or special operations forces members won't turn African states into protectorates or win populations' hearts and minds. Even money doesn't guarantee friendship.

Moreover, America's forces are primarily deployed in counterterrorism work. How do they eliminate an increased Chinese and Russian "presence"? And why must they do so?

In Africa, Moscow is a minor player. It sells weapons, offers training, and provides advisers, modest involvement compared to America's activities. None of these justify a U.S. military response. How would a few thousand troops scattered across an entire continent prevent Russia from gaining military, political, or economic influence? Moreover, some of Moscow's activities complement U.S. policy. For instance, Russia sent around two hundred mercenaries to Mozambique to counter an Islamic State affiliate.

Beijing's most important calling card is the economic calling card, which it often flexes via its Belt and Road initiative funding. Katherine Zimmerman, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, has argued that "African partners know full well that they are getting a bad deal when working with China, but oftentimes China's timelines and its blind eye toward human rights and other issues outweigh what the U.S. can offer."

The presence of American soldiers won't change that. Even Kathryn Wheelbarger, the acting assistant defense secretary for international affairs, has admitted that the primary issue is influence peddling, which does not warrant a military response. Indeed, it isn't clear that Washington should worry. The PRC has suffered through its own "Ugly American" experience of the Cold War. African resentment of China has risen in a number of nations, undermining Beijing's influence.

Sens Chris Coons (D-Del.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C), the latter notable for advocating military confrontation around the world, claimed that "A withdrawal from the continent would also certainly embolden both Russia and China." But since when has either of those governments held back from acting as it wished in Africa? How would U.S. forces constrain either country?

Terrorism and insurgency are additional concerns that bedevil a number of African nations. For instance, Risch and McCaul claimed that "Ten thousand ISIS and Al Qaeda jihadists are estimated to be active across Africa." Coons and Graham were even more hysterical, warning that a U.S. troop reduction "could result in further instability on the continent and serve to strengthen terrorist groups that could target the homeland." Indeed, they added: "Any withdrawal or reduction would likely result in a surge in violent extremist attacks on the continent and beyond."

The challenges faced by many African states are multifaceted. For instance, Nigeria, the continent's most populous state with significant oil deposits, suffers from regional insurgencies and Islamist terrorism, most notably by, but not limited to, Boko Haram.

Nevertheless, these are not America's fights. No doubt, Somalia's al-Shabab, Nigeria's Boko Haram, and Niger's Islamic State in the Greater Sahara would harm any American—like the four

accompanying a Nigerian military patrol in Niger more than two years ago—who end up within their grasp. However, the United States is not in their sights.

Observed AFRICOM Commander Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser before the House Armed Services Committee last year: “The threats we are working against aren’t necessarily a threat to the homeland and may not be a threat to the region overall.” He explained: “In many of these groups, we have the intersection of jihadist philosophy with crime, historical influence, criminal activity, shipping of weapons, drugs, cattle and so forth. These groups may hang out a shingle and say ‘we’re with ISIS today.’ But they may or may not have the intent or capability to attack outside their particular part of the country. Even though they may call themselves Al Qaeda or ISIS, sometimes it’s difficult to say they’re a threat to the homeland.”

Naturally, African regimes want America to stick around. For instance, Senegal’s president, Macky Sall, argued that withdrawal “would be a mistake and it would be very misunderstood by Africans.” Meanwhile, Togo’s President Faure Gnassingbe complained that “those terrorists will be stronger here.” Thus, America should “fight on both ends—in the Middle East and in Africa.” Andrew Young, America’s ambassador to Burkina Faso, argued that “ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates that have attacked us in the United States in the past are expanding their reach in the region.”

Alice Hunt Friend of the Center for Strategic and International Studies observed: “It’s not that the terrorist groups in the Sahel and in West Africa are all that large or strong or capable, it’s that they are very bold and the African militaries out there are really incapable.” But that problem is both pervasive and long-standing. It cannot justify an American troop presence, potentially forever.

America’s overriding role is war. According to Joe Penney of Reuters, “the U.S. has a military presence in almost every country in Africa and conducts ‘advise-and-assist’ missions with local counterterrorism units in Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Uganda, the Central African Republic, Somalia, Libya and possibly elsewhere.” In Nigeria, U.S. troops accompany soldiers on combat missions. Americans aren’t supposed to fight unless attacked but given the nature of such missions, in this case against the group Boko Haram, they should be considered combatants.

Officially the United States does not lead combat missions but there is little oversight of actual operations and American personnel often effectively take charge. The ambiguity of America’s role is reflected in the 2017 ambush in Niger in which ISIS in the Greater Sahara killed four Americans along with five Nigerians.

Washington needs to stop treating African states as defense dependents and return responsibility for security to them. Even Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy admitted that: “At the end of the day, the problems in the Sahel are not going to be solved by France or by the United States or the international community. They have to be solved by the states in the Sahel.” For instance, Boko Haram has prospered because of the Nigerian government’s infirmities, including the military’s brutality. The case is similar across Africa.

Gen. Stephen Townsend, head of U.S. Africa Command, took a different tack, telling the Senate Armed Services committee last month: “A secure and stable Africa remains an enduring American interest. In the past, maybe we’ve been able to pay less attention to Africa and be OK in America. I don’t believe that’s the case for the future.”

However, Africa doesn’t matter militarily to America. No doubt, a “secure and stable” Africa would be welcome and thus an “interest,” but it is not an important one. Nor is it attainable, at least at a reasonable cost. For Africa terrorism actually is a minor problem compared to major disasters such as devastating civil wars and conflicts involving Sudan, Liberia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. There remains plenty of tragedy in countries like Somalia. There may be cases in which more limited advice and training could be justified. Unfortunately, too often such intervention delivers few practical benefits and creates abundant opportunities for blowback.

Judd Devermont, Africa director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, complained that discussion of a possible withdrawal “is reinforcing a view in West Africa that the U.S. is not interested, that it does not see it as a strategic importance and that it is going to cut and run and abandon its African allies.” But such talk is the policy equivalent of emotional blackmail. The region is not strategically important to America. Ending an unnecessary commitment is not cutting and running. The United States has not promised eternal support for any African state.

France also wants the United States to stick around Africa. “Any reduction would limit our effectiveness against terrorists,” said French defense minister Florence Parly. President Emmanuel Macron is worried that “If the Americans were to decide to withdraw from Africa, it would be bad news for us.”

So what? The former colonial power remains deeply involved in Africa and has come to rely on Washington for aerial refueling, intelligence, and logistics in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Understandably, France would like to continue offloading as many tasks as possible—Macron’s government also lobbied to keep the United States entangled in Syria. However, Washington officials are skeptical of the value of French efforts. One anonymous American told NBC that “We’re spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a French force that has not been able to turn the tide. It’s not even a case of whack a mole. For all that we’re spending, we’re not getting much out of it.”

Anyway, Paris can afford to do what is necessary. While trying to convince Washington to stay, France announced plans to deploy an additional six hundred troops to the African Sahel in the wake of the death of thirteen soldiers in a helicopter accident. This augmented the forty-five hundred men already stationed in West Africa. Parly explained: “It’s an important effort for the French Army. The fight against terrorism is our priority.”

Paris also should push its neighbors to act. Some other European governments are contributing to Africa’s efforts in small ways that have their share of shortcomings. The European Union has declared the Sahel to be a “strategic priority.” Washington should refuse to bail out Europe, which has a greater interest in Africa. Esper rejected French complaints about his review: “It is

time for other European allies to assist as well in the region and that could offset whatever changes we make as we consider next steps in Africa.”

Nevertheless, Townsend contended that AFRICOM “accomplishes with a few people and a few dollars, on a continent three-and-a-half times the size of the continental United States, is a bargain for the American taxpayer and low-cost insurance for America in that region.” Coons argued, “I think we would be foolish to ignore a wide-open, lightly governed space that is as big as the continental United States and from which attacks might be launched against Western Europe and the United States.”

However, terrorists can operate from almost anywhere on earth. They don’t need a lot of territory. Washington cannot occupy every empty space. Entangling the United States in endless wars in Africa is no bargain. For instance, last month an attack by al-Shabab on a Kenyan base in Manda Bay, manned by Americans, overcame the Kenyan guards, overran the facility, shot down an aircraft, destroyed several others, killed three Americans, and wounded two others. Washington sent in another one hundred soldiers for security. Townsend admitted that he feared another attack on the base.

America cannot afford to continue doing everything around the world. After meeting France’s defense minister, Esper opined: “My aim is to free up time, money and manpower around the globe, where we currently are so that I can direct it” elsewhere. Such a review is long overdue. Most of America’s forces deployed overseas should come home.

Of course, withdrawals should not stop with Africa. There are some fifty-two hundred troops in Iraq, which that nation’s government wants to see withdrawn. Roughly thirteen thousand remain in Afghanistan, nearly twenty years after Washington first intervened. There is talk that Esper might cut those numbers by twenty-five hundred and four thousand. That would be another good start.

But the administration should begin with Africa and by bringing American forces home. It is time for President Donald Trump to walk the walk and not just talk the talk when it comes to halting endless wars.

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