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Pentagon grapples with a thorny question after Niger ambush: What next in Africa?

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The death of four U.S. soldiers in a chaotic ambush in Niger leaves the Pentagon grappling with a thorny issue in Africa: How should it counter the Islamic State and other militant groups without becoming ensnared in conflicts on the continent?

The attack, launched Oct. 4, also left five Nigerien soldiers dead and prompted a two-day search for one of the slain American soldiers. The Pentagon is expected to soon release the results of an investigation that details what went wrong and how soldiers carrying out a routine patrol possibly ended up hunting members of a new Islamic State offshoot, as Nigerien officials have said.

“I have been reading the report myself because I don’t want this dragged out,” Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said Thursday, adding that he expected to see recommendations from the Pentagon’s top officer, Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr.

Video released by the Islamic State and originally captured on the helmet camera of a U.S. soldier shows U.S. and Nigerien soldiers fighting in an open desertscape as armed militants closed in. The unit, which included elite members of 3rd Special Forces Group, did not have air support for an hour after calling for help, leaving it vulnerable as a larger force of about 50 militants attacked with rifles and machine guns.

The ambush underscores the danger of dispersing small teams across a vast continent where the Pentagon does not have the same level of support for its service members as it does in a country such as Iraq or Afghanistan. Those war zones remain dangerous but, after years of U.S. operations, have a more robust network of fire support, aerial surveillance, medical help and quick-reaction rescue units when a crisis erupts.

The attack also raises questions about what the Trump administration might do in Africa in the future.

Senior defense officials, including Mattis, have long backed having U.S. troops advise and occasionally accompany local forces on operations, calling it an effort to prevent militant groups from launching attacks on the United States. But President Trump has questioned the wisdom of deploying U.S. troops across the globe for small counterterrorism missions and has said little about the war against terrorism on the continent.

Mark E. Mitchell, a senior Pentagon official overseeing Special Operations, said recently that while the Niger operation prompted scrutiny about the limited aircraft available to perform intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions, it would be hard to provide many more.

“Frankly, if we filled all the needs for our combatant commanders, we would have to triple or quadruple our force, and we just don’t have the money to do that,” Mitchell said, speaking in a room of defense contractors and Special Operations officers at a conference near Washington. “We don’t have the pilots, and it’s just not going to happen.”

Across the continent on any given day, about 6,500 U.S. troops and 1,000 contractors are involved in U.S. military operations, Marine Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, the chief of U.S. Africa Command, told the House Armed Services Committee this month. More than 4,000 of them are based in East Africa in Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya.

In Somalia, the Pentagon boosted the number of U.S. personnel last year from about 200 to 500, while carrying out airstrikes against al-Shabab, a militant group with ties to al-Qaeda. A Navy SEAL became the first U.S. service member killed in Somalia in about 25 years last spring during a raid on a militant compound.

Waldhauser, asked about operations in Somalia, told committee members that he would not say the United States is at war there and that the mission is “specifically designed for us not to own that.”

Other U.S. troops are spread out thousands of miles away, with about 1,800 in West Africa — an area nearly the size of the continental United States — in countries from Senegal to Nigeria. The U.S. military trains, advises, equips local forces and bolsters counterterrorism efforts there in ways that are not always transparent. It also received approval from Niger’s government late last year to fly armed drones from Niamey, the nation’s capital.

The Pentagon considered 15 African nations dangerous enough for U.S. troops to qualify for imminent danger pay of \$225 per month when the Niger attack occurred: Algeria, Burundi, Chad, Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Tunisia and Uganda. It added Niger, Mali and the northern regions of Cameroon to the list this month.

The Trump administration acknowledged in a required report to Congress on March 12 that U.S. troops came under fire in Niger again in December. The report, posted online by The New York Times, states that U.S. troops reacted in self-defense. No U.S. troops were injured in the firefight.

The Niger attack marked the largest number of deaths for the U.S. military in a single Africa operation since the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia in October 1993. That mission prompted significant changes, including the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia within months by President Bill Clinton and the resignation of Defense Secretary Les Aspin.

Army Gen. Carter Ham, who was commander of U.S. Africa Command from March 2011 to June 2013, said the decisions in the aftermath of the Battle of Mogadishu “were understandable” at the time, but that Somalia’s security situation might be better now if the changes had been made gradually. It is important, he said, to have an ongoing assessment of whether a mission still makes sense.

“Sometimes, the knee-jerk reaction when something bad happens of, ‘Get them out of there,’ that’s not a particularly good response,” Ham said. “It may have some longer-term consequences if there is an abrupt withdrawal from a particular area because something tragic has happened. This is where a bit of time and distance can be helpful in the evaluation of that.”

The small nature of the mission in Africa stems in part from a desire among many African officials not have a large U.S. military presence in their countries. But it also is based on assessments done at the Pentagon, which typically prioritizes larger combat operations elsewhere.

Waldhauser told the Armed Services panel that the vast size of Africa challenges the U.S. military when it comes to providing quick-reaction rescue forces and medical evacuation. Still, he said, “the bottom line is that we know we have adequate resources to do what we are supposed to do, and we have to work within those right and left limits.”

That continues a theme that has existed almost universally since Africom was established in 2007 to provide better oversight of operations on the continent. Since then, commanders have often asked for additional assistance to bolster security and training efforts there, but often have been overruled at the Pentagon in light of competing priorities in other regions.

“I always felt that there was a careful calculation of the application of resources. Did I get what I wanted? No. Did I get what I felt was required. No,” said Ham, now the president of the nonprofit Association of the U.S. Army. “Did I feel that my resource requirements were adequately and thoroughly considered in balance with the global requirements? The answer to that would be yes. I never felt like I was denied the opportunity to make the case.”

Under President Barack Obama, the White House often pressed the Pentagon to find more surveillance flights for operations in Africa, said Brian McKeon, who served as both a Pentagon and White House official in the Obama administration. The expectation in the latter years of the Obama administration was that a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan would free up some surveillance aircraft, he said, but it did not work out that way.

“The assessment gets to a point where it’s much more dangerous to be out and about with the host-nation forces, and they don’t have the assets to provide sufficient backup and personnel recovery,” McKeon said. “Obviously, that’s probably going to lead to a decision where there is fewer patrols out and about.”

The operation in Niger served as a reminder to American citizens that U.S. troops are deployed on their behalf in places they do not necessarily realize, said retired Air Force Col. Erik Goepner, a visiting research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. Those operations sometimes create enemies, especially when the United States kills civilians, he said.

“I think American citizens should rightfully ask, ‘How do we define this mission set?’ ” he said of Niger. “Is it building up indigenous forces, and is that the extent of it? If so, great. Or, are we doing kill-capture missions? Because if we’re doing kill-capture missions, the horror of war is that you’ll always kill the wrong guy in some numbers.”

“That is just by definition what happens when you are using military force against people.”