



## Obama sends military where risk is low

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President Obama's decision to send up to 300 troops to Cameroon while at the same time rebuffing calls for more military engagement in the Middle East is indicative of his view on U.S. intervention abroad, experts say.

"This administration likes to deploy troops to places where there are very few costs," said the Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman, referring to both expenses and potential casualties. Obama is a "limited-liability interventionist," he said.

In more than six years as commander in chief, Obama has not practiced restraint in accepting missions for the United States military, but he has proven very "dovish" in terms of treasury and lives expended, Friedman said.

On no continent has that been more evident than Africa. Obama has deployed personnel to at least 14 African nations. Their missions have ranged from tracking down Ugandan war lord and war criminal Joseph Kony (still at large) to finding Nigeria schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram (most still missing) to fighting Ebola (a mission widely seen as a success).

The Center for Strategic and International Studies' Anthony Cordesman said that is because most African nations are not capable of dealing with the threat posed by Boko Haram and other terrorist organizations. The U.S. can offer critical help with training, logistics and coordination, usually via multi-national efforts, without committing actual ground troops.

The Cameroon mission is part of a "key pattern of subtly expanding U.S. Africa Command, largely because we are seeing far more coherent terrorist groups emerging that these countries are not equipped to deal with."

In a recent mandatory update to Congress about military engagement abroad, Obama wrote that AFRICOM, as the command unit there is known, is central to counterterrorism efforts.

"In furtherance of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, the United States continues to work with partners around the globe, with a particular focus on the U.S. Central Command's and U.S. Africa Command's areas of responsibility," Obama stated. "In this context, the United States has deployed U.S. combat-equipped forces to enhance the counterterrorism capabilities and support the counterterrorism operations of our friends and allies."

Cordesman said Obama's focus on Africa has greatly enhanced AFRICOM's profile.

When it was created, "it seemed like it was a command in search of a mission," that it was "formed more for politics" than reality, he said. "Now it's more real more than political."

Including drone activity, the U.S. has an active military footprint in at least the following African countries (the Pentagon does not make all military activity public): Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda.

Obama explained his approach to foreign conflicts in the "Obama Doctrine" he laid out last year in West Point, N.Y.

"But to say that we have an interest in pursuing peace and freedom beyond our borders is not to say that every problem has a military solution," Obama said, beginning a phrase that the Obama administration uses almost daily, whether discussing Syria, Iraq or Ukraine.

"Instead, we must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action," Obama said last May. "We have to broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development; sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law; and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action."

"Helping African militaries bring themselves up to the level where they can deal with this challenge is going to require not just U.S. military assistance, but also help from our French allies and other countries," The Atlantic Council's J. Peter Pham recently said, echoing the Obama Doctrine. "This is going to have to be a multilateral approach."

When discussing Obama's Oct. 14 notification to Congress about the reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering mission he authorized in Cameroon, the White House underscored that troops would not be going it alone, and would not be in harm's way.

The personnel, 90 of whom have already been deployed, "will be part of a broader regional effort" and "will not be there in a combat role," White House spokesman Josh Earnest clarified.

Experts say the Cameroon mission's modest numbers, like most the African engagements under Obama, reflects the reality that Boko Haram does not immediately endanger America and that its military might is already stretched.

"Any U.S. participation in the efforts to counter Boko Haram will have to balance the growing nature of the threat as a regional security challenge with the reality that we also have limited resources and global challenges," Pham said.

But experts, former Defense officials and lawmakers say Obama's tendency toward "half-measures" and reliance on drone and air campaigns rather than ground troops creates a vacuum that terrorists and dictators are exploiting.

"In an absence of American leadership, the vacuum is going to be filled by bad people," Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain, R-Ariz., recently told Reuters.

Cato's Friedman recently argued that overreliance on remote warfare only boomerangs on the U.S. and ultimately demands a bigger toll.

"The trouble is that airstrikes and other quick applications of military force are rarely as cheap as they first appear," Friedman wrote. "They tend to cause unanticipated trouble and begin conflicts without winning them."

Douglas Ollivant, a former senior Obama National Security Council official, told Reuters that the Obama Doctrine's reliance on alliances is flawed.

"That's the problem of working through partners," he said. "They're not always capable."