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How to Phase Out Military Aid in Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Africa will become increasingly critical to the international community over the next several decades. However, even as its population and economies grow, security crises on the continent remain resilient or worsening. The modern American approach to security in Africa is insufficient and must be reworked. Africans want ownership over their own affairs and ownership over their own security, but they are dependent on ineffective American security policies. This paper analyzes how current American approaches to security exacerbate conflict and presents a new approach to American security assistance that will allow Africa to develop its own self-sufficient security institutions.

Introduction

In the medieval streets of Cairo, the ancient city collapsed under the weight of foreign wealth. From the deserts of West Africa, the Malian Emperor Mansa Musa passed through on his way to Mecca and spent in such a magnificent fashion that the Egyptian economy crumbled under the flood of gold. Seven hundred years later, the lands of the “wealthiest person in history” are flooded not with Malian gold but with American advisors and military aid, fracturing a delicate ecosystem just as the emperor did in Cairo.

For decades, U.S.-sponsored proxy conflicts in Africa ravaged the continent and played a role in its underdevelopment. Today, long-held power dynamics are rapidly shifting. Africa is a continent of 1.4 billion people and most of the fastest growing populations in the world, with economies catching up to their communities. Nations like South Africa, Nigeria and Ethiopia are primed to explode onto the world stage. Africa is of growing importance to the global community.

Alongside this hopeful outlook, the gravitational center of jihadist terror appears to be shifting toward Africa, with terrorist insurgencies proving resilient and even growing. We are seeing widespread failures in U.S. counterterrorism efforts. The success of counterterrorism efforts in Africa has significant implications for security in a global sense. Left inadequately contested, Africa could become a base of recruitment and organization for attacks on Americans domestically or abroad.

This paper explores a new approach to American security relationships with foreign countries, through the lens of Africa's unique political ecosystem. Twenty years of costly and ineffective warfare in the Middle East have forced a reevaluation of the American perspective on security. The United States can and should fundamentally reform its approach to counterterrorism in Africa.

America's security approach in Africa is centered around providing military aid to national governments, a strategy that has remained dominant both during and since the Cold War. The shift in priorities from anti-communism to counterterrorism was politically destabilizing in some cases, but the greater consistency is the manipulation of U.S. military aid by African security elites. American security assistance - both direct and indirect - is leveraged by political actors to advance political missions that consistently elude American political calculus.

To advance American national interests, the United States must transform its security approach to focus on the behaviors that it incentivizes from partners. Past and current approaches have incentivized self-destructive political instability and systemic insecurity. A new approach must encourage Africans to take ownership of African security.

Framework: Impacts, Incentives and Sustainability

To evaluate security approaches in Africa, the United States must analyze both the short-term impacts of policies and long-term implications. The three general factors to consider are the short-term impact, financial/political sustainability and the on-the-ground incentives created by policy.

These short-term impacts are a clear necessity of policy analysis. Terrorism and security crises are time-sensitive issues and policies to mitigate or reverse their effects are important. Kinetic intervention is an example of a policy solution with clear short-term impacts: the neutralization of a key figure in a terror network might disrupt the network's ability to operate. But a solution like kinetic intervention is neither sustainable nor does it incentivize constructive

behavior from stakeholders.

The sustainability of a program is crucial. There are several dimensions to this, both economic and political. In an economic sense, the high operational costs of a program could be crushing if continued or expanded. In a political sense, there may be significant damage to the relationship between those seeking to provide security and those hosting the security program. A solution to mitigate both problems is an implemented mechanism to leave the foreign country and stop providing assistance either on a hard deadline or a reasonable quantitative metric. If a policy is interpreted as permanent, stakeholders react to the system, and this must be accounted for as well.

Understanding the incentives created for the duration of a policy's implementation is crucial. The scale of U.S. foreign policy is often enormous compared to the communities that they effect. Because of this, American security policies drastically shift the political ecosystem of local stakeholders. Without consideration of how their behavior may be changed with a new policy, the goals of that policy may not be met. For example, if a country receives more military funding from the U.S. than from their existing security budget, that country's security elites may prioritize the conditions under which they receive American funding over the conditions under which domestic funding is available. This can lead to military coups and violence against civilians, exasperating instability.

U.S. security approaches in Africa must consider impacts, incentives and sustainability. This paper will now explore existing approaches to security questions and how they meet those metrics.

The Occupying Force: External Actors

There are fundamentally two approaches to solving African security crises: using Africans and using anyone else. This paper will briefly explore the non-African solutions to these security problems and the variety of ways in which the United States has enlisted the support of non-African institutions in unsuccessful security programs.

There are too many programs to explore in depth and

some may not be adequately addressed. It is nonetheless important to demonstrate the sense of betrayal that is consistent throughout the many external solutions to African problems. Counterterrorism efforts require the earned trust of civilians, and this trust requires a focus on perceptions and interpretation. Recent history has made this extremely difficult.

Iraqization: The American Reputation

America's history and its Global War on Terror has hugely complicated the required trust for effective counterterrorism operations. Even outside of the hundreds of thousands killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. has botched counterterrorism efforts in Africa. In Somalia, a Taliban-like militia called the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) developed amid the nation's apocalyptic civil war, which had already been raging for more than a decade. While some Somalis perceived the ICU as a stabilizing force for law and order in a lawless and violent environment, the United States shattered the group, which reorganized itself into the infamous terror network al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab demonstrated a greater willingness to target civilians and two decades later, the United States is still involved in Somalia in an unsuccessful effort to completely eliminate the group.

Even if the United States clarifies its intentions are to effectively eliminate terrorism, recent history has shown that these efforts devolve into ham-fisted attempts to reorganize society. The Iraq War is a clear example of this: the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) decision to disband the Iraqi military and disqualify most educated Iraqis from government positions devolved into another ongoing conflict that has taken an estimated 650,000 lives.¹

The dominant approach of the American military force is applied through air operations, which has a crucial psychological effect on civilians. The constant threat of destructive military force is radicalizing and may lead many Africans to hate and fear an American presence. These threats are not hypothetical. As mentioned, the United States has maintained programs to directly intervene in Somalia for the past several decades. The results speak to the inefficacy of this external solution to an African security problem.

Somalia: Direct American Intervention Doesn't Work

The United States played a role in the creation of al-Shabaab in the early 2000s, but it maintains this role in Somalia with a system of direct aerial military strikes. The primary impact of the American presence in the ongoing conflict in Somalia has been to exacerbate this decades-long struggle, not just failing to solve the security crisis but significantly worsening it.

This system of military airstrikes maintains a constant threat to civilian populations. Even the Department of Defense (DoD) has acknowledged that American airstrikes in Somalia have killed innocent civilians and caused severe public harm.² There is a systemic lack of transparency from the American military on the details, but locally reported civilian deaths range from 193 to 331 since 2007.³ This maintains a perceived threat to all Somali civilians that they may be the next collateral casualty from an American military operation.

Beyond that, however, are the non-lethal damages from American military operations. Strikes often hit farms, homes, and livestock, posing a constant threat to not only life but property. The United States military does not account for this adequately.⁴ Al-Shabaab does, however. Collateral impacts are leveraged for propaganda and recruitment, and when that fails, al-Shabaab simply terrorizes civilians into joining their ranks.⁵

Somali civilians are attracted to groups like al-Shabaab because they represent an alternative to the status quo promoted by the U.S.-sponsored Somali government. The vast military aid that the Somalia Security Forces (SSF) receive plays a role in their inadequate prioritization of civilian interests, but military aid will be addressed later in this paper. The United States military conducts military operations on behalf of the Somali government, and thus has roped itself into an insurgency with no relevance to American national interests. The Somali government's reliance on American money and air support has allowed it to disregard any compromise toward frustrated civilians who then seek to join the ongoing conflict.⁶

As a result, the United States is reduced to conducting

counterinsurgency operations which in turn only drive more Somalis against the U.S.-backed government.⁷ The actual capabilities of the al-Shabaab terrorists are now too pitiful to threaten the United States homeland.⁸ To keep America's attention on the counter-insurgency program, Somali military forces have provided false intelligence reports.⁹

The modern American military mission in Somalia is crowded with escalatory factors. Despite President Donald Trump's earlier decision to withdraw American forces, President Joe Biden recently redeployed ground forces.¹⁰ To add to the confusion, there are private military contractors who have spiked the fees for their services in times of chaos, generating a profit incentive for a degenerating security situation.¹¹

Somalia is a perfect storm of the chaos generated from direct American intervention in a security crisis. The past two to three decades of American security interventions have only roped the United States into a civil conflict irrelevant to American interests and Somalia remains a country with a massive security crisis. Clearly U.S. programs have failed to have a positive impact. The recent return of American ground troops is generating an unsustainable situation with the continuous tension of American airstrikes looming in the minds of Somali civilians. This program has only incentivized Somali security elites to manipulate the American presence for their own political ends.

West Africa: Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen

An analysis of West Africa has too many interceding nations and factions to concisely address. On the issue of military aid, there is a vast array of competing African-led counterterrorism initiatives that confuse and complicate the crisis. The G5 Sahel Joint Force (Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad, and Burkina Faso) is separate from the Multinational Joint Task Force (Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger). Additional resources are plunged into the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) multibillion-dollar program and the United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) peacekeeping operation backed by the UN and the African Union (AU).¹² The lack of clarity around the roles that these different actors play lead to

gaps in strategic planning and system-wide failures.¹³ To add to the confusion, there are programs promoted by the United States and the former colonial superpower in West Africa: France.

France has long held a strong presence in the region, even after its decolonization in the early 1960s. Through its promotion of Francafrique, France has publicly demanded that its former colonies maintain strict financial ties and it has privately been complicit in regime change efforts throughout the Cold War.¹⁴ This behavior occurred with the tacit approval of the United States under the guise of anti-communism. Today, anti-French sentiment in West Africa is rising, with the governments of Burkina Faso and Mali seeking a Russian presence to antagonize their former colonizer.¹⁵

The United States does not acknowledge its role in this, but a close relationship through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the UN Security Council guarantees that a relationship with France almost always trumps African interests. Until very recently, France maintained a counterterrorism effort in West Africa called Operation Barkhane.¹⁶ This initiative complicated peace processes as one of the largest insurgent groups in the region welcomed negotiations with the Malian government under the condition that the 'racist, arrogant, French crusader occupation ended'. In response, France ruled out any talks with the group.¹⁷

The United States has cooperated with French counterterrorism efforts, despite the fears and frustrations of local populations. America's own counterterrorism effort in the region has failed, but mostly due to its military aid programs which will be described further in this paper. While the United States is visibly present in Somalia, in most cases it provides support from the background. To Africans, however, this looming presence is politically antagonizing.

AFRICOM and the American Panopticon

The United States established its African Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, based out of Germany. This remote location is partially due to the hesitation of any African country to host an AFRICOM center, but it has not slowed the expansion of the American military presence to 29 U.S. military bases hosting

some 7,000 U.S. soldiers.¹⁸ Much of these resources are spent on providing air support and intelligence to security partners in the region, essentially being an American “eye in the sky” for a continent of 1.4 billion people.

Africans fear that their safety will not be adequately considered in American decisions. In the view of many Africans, the United States exhibits a pattern of behavior in its “militarized” approach to diplomacy that will escalate any situations that it gets involved in.¹⁹ Because of this, Africans are broadly uncomfortable with overt and covert U.S. intelligence programs within their borders.²⁰ A strong sense of independence drives this fear that African actors will lose control and sovereignty in their home, as American programs replace existing African military structures and institutions.²¹

Africans also fear the exploitative nature of the military-industrial complex as a source of future escalation and an attack on African independence. The scale of the American military industry would dwarf anything similar in Africa and generate a supplier/customer relationship. While the money would flow into America, the wars would be fought in Africa. This system of “exporting destruction” to Africa while increasing “African dependency” is a major concern both for AFRICOM and a variety of military aid programs.²²

The presence of the American AFRICOM command providing background support is seen as intrusive, in no small part due to the legacy of the failed American War on Terror. The worsening security crisis speaks to its failure in short-term impact, and it is politically unsustainable, incentivizing nationalist actors to rail against its abuses and exploitation. The commonly suggested solution to this is to enlist a wider international mechanism to provide peacekeeping operations. This too is interpreted as an intrusive presence.

Blue Helmets

Many in the Global North perceive UN peacekeeping forces as an intuitively altruistic effort at conflict resolution, but Africans who have experienced these programs take different views. These programs tend to occur with long mandates that turn out to be incredibly expensive. The UN peacekeeping mission in

the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has been there since 1999 and employs around 18,000 people at an annual cost of over US\$1 billion.²³ The presence of tens of thousands of foreign professionals is hugely costly in a financial sense, but also has a completely unsustainable political cost.

Africans tend to be significantly antagonized by the presence of UN peacekeeping forces and this discontent is frequently leveraged into populism and violence. UN peacekeeping officials insist on their concern for respecting host nations with their “people-centered” protection approach.²⁴ In practice, however, these missions are reluctant to engage with the messy politics of their host countries.²⁵

The result is that whenever violence is inflicted on civilians in security situations with a UN presence, local politicians leverage this into outrage toward the UN mission.²⁶ This has recently occurred both in MINUSMA in West Africa and MONUSCO in the Congo where local groups attacked the UN peacekeeping facilities, killing three peacekeepers and an unknown number of civilians.²⁷

This political backlash occurs on a national level, where both the West African country of Mali and the Central African Republic lashed out at their UN missions by inviting the Russian Wagner group to provide security.²⁸ The UN’s “blue helmets” are interpreted as ineffective compared to the Wagner with their extensive human rights abuses. Despite the frustrations, these UN mandates only expand and become more expensive with their pattern of “Christmas-tree mandates” as more and more objectives are imposed on the group.

UN peacekeeping mandates are destined to grow in complexity and responsibility alongside a sense of distrust and betrayal from the communities they hope to serve. Their costs are unsustainable, and they incentivize local politicians to use them as a convenient punching bag for populist rhetoric.

This is the larger problem with these non-African solutions for African problems. They tend to generate intense anger and betrayal from civilian populations. Because of this, an alternative approach has been for the United States to sponsor African solutions, funding the domestic military operations of African

countries. Like the peacekeeping forces, these too are manipulated by opportunistic political actors who leverage the American unfamiliarity with the African continent.

Security Assistance

The United States has a new favorite tool for its foreign policy in the Global South, and it's called Security Sector Assistance (SSA). This type of assistance is commonly known as military aid and includes funding foreign militaries, arms sales, and training. Two laws provide the DoD with broad authority to fund partners with little to no oversight.

The statutory authority 10 U.S.C. § 127e, referred to as 127e, allows the DoD to provide “support” to foreign forces, paramilitaries and private individuals who are in turn “supporting” U.S. counterterrorism operations.²⁹ Similarly, the authority 10 U.S.C. § 333, referred to as 333, permits the DoD to train and equip foreign forces anywhere in the world, allowing the U.S. to directly target the adversaries of our partners under the interpretation of self-defense.³⁰

These two laws provide for very little oversight or supervision. The DoD gives little explanation for its interpretation of which § 333 partners to defend or where it conducts § 127e programs, often declining to report to Congress when U.S. forces under these authorities direct or engage in combat.³¹

The consequences of this approach to security are multi-faceted but generally provide little if any improvement to regional security while encouraging partner forces to foster insecurity and attack the populations that they are meant to protect. Simply put, with Washington offering piles of money, African partners are predictably willing to break the rules to protect their share.

The Appeal: Throwing Money at Terrorism

The political attractiveness of SSA programs has allowed for this lack of transparency for an ineffective program. Today, SSA is a decisive part of America's strategy in Africa.³² This is because it appears to Americans like a way to quantify their effort without risking boots on the ground. Proponents of SSA speak

about how American training can instill “American values and virtues”, professionalizing and liberalizing autocratic military institutions.

This perspective is not based in reality. Not only does SSA fail to promote American values, it distorts a variety of delicate political ecosystems such that the necessity for African militaries to prioritize African civilians drops to dangerous levels. The scale of U.S. military aid programs simply makes African militaries more reliant on their American donors than their own people. In 2012, this American military aid represented more than 15% of the military budgets of partners in Burundi, Djibouti, Niger, and Uganda.³³ With these new funds, African militaries often no longer prioritize counterterrorism and SSA proves ineffective.

Ineffectiveness: Distracted and Directionless

Providing SSA to African countries has proven to be an unreliable means for solving security issues. Accountability safeguards are overwhelmed, so SSA often ends up “throwing money at a problem” and relying on an overconfidence in African military officials who act primarily in their self-interest.

The result is mishandling of funds on a massive scale. SSA intends to build the capacity of partner forces but fails to recognize the extent of existing gaps. As a result, partner forces can neither adequately maintain the provided equipment nor consistently train soldiers to use it, so the expensive equipment falls into disrepair.³⁴

This type of short-sighted spending is endemic in American SSA programs, as it tends to be provided in short bursts. This is often attributed to bureaucratic inefficiency and the red tape which complicates the creation of a comprehensive political-military approach.³⁵ SSA programs often lack focused supervision due to legislative requirements and shifting senior-level attention, leading to a consistent lack of impact.

The resources that the United States provides through SSA has often slipped through the cracks and into the possession of the very forces meant to be defeated by these resources. This occurred in Libya in 2014,

when resources were left without adequate attention and taken.³⁶ In 2012, elite U.S.-trained units in Mali defected to the Tuareg insurgency and brought with them critical equipment.³⁷ In any case, the larger failure of increasing SSA funds to improve the security situation demonstrates the general inefficiency of the program. SSA doesn't promote good behavior, so it is critical to evaluate what it actually does.

Tolerating Terrorism: The American Security Safety Net

Security assistance opens the door to a thread form of politics unthinkable to most in the United States. The truth is that by ensuring a simmering terrorist threat, military officials can guarantee their political power because eliminating the threat could dry up the money they depend on.

American military aid is provided at such a scale that it overwhelms the underdeveloped civilian and military institutions of impoverished African countries. As a result, partner militaries keep instability and even terrorism at a manageable level so that aid continues to flow.³⁸ American policymakers fail to consider that in Africa, the political risk of ongoing violence is often safer than the political risk of a weaker military, as these American SSA funds inherently reinforce regime stability.

This decision to tolerate terrorism occurs even in relatively democratic and stable African countries like Kenya. In the late 2000s, the American military provided considerable SSA to crush a burgeoning al-Qaida faction, but a study found that Kenyan officials were incentivized to maintain terrorism at such a level that guaranteed continued American funds.³⁹ Developing countries may not share America's zero tolerance policy toward terrorism. A key reason for this tolerance is the sense of an American security safety net where the United States will fix the problem if the situation deteriorates further. This similarly negates domestic pressures for a professional and effective military, as even civilians have outsourced their trust to the global hegemon.⁴⁰

A deteriorating security situation may mean suffering in the short-term, but it will likely mean a new rush of security aid or American boots on the ground in the

long term. This is a huge reason why increasing levels of SSA neither increase nor decrease terrorist activities across African countries.⁴¹ On a darker note, the result of SSA isn't always laziness, as it can also be a will to manufacture a crisis for the rewarding American-funded solution.

Build Your Own Insurgency: SSA Encourages Abuse

While American SSA at times results in rusting equipment or corrupt officials, it is just as often inflicted by military partners on innocent civilians. The justified backlash toward this violence has the recursive effect of generating a new security crisis which in turn can be leveraged toward greater SSA payouts.

This practice is based on critical dishonesty on the part of security partners. It is not in the American national interest to inflict violence on African civilians and foment new conflicts. This is an issue of the principal-agent problem where the United States simply does not understand the environments in which it is engaging.

The significance of SSA resources is that they become a kingmaker in the anarchic factionalism within African countries. When Burundi misdirected American SSA toward the pro-government Imbonerakura militia, the relevant actors were rationally directing vast foreign military aid toward regime stability because it simply outweighed the benefits of Washington's intention of capacity building.⁴² The United States justifies SSA as a promotion of professionalism and human rights but efforts to patch deep wounds in African civil-military relations predictably fail.

Priorities taught through American SSA training lack an understanding of African political systems and result in continued or worsened human rights abuses. When military officers are taught seemingly simple norms like to obey orders from civil institutions and to respect human rights, they often find these norms inadequate when civil institutions order human rights abuses.⁴³ When American norms seem inadequate, they are often discarded entirely. The fact that this is a continent-wide problem only crushes efforts to punish violators, as any failure by the U.S. to punish a human rights abuse elicits an outcry of hypocrisy.⁴⁴

Relapse: The Problem with Simple Disengagement

American military aid is being leveraged toward domestic political ends and that has resulted in the unraveling of democratic systems. The United States is overwhelming fragile nations in Africa with a chronic lack of resources but directing the resources it sends toward the military. In the context of these weak norms and weak civilian leadership, African military officers with new resources and training often grow frustrated and either take greater control over their nation's politics or replace the political system altogether.⁴⁵ There is a well-documented pattern of the African military officers closest to American SSA programs organizing a new wave of military coups, with seven coups or coup attempts in the last year and a half alone.⁴⁶

These military coups generate a political dynamic where military dictators only seek the loyalty of their soldiers and inflict widespread human rights abuses in response. The former internal security minister of Burkina Faso explained very bluntly that atrocities committed on civilians are used as a morale booster for soldiers.⁴⁷ Whether it is a matter of actors targeting a rival ethnic group or just making use of the new resources offered by the American SSA program, innocent civilians bear the huge costs of American involvement in African affairs.

This brutal pattern shows a clear failure of the critical SSA approach to American security policy. There is a lack of the desired impact as SSA programs are proven to have a negligible effect on terrorist levels. The incentivization of an endless cycle of democratic backsliding and human rights violations demonstrates that SSA is not sustainable because of the behaviors it perpetuates.

The United States is being manipulated by African political actors who simply understand the region and the existing political ecosystem better than it does. The solution seems to be to withdraw our military assistance from the region and allow African power dynamics to even themselves out. Unfortunately, largely due to past American actions, there are external factors that may have complicated that withdrawal.

The appeal of disengaging from Africa is that the trajectory of African security is not clearly in American national interests and disengaging could curtail the negative effects of American aid while allowing African countries to self-regulate. The harsher reality is that U.S.-Africa relations do not occur in a vacuum, and political actors that are neither American nor African have a growing presence on the continent. Disengagement remains a superior option to external solutions or SSA, but it may be short-lived as American competition with these external actors outweighs priorities around African security. A key factor in the future of American military aid is the growing attention to Africa paid by global terrorist networks.

Terrorism's Shifting Center of Gravity

The attention and ambition of the most capable and notorious terrorist networks in the world have turned on Africa. As a result, sudden U.S. disengagement may allow global jihadist networks to blossom and conduct attacks on American interests. There are already a multitude of terrorist groups in countries across the continent, including Somalia in East Africa, the Sahel region of West Africa, the rural interior of central Africa, and even northern Mozambique in Southern Africa.

Seasoned jihadist insurgents from groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State have been moving down to Africa to train and develop new groups. Throughout the 2010s, numerous high-ranking al-Qaida terrorists moved from a variety of Middle Eastern countries to Somalia to join the blossoming al-Shabaab. They attempted to establish new jihadist networks in Kenya and Tanzania but were scattered by intense counter-terrorism efforts, instead moving to northern Mozambique or Uganda.⁴⁸

The group in Uganda moved to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and re-christened itself the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). They remain active today, if overlooked in the broader security concerns of the eastern DRC. The group in Mozambique established Ansar al-Sunna, which overwhelmed the Mozambican military, requiring an

intervention from neighbors like South Africa and even the distant Rwanda. Ansar al-Sunna remains a considerable threat in the region today.

By forming a multitude of resilient terrorist cells, developing terror networks could thrive in the chaos they create and set down roots until they are able to launch attacks on American civilians an ocean away. At a basic level, terrorism is trending toward being an African problem. Between January and June of 2022, Nigeria had the second highest number of Islamic State claimed attacks, more than those occurring in Syria.⁴⁹

This should be of major concern to the United States. Unlike the Middle East, Africa is a region that is growing faster than any other in the world. Africa will comprise nearly 30% of the world's population of 2050, and rapid economic growth will push 90 million Africans into the consumer class by 2025; this is in addition to a blossoming industrial sector that could soon supplant Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ American strategic interests are not currently in Africa, but they will be soon.

The darker outcome of Africa's population growth is that there are millions of young Africans who may turn to even greater militancy and violence if a security situation restricts them from peaceful economic ambitions. Terrorist networks are famously adept at reaping new recruits from the security crises that they create. Already, terror networks are leveraging frustrations around poverty and instability into anger toward "the West."⁵¹ This new generation of Africans are an incredible resource to these terror networks and the Islamic State has already announced its intention to "remain and expand" in Africa.⁵² A withdrawn America is likely to be pressured back into Africa as the situation deteriorates.

Political Games

Withdrawing suddenly from Africa will have a worse outcome than a more controlled disengagement over a longer period of time. African nations manipulate and abuse security aid, but only because they are already lacking in resources. Disengagement will leave them incapable of solving key problems. Nigeria has a relatively strong economy and is one the few regional powers on the continent, but it is currently running

into such intense budget concerns that it is risking the loss of recent territorial gains with the terrorist group Boko Haram.⁵³ African nations facing these sorts of crises may start shopping for new patrons.

Russia and China have long held a presence in Africa, and they may offer alternative security arrangements with African countries. As previously mentioned, the Russian mercenary company Wagner Group has been introduced as an alternative to UN peacekeeping forces. African countries have recently been courted, with the Russian Foreign Minister arguing that friendship with Russia was key to African food security.⁵⁴ The United States has offered something far less concrete in response with their Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act.⁵⁵

China is also engaging heavily with Africa and its development-based Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could open the door to security relationships with African countries. African countries' existing development relationship with China may make Beijing their first phone call when the streams of American military aid run dry.

The threat isn't that African countries might become ensnared in a superpower rivalry, but rather that this rivalry may drive American political pressure to return to its harmful aforementioned security approaches. If the United States does not have an existing security policy toward Africa, a major deal with a rival or a major terrorist attack may be politicized into a renewed effort to have a strong American military presence in the region.

Already, there is an internal institutional drive to retain American involvement through the "bureaucratic staying power" of "Africa specialists" who may seek policies that will guarantee careers and job security.⁵⁶ An ill-defined or sudden withdrawal may embolden these groups to act. A well-coordinated withdrawal with an approach that carefully factors the behaviors encouraged by American security policy is the preferred solution to the American security dilemma.

A Controlled Withdrawal of Military Aid

The United States should withdraw from military op-

erations in Africa and redirect existing military aid to African governments toward an African Union (AU) continental counterterrorism program. By keeping the annual aid provided at a fixed number, there will be no benefit from ongoing insecurity, and African military officials will be encouraged to pursue their own capacity-building operation before inflation shrinks the purchasing power of the allocated assistance funds.

The specifics of an African Union counter-terrorism program, abbreviated here at AU-CTP, will be dictated by the AU. The United States will serve the role as an investor, withholding the right to freeze, shrink or permanently cut off military aid if it is determined that this aid is being abused or misused in a serious sense. The material costs of misappropriation will lead political actors within the AU to regulate each other and so concerns about national politics will be regulated by a network of peers.

The AU-CTP program will not perfectly address all the problems of sustainability, impact, and incentivization. As described, if AU-CTP is not operated in a satisfactory manner and America withdraws funding for the proposed program, the chance for a return to harmful patterns is possible. Any withdrawal would occur with clear cause, however, which minimizes the relapse problem.

The set annual aid would make the program vastly more sustainable than other options, and the program is designed to encourage Africans to take ownership of their own security crises with less risk of opportunistic political manipulation. The remainder of this paper will explain the decision to work closely with the AU and further elaborate on the comparative advantages of the AU-CTP option.

Why AU-CTP?

Trust has been misplaced in African military partners, so the decision to simply shift focus toward a new institution should be met with suspicion. The AU is a uniquely trustworthy institution and plays a uniquely positive role on the continent. Providing it with resources to solve counterterrorism problems is preferable to withdrawing from the region entirely.

The AU plays an important symbolic role on the continent. For decades, African nations coordinated through the comparatively toothless Organization of African States (OAS). This was largely because of the solidaristic doctrine that, “No African is free until all Africans are free,” and African states demanded the end of the ongoing white minority rule in the Portuguese colonies and the Apartheid states of South Africa and Rhodesia (later renamed Zimbabwe). With the end of the Apartheid state in South Africa in the mid-1990s, the toothless OAS was replaced by the far more powerful AU.

The AU is a key institution on the continent, but primarily lacks leverage with its member-states. The region has lost its sense of ownership over the future. With a young and rapidly growing population setting the groundwork for a widespread interpretation of ownership over security conditions, concerns about African security rest with that hopeful generation.

African Ownership of African Problems

The AU represents freedom and sovereignty for the continent, which functionally defines its final break from colonialism as the formation of the AU. Many Africans interpret ongoing American, French, and UN military operations as an extension of the colonial past. By transferring counterterrorism jurisdiction from American policymakers to the key institution of African self-determination, Africans will have greater trust in counterterrorism projects in their land.

One of the main problems expressed in concerns about external intervention is the public perception and political manipulation of the circumstances. When local politicians leverage anger around UN peacekeeping forces or terrorist groups leverage the carnage wrought by American airstrikes, they are calling on a deep-seated anger. There are deep cultural wounds around the feeling that Africa’s future has always been dictated by outsider.⁵⁷ Placing a spotlight on the AU is likely to avoid some of the nationalist opportunism of other security programs because the AU is considered the apex of African solidarity around shared suffering.⁵⁸

By funding African-led counterterrorism efforts, the United States can present itself as a partner in African security, but crucially, a “silent partner.” This “silent

partner” approach would be a new direction for the American military, but a potential new model for security relationships with the Global South.⁵⁹ Security assistance was a key factor in the failed nation-building project in Afghanistan and other regions. If the United States is only willing to provide security assistance through well-regulated regional organizations, it could encourage diplomatic problem-solving.

There is, of course, the danger that African politicians would rally their populations in anti-American sentiment if the United States were to choose to withdraw their funding, but that would be fairly counterintuitive, as the public anger would be occurring in Africa and could only be directed toward African politicians. Additionally, the political maneuver has limited applications as standards like civil rights and strong civil-military relations are broadly popular when applied fairly. Popularity among foreign populations is not in of itself an American foreign policy interest, so public outrage will not be a major concern.

The question of whether the AU should be the mechanism for counterterrorism in Africa does not address whether the AU can perform that job effectively. The AU-CTP program would be able to operate through actors who understand African security crises and are thus minimally intrusive.

AU-CTP Will Fix Existing Regional Initiatives

The AU would be the most effective mechanism for counterterrorism because the consistent issue with other programs is a lack of experience in the region. Furthermore, the AU will be able to work through existing networks of regional organizations. It has long been argued that African military officials have better approaches to African conflicts.⁶⁰ Africa is a massive continent of 1.4 billion people and there are existing regional counterterrorism initiatives that the AU-CTP program can streamline and sponsor.

Regional initiatives are a key solution to terrorism and can be leveraged in an organized fashion to achieve greater ends. The counterterrorism efforts in West Africa have long been a confused mess, including the G5 Sahel Force, the Multinational Joint Task Force, ECOWAS, MINUSMA, French Operation Barkhane

and the American Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program.⁶¹ The AU has been working through MINUSMA but has also called for greater cooperation between these actors through the Lake Chad Basin Commission.⁶² With far greater resources, the AU would be able to reallocate resources with the clear mandate of stabilizing the region, as opposed to the status quo of competing interests among counterterrorism programs.

There are a variety of other counterterrorism efforts that could be integrated into AU-CTP supervision and patronage. Recently, the newly created East Africa Community (EAC) has gathered military forces from Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan to address instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).⁶³

This is a key reason for the strict limit to US funding for the AU-CTP. Any additional funding for African security can and must be provided by African countries. As US funding inevitably diminishes, African countries will have time and ample warning to fill the gaps. The EAC effort is very new, but already there are concerns about leadership and integration. Additionally, concerns are voiced that the EAC program will not adequately incorporate recent lessons from the counter-terrorism efforts in Mozambique.⁶⁴ A coordinating and funding body like AU-CTP could distribute the existing network of seasoned African counterterrorism specialists, ensure resource needs are being met and improve the effectiveness of existing counterterrorism efforts.

The developing counterterrorism program in Mozambique is an additional example of the need for greater organization and leadership in African regional counterterrorism programs. Like in West and Central Africa, there are a variety of military operations conducted by a variety of actors. The South African Development Community (SADC) and the military of Rwanda are failing to adequately share intelligence and objectives with both each other and the Mozambican military.⁶⁵ This has led to the introduction of private military contractors who have been subsequently accused of human rights violations.⁶⁶ In search of leadership and coordination assistance, some are already calling for greater involvement from the AU.⁶⁷

Existing AU counter-terrorism efforts have had major problems. The past AU mission in Somalia faced repeated accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse against Somali women and girls.⁶⁸ Abuses within AU programs can be best addressed with greater mechanisms for supervision and a credible threat that American aid will be withheld if these conditions are replicated.

Providing these resources to the AU-CTP will make it a far more important player in African politics on a broad scale. While a shift in power dynamics must be expected, the influences of the AU are likely to be beneficial for both American and African interests.

The AU-CTP Can Run Counterterrorism Effectively

So far, this paper has been advocating for the strengthening of the AU without much discussion of its current status. The scale of an AU-CTP program would require an overhaul of many existing AU-CTP security programs, so it does not consider many of those. The AU has some key problems today, but they are primarily rooted in a lack of authority within its member-states.

Unlike the European Union (EU), the only qualification for membership within the African Union is geography. As will be later discussed, it suspends membership in the event of democratic backsliding. The result of this reliance on voluntary adherence is that African governments have a history of sabotaging AU efforts to exert its authority.⁶⁹ With the wave of military coups on the continent, some are arguing that the AU is facing a decline in authority.⁷⁰ The reason for this, however, is a lack of resources provided to African countries.

Member states can walk over the AU because it lacks significant funds for its program and thus members have minimal dependence.⁷¹ A program like the AU-CTP is crucial to the AU, serving the dual purpose of earning widespread credibility and dependence. The AU won important symbolic admiration in its formation, but greater resources will allow it to be transformative.

These resources can be effectively leveraged to suc-

cessfully achieve some of the ends that international efforts have failed to attain. The RAND report on SSA in Africa walked away with a singular mechanism through which SSA can be effective. When American aid occurred in the presence of UN peacekeeping operations (PKO), internal political violence was generally reduced.⁷² This is largely because more professional and organized military units positively influenced host-nation security forces.⁷³ This occurred successfully with a heavy American effort to rebuild the Liberian military between 2003 and 2010, succeeding only because of PKO influence.⁷⁴

This trend speaks to the powerful potential of the AU-CTP program. Trends around reduced political violence extend to a reduced frequency and lethality of terrorism attacks. More professional African military forces can serve this function. While UN forces have attempted to create an “organization scaffolding” through international specialists “attuned to local political dynamics,” the AU can develop an extensive network of African security experts. UN peacekeeping forces are an antagonizing factor that are unsustainable, but a well-organized AU peacekeeping operation could simply do that job much more effectively.

The direct ability of an AU-CTP program to bolster existing counterterrorism operations and establish effective peacekeeping operations is critical. Centralizing authority in the AU runs the risk of encouraging some to seek control of AU-CTP funds. The AU itself and the conditional mechanism of American AU-CTP funding are designed to mitigate this.

Prioritizing Democracy

While the United States would be a silent partner in the AU-CTP program, American money should go toward positive outcomes like human rights and democratization. The AU shares these values and will additionally regulate itself to keep national interests of member states from dominating AU-CTP programming.

The AU has long promoted democracy on the continent. The AU sanctions countries that have their democracies overthrown, cutting them off from participation in the body. This may not seem important, but states vehemently lobby against suspension and military dictators have historically acquiesced to

the AU's demands for new elections.⁷⁵ This occurs regardless of the size and importance of the country, with AU pressure caving even Egypt.⁷⁶

There are certainly concrete issues with this system, but these gaps are already being addressed with proposed reforms to empower the sanction system further. One policy includes sanctions for unconstitutional changes of government, as expressed through the concerns about Sudan.⁷⁷ This may also occur for election-rigging, a hugely important concern for Africa.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the AU has existed for only twenty years and it has suspended 91% of states tried since 2005.⁷⁹

Introducing the pool of AU-CTP funding will raise the stakes on being sanctioned by the AU. These higher costs will allow the AU to credibly threaten suspension for abuses like unconstitutional regime change and election-rigging. It would improve both the authority of the AU and the state of democracy across the continent. Greater democracy in African countries will amplify the demands of African civilians, forcing a continent-wide improvement in civil-military relations. This, in turn, will translate into greater pressure against human rights abuses.

There remains the concern over what may happen if any of these admittedly enthusiastic and hopeful predictions do not come true. This is the benefit of America's role as a silent partner and financier. If Washington does not like how the AU is handling things broadly, it can leave.

Africa After AU-CTP

African member states are incentivized to stay within the good graces of their new sponsor, the AU. Unlike the United States, the African institution has African interests in mind. It is incentivized to stay within the good graces of its new counterterrorism sponsor, the United States of America. The United States can act in its own interests and encourage Africa to regulate its own security and terrorism.

The American funding for the AU-CTP is set at a certain unchanging level, so it is going to fade away on a timeline. Because of this, the circumstances of the funding are likely to be directed toward ca-

capacity-building instead of short-term operational expenditures. With this capacity-building, as the set aid shrinks, it will also be less and less important to AU-CTP operations. Similarly, if a rival like Russia or China offers SSA, it will only be supplemental to the existing AU-CTP structure. At best, they would be a late investor in the program. If they offer SSA to a specific country, they would be an agitator to the existing African security ecosystem.

Once an African institution claims ideological and literal ownership over questions of African security, external actors will not arrive as a saving grace in the face of desperation. Concerns about neo-colonialism will be addressed by the point that Africans will not depend on others for these security programs. If AU-CTP becomes self-sustaining enough, perhaps it can trade in that American security assistance for American development assistance, building bridges and roads. America will simply no longer be needed in Africa, and that is in its national interest.

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