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Strategic Competition and Irregular Warfare in Africa: Lessons from the Cold War

By Peter Burns

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 21st century will be the African century. The continent's population is on track to exceed 2.5 billion by 2050.¹ The effort required by governments, economies, and institutions to effectively manage this level of growth will be demanding given the varied challenges Africa faces. Political stability, internal security, climate change, and foreign influence are just some of these challenges, and they will require deliberate planning, investment, and action to address.

The rapid growth of Africa over the next several decades will occur amidst the backdrop of increasing international competition. This creates an opportunity for African states to leverage international alliances through political and economic alignment. The risk of polarizing political alignments by African states is to repeat the past, specifically the Cold War. During this time, strategic competition between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China in Africa created instability and conflict which underlies volatility in many African states to this day.

In the modern conceptualization of strategic competition, the United States seeks to gain relative advantage over adversaries through a whole-of-government approach that includes instruments of military power.² The military power applied in strategic competition often takes the form of irregular warfare, as it did during the Cold War period. Application of irregular warfare doctrine is the responsibility of special operations forces, who are increasingly employed around the world to pursue objectives below the threshold of war, often referred to as the grey zone.³ In the African case, responsible application of special operations forces to strategic competition objectives must be rooted in the lessons of the Cold War to avoid polarizing a continent whose bright future is at risk from foreign influence.

This paper presents five brief cases of foreign competition in Africa during the Cold War: Congo, Angola, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Although legal authorities, oversight, and U.S. foreign policy broadly is much changed from the Cold War era, these cases contain useful lessons for crafting future U.S. security policy in Africa. Using these lessons and strategic foresight analysis to identify future scenarios, this analysis offers four distinct generalizations of the African future to identify foreign policy risks, opportunities, and challenges. As a result, seven policy questions are provided for use in assessing the usage of U.S. special operations forces for strategic com-

petition in Africa.

Defining Irregular Warfare

In U.S. military doctrine, irregular warfare is defined as:

“A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Irregular warfare (IW) favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.”⁴

This definition is ambiguous compared to other military concepts as irregular warfare fills the gap between conflict and peace, thereby eluding a clear, binary classification. This ambiguity is the appeal of irregular warfare, as it enables a broader range of engagement with less risk for the participating states. The value of irregular warfare is fully realized by other major powers like China and Russia.

The application of irregular warfare formally assumes five specific forms. The most recognizable variations are counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, with modern examples in the U.S. military campaigns from the Global War on Terror. The other three examples are foreign internal defense, stability operations, and unconventional warfare.⁵ Unconventional warfare is unique as it provides military support to organized groups designed to operate against a nation-state from within. This is through an insurgency or resistance effort. In all forms, irregular warfare campaigns include an integrated application of the national instruments of power.

Irregular warfare operations take place in complex social contexts where the information domain plays a critical role.⁶ As a result, actors often leverage misinformation and disinformation campaigns to influence target populations.⁷ In today’s landscape, the influence of activities conducted in the name of strategic competition will have far greater effects compared to similar activities that took place during the Cold War time period due to the network effect of the information environment.

Defining Strategic Competition

Since the beginning of history, nation-states have competed among each other in pursuit of their own interests. Competition between interests requires a continuous balancing of relative power in order to prevent conflict in the absence of cooperation. The Cold War is an example of this balancing between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The balancing occurred, of course, militarily. But other forms of balancing allowed for more peaceful forms of competition, whether through technological innovation, economics and trade, or cultural influence.

The U.S. military’s *Joint Concept for Competing*, released in 2023 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, presents the conceptualization of strategic competition in the modern era:

“Strategic competition is a persistent and long-term struggle that occurs between two or more adversaries seeking to pursue incompatible interests without necessarily engaging in armed conflict with each other.”⁸

Strategic competition is a continuous interaction of political, economic, military, and cultural forces integrated in a manner which provides a relative advantage over an adversary. The concept recognizes that “adversaries are employing cohesive combinations of military and civil power to expand the competitive space” and encourages a comparable effort by the U.S. government.⁹

From the military perspective, strategic competition is a supported effort in which military power is used alongside other government actors in the interagency. As a result, strategic competition requires a deep integration of military power with the efforts of other leading governmental components. Perhaps most importantly, these actors must be responsible for deliberately calibrating the integration of military power to maintain a continuous advantage over the competitor, without escalating towards conflict or jeopardizing tangential objectives, all while managing perceptions of other actors and populations within the operating environment. This requires integrated campaigning.

Integrated campaigning is a critical component of strategic competition. The concept achieves a unity of

government effort by aligning the actions of interagency partners and allies towards strategic goals.¹⁰ This enables the leveraging of varied authorities and capabilities in a whole-of-government approach to achieve a continuous advantage in strategic competition.

During the Cold War, there was a lack of development in integrating ideas, institutions, and legal authorities towards a comprehensive approach for strategic competition. The Cold War period is very much defined by the usage of military and paramilitary power to gain advantage over competing states, particularly in Africa.

Strategic Competition in Africa During the Cold War

Competition during the Cold War occurred across many regions, but the least well-known is the African case. The United States, Soviet Union, and China competed through intervention in African affairs from the early 1950s onwards. Foreign influence created instability, stoked conflict, and resulted in widespread suffering across the continent.¹¹ The legacy of foreign interference in Africa during the Cold War is a root cause for many of the conflicts that persist today.

Decolonization movements in the mid-20th century set the stage as newly independent states began to form governments. Although the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) sought to avoid extension of Cold War competition onto the African continent, in practice, many states experienced popular ideological movements that made this impossible. Ideological competition between liberalism and communism provided the impetus for foreign influence by the United States, Russia, and China. The alignment of African states with outside powers became inevitable.

Although not officially incorporated into U.S. military doctrine until 2008, irregular warfare occurred across the African continent during the Cold War. Foreign internal defense is one example of irregular warfare applied to Africa, as the United States armed and trained forces that were unfriendly to the Soviet Union with the goal of strengthening existing regimes.¹² The U.S. government equipped regimes and rebel groups alike, exercising either counterinsurgency or unconventional forms of irregular warfare across the continent. Sta-

bility operations are an easily identifiable form of irregular warfare conducted in numerous African states. These operations are focused on providing a basic level of security to transition unstable areas to legitimate local governance. The impetus for these operations can be conflict, natural disasters, or governance issues.

African states with communist leaning elements were viewed as threatening to U.S. interests, attracting support for armed resistance movements (unconventional warfare), counter-insurgency, foreign internal defense, and arms sales more broadly. This support was primarily led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).¹³ At the time, irregular warfare had not yet been developed doctrinally by the U.S. military, although the forms of military power that were applied to competition in Africa during the Cold War are now known as such. This is also true for the Soviet Union and China, which armed governments and resistance groups on the continent throughout the Cold War.¹⁴

Apart from ideology, natural resources and foreign investment were motivators for foreign influence. Africa is rich in natural resources, specifically minerals, oil, and natural gas.¹⁵ Foreign governments often supported commercialization of these African interests through support to friendly governments or rebel groups.¹⁶ This form of corruption unwrote several authoritarian regimes throughout the Cold War. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the strategic imperative to maintain control over these vast resources vanished, resulting in regimes that subsequently lost foreign support and collapsed into power vacuums.¹⁷ Ironically, the end of the Cold War brought further instability, conflict, and underdevelopment to the continent.

Figure 1: Africa During the Cold War¹⁸



Congo (Zaire)

When Congo gained independence from Belgium in 1960, the West retained an interest in continued control of the country's vast natural mineral wealth¹⁹. The post-colonial government, however, did not align with these interests. Lacking support from the United States and United Nations (UN) in upholding the rule of law after a mineral-rich province broke away from the newly formed state, Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba sought support from the Soviet Union.

The alignment of Congo, rich in natural resources and one of the first states in Africa to seek Soviet support, raised strategic concerns for the United States and justified intervention. Together with Belgium, the United States supported a coup d'état, a form of irregular warfare.²⁰ The U.S. government assisted in the capture and turnover of Prime Minister Lumumba to secessionist forces, resulting in his assassination.²¹

The Soviet Union and China quickly supported the opposing rebel groups by providing military assistance while the U.S. government trained and equipped a mercenary army loyal to the new prime minister, Moïse Tshombe.²² Then, a second U.S.-backed coup d'état installed the dictator Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who would amass billions of dollars in personal wealth over the next three decades of rule.²³ At the end of the Cold War, the West no longer needed Congo as a bulwark against the influence of the Soviet Union and China. The Mobutu regime then collapsed, leading to years of instability and conflict that took the lives of at least 5.4 million people.²⁴

In the Congolese case, American policymakers viewed the newly independent state as critical to strategic competition with Soviet and Chinese interests in Africa due to its natural resource wealth and initial ideological disposition. This resulted in various forms of irregular warfare support to policymaking, including both unconventional warfare through support to resistance groups (coup d'état) and foreign internal defense (training and equipping). These efforts resulted in a Congo that was aligned with U.S. interests for more than thirty years. Ultimately however, these interests were not aligned with the population, resulting in a devastating conflict once the Cold War ended.

Ethiopia and Somalia

Ethiopia and Somalia's geographic position on the Horn of Africa is strategically valuable due to their proximity to the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Middle East. In the 1950s, the United States maintained a critical interest in the Kagnew communications station located in Eritrea (annexed from Italy by Ethiopia in 1962).²⁵ Further, the Soviet Union developed deep ties with Somalia. Thus, the U.S. government sought to strategically compete with Soviet influence in the Horn of Africa by providing military assistance to Ethiopia. Over a decade, the United States provided over \$280 million in military aid and trained thousands of Ethiopian military personnel through foreign internal defense.²⁶

In Somalia, the Soviets developed a strategically valuable military base at the Port of Berbera. The state quickly became one of the most heavily armed nations in sub-Saharan Africa, after Ethiopia, as the Soviet Union also provided millions of dollars in arms and thousands of military trainers.²⁷

In 1974, a military coup in Ethiopia installed a Marxist regime, souring U.S. support. After regional disputes over the political future of the Horn of Africa, Somalia invaded Ethiopia in what is known as the Ogaden War. The Soviet Union did not support Somalia's war, and in fact favored the communist orientation of the Ethiopian government.²⁸ The Somali military, trained and equipped by the Soviet Union, was nearly victorious in the war before the Soviets intervened on behalf of Ethiopia, switching sides, and airlifted over \$1 billion in military assistance and thousands of troops in what would be the largest military engagement for the Soviets since the Korean War. Somalia withdrew in defeat.

In response, the United States now backed Somalia to maintain a strategic balance. This policy was aided by the fact that satellite technology made the critical U.S. communications station in Eritrea obsolete.²⁹ Americans provided Somalia with over \$500 million in military and economic aid.³⁰ This support provided the United States strategically important infrastructure assets located on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

At the end of the Cold War, the fragile regimes in Ethiopia and Somalia were weak without foreign support. In 1991, both states collapsed. The power vacuum unleashed warlords and Islamic militants armed with

access to some of the largest weapons stocks on the continent courtesy of their former foreign partners.

In the cases of Ethiopia and Somalia, these states suffered from their geostrategic position on the African continent. Although finer regional and cultural nuances exist, the influence of U.S.-Soviet competition in the region exacerbated the prospect of conflict. The flip-flopping nature of the alliances illuminates the risks of alignment with volatile states. Only in the most certain of cases should foreign powers invest such volumes of military assistance. Further, the future stability of a state must not be dependent on its continued aid.

Angola

In the case of Angola, the United States, Russia, and China all became embroiled in the post-colonial formation of the government. Angola is rich in natural resources like oil and minerals and is a recipient of significant foreign investment from the West.³¹ The United States first became involved during the 1960s, after Portugal sought North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) support during a communist insurgency backed by the Soviet Union.³² The U.S. military trained and equipped Portuguese soldiers to conduct counter-insurgency operations, a form of foreign internal defense.

The independence of Angola from Portugal set the stage for three rival factions to compete for power. The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) were ideologically anti-communist and attracted the support of the U.S. government. Interestingly, FNLA and UNITA also attracted the support of China after the Sino-Soviet split.³³ The Soviet Union supported the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

From the onset of independence, a civil war broke out between the rival factions. Washington covertly backed the anti-communist factions and provided millions of dollars in military aid. Supported by the Americans, South Africa and the Congo (leveraging the strategic relationship with the Mobutu regime) invaded Angola alongside European mercenaries.³⁴ The Soviet Union and Cuba intervened on behalf of the MPLA, enabling its victory and the establishment of the leftist People's Republic of Angola.³⁵

The United States and South Africa continued to back an insurgency (unconventional warfare) in Angola until the end of the Cold War. In 1991, all three factions declared a ceasefire and held elections that ultimately resulted in a protracted war that lasted until 2002. Throughout the conflict, approximately 500,000 Angolans lost their lives and economic underdevelopment from war and destruction plagued the country for years thereafter.³⁶

In the Angolan case, the country became an outright proxy battleground between Cold War powers. The natural resource wealth and commercial interests provided the strategic impetus for intervention, exacerbated by the ideological motives of the MPLA faction. The perceived strategic value of Angola incentivized foreign powers to not only provide aid, but directly intervene in the conflict militarily. Like in the other cases, the end of the Cold War in 1991 marked a change in direction for Angola, revealing the influence of foreign powers.

Liberia

Liberia was a critical strategic foothold in West Africa for the United States, which enjoyed special sea and air access. As a result, the largest concentration of U.S. assets in Africa were in Liberia, cementing the importance of the state to U.S. interests.³⁷ These interests justified millions of dollars in political and military support.

A 1980 coup d'état jeopardized the U.S. position in Liberia. Although the new military regime was strongly pro-American, the resulting political and economic instability attracted additional U.S. aid as a bulwark against other foreign interference.³⁸ Cold War strategic competition created fears of Soviet influence in Liberian affairs. The U.S. addressed this threat by utilizing a whole-of-government approach to stabilize the Liberian government.

Washington provided military and economic resources as part of a stabilization operation (a form of irregular warfare). Additionally, the U.S. trained and equipped the Liberian military, providing foreign internal defense to counter the influence of neighboring states and the Soviet Union. These efforts lasted until the end of the Cold War, when like in the other cases, a civil

war tore apart the government and a decade of internal conflict ensued.

The Liberian case is an example of stabilization operations and a whole-of-government approach applied to maintaining a continuous advantage over strategic and regional adversaries. Liberia was decisively pro-American and enjoyed substantial support all while maintaining a problematic human rights record.³⁹ As in the other cases, local and regional interests did not align with the foreign supported government, resulting in years of instability and conflict once this support was withdrawn.

Lessons Learned from the Cold War

The Cold War period instigated intense competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. These and other actors, like China, sought to influence outcomes on the African continent as decolonization created newly independent states rich in natural resources, geostrategic position, or both. The U.S. record outlined in the five cases presents a pattern of irregular warfare that emerged during strategic competition on the African continent. Although much has changed since the Cold War, the cases are demonstrative of several themes that must be incorporated into a modern strategic competition campaign utilizing irregular warfare.

First, there was an overreliance on military and paramilitary means. The involvement of the U.S. military and interagency partners across the continent defaulted to a military orientation that armed unstable governments and resistance groups. In some cases, like Angola, outright proxy war between foreign powers occurred, while in others, like Ethiopia, military assistance was eventually turned against U.S. interests through coup d'état. Overall, militarization of political conflicts sowed the seeds for conflict after the end of the Cold War, as evident in the outbreak of civil war across Africa in or around 1991.

Second, policymakers often failed to consider the long-term implications of military assistance. In most examples, the strategic imperative of the Cold War accelerated foreign involvement without due regard for long-term effects on internal and regional stability. This is evident in the case of Somalia and Ethiopia, where two heavily armed states waged a regional con-

flict after facing political destabilization. In Angola, foreign influence created regional conflict as neighboring states were compelled to join in on the civil war, compounding the conflict. The year 1991 marks the beginning of civil war and governmental collapse in several cases, indicating that the long-term implications of military aid were not entirely envisioned or mitigated in the event strategic competition ends.

Third, the United States too often took unilateral action in providing military assistance to African states. Although the UN was involved in some cases to deescalate conflict, multilateral institutions were not preferred to unilateral action, specifically in the cases of Angola and Congo. The participation of regional and international organizations is imperative as it lends credibility and legitimacy to the efforts of foreign states.

Fourth, U.S. credibility suffered from its Cold War track record in Africa. In the case of Liberia, support for a military regime that violated human rights damaged U.S. credibility on the continent. Credibility also suffered when, at the end of the Cold War, partner support vanished, tipping fragile states into conflict that created millions of deaths and years of instability.

In extracting lessons learned from the U.S. experience in strategic competition during the Cold War, future campaigns should deeply consider the long-term implications for local and regional stability. The risks of any forecasted implications must be mitigated in order to preserve U.S. credibility. This is possible if multilateral institutions act together along with the United States to achieve strategic goals.

Modern Strategic Competition in Africa

The dynamics that incentivized Cold War competition in Africa are still existent today, including increasing demand for natural resources concurrent with political instability. Decolonization created instability across the continent much like violent extremist organizations and fragile states contribute to instability today.

The range of tools available for strategic competition is more expansive and effective as the information environment amplifies campaign effect.⁴⁰ Furthermore, irregular warfare authorities are designed to enable

application of U.S. special operations activities to strategic competition campaigns. These activities must be carefully calibrated in light of the information environment, lessons learned from irregular warfare, and new risks of entanglement with adversaries operating on the African continent.

Lack of foresight preceding the application of irregular warfare strategies was a consistent pattern in the Cold War cases. Strategic foresight analysis is a process that provides a holistic, forward-looking assessment of the strategic competition environment.⁴¹ Through “horizon scanning,” emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities that may characterize the future operating environment can be identified. In doing so, four distinct scenarios of the African continent are envisioned for 2035 with implications for irregular warfare.

U.S. Irregular Warfare Authorities

As mentioned, much has changed since the Cold War, specifically the fiscal and legal authorities that govern the use of U.S. military forces abroad. In terms of irregular warfare, there are three primary statutory authorities that enable cooperation with African states in the areas of counterterrorism, foreign internal defense, and unconventional warfare.

The most common legal authority exercised by special operations forces is 10 U.S. § 333 which allows for the training and equipping of foreign partners to build military capacity broadly.⁴² As of 2018, these programs existed in approximately 52 countries around the world.⁴³ Incorporating a lesson learned from the Cold War, § 333 programs are subject to Leahy Law human rights vetting.

In terms of counterterrorism, 10 U.S. § 127e is a specific authority to spend “up to \$100 million per fiscal year to support foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in support or facilitating authorized ongoing military operations by the United States special operations forces to combat terrorism.”⁴⁴ This authority enables the U.S. to operate “by, with, and through” partner forces in the pursuit of counter-terrorism objectives, without necessarily having any other legal authority to prosecute targets.⁴⁵

The legal authority with the most latitude is § 1202 passed in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act

(NDAA). It authorizes up to \$15 million annually to provide support to foreign forces, irregular groups, or individuals in support of irregular warfare operations by U.S. special operations forces.⁴⁶ This authority supports the full gamut of irregular warfare operations, including unconventional warfare that entails support to resistance groups. This authority enables strategic competition by special operations forces using irregular warfare doctrine and does so in a way analogous to the Cold War examples previously provided.

Further funding is made available explicitly for security cooperation programs in support of strategic competition campaigns. The Secretary of Defense Strategic Competition Initiative §1332 passed in the 2022 NDAA allows for the Secretary of Defense, with concurrence from the Secretary of State, to fund activities (up to \$20 million annually) that advance U.S. national security objectives for strategic competition.⁴⁷ This statute specifically addresses defense activities that allow competition “below the threshold of armed conflict” by supporting the interagency in advancement of U.S. strategic interests.⁴⁸ Further, this initiative instructs the Secretary of Defense to develop and submit to Congress a plan for strategic competition in the U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility.⁴⁹ The implication is that irregular warfare activities would be the key contribution of the Defense Department to these campaigns.

Beyond military authorities, Congress passed the Global Fragility Act in 2019 that aims to coordinate a whole-of-government approach to prevent violence and instability in fragile states.⁵⁰ As of 2023, African states identified for stabilization assistance from the United States include Mozambique, Guinea, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Côte d’Ivoire.⁵¹ The State Department takes the lead on the country strategy, integrating military activities as required to complete an integrated approach to stabilization.⁵² This approach is most representative of the strategic competition concept as described previously by combining interagency authorities and resources with military support. In short, there are numerous authorities that enable irregular warfare in support of strategic competition campaigns in Africa.

Russia in Africa

Russia largely scaled back its operations in Africa

between 1990 and 2015, but recently has become increasingly involved in the affairs of several states.⁵³ Although Russia's strategic goals in Africa are unclear, they likely revolve around maintaining security partners, markets for arms exports, and producing revenues from natural resources.⁵⁴

Russian private military companies (PMCs), most notably Wagner Group, are operating for-hire across the continent.⁵⁵ The increase in radical Islamic terrorism encourages the hiring of PMCs to augment state security forces. This occurred in Mozambique, the Central African Republic, Mali, Kenya, and others. Often, the hiring of Russian PMCs to conduct counterterrorism and internal security missions results in human rights violations, as occurred in Mali.⁵⁶ Russian PMCs also collect rents from export economies as indicated in the case of the Central African Republic, where mining exports are used to pay PMC fees.⁵⁷

The presence of Wagner Group in African states complicates U.S. security cooperation programs. Recently, legislation in Congress proposed designating the Wagner Group as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).⁵⁸ With the presence of Russian PMCs in at least 17 African states, the likelihood of entanglement with U.S. forces is elevated. It's unclear what the ramifications of designating the Wagner Group as a foreign terrorist organization would be, specifically in regard to unlocking legal authorities designed to allow cooperation on the basis of counterterrorism activities. A key risk is designation of Russian PMCs as legitimate counterterrorism targets.

China in Africa

Chinese activities across Africa are well documented, often as a component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese policy in Africa is primarily focused on economic and infrastructure development, compared with Russia's more security-centric aims. This includes investment in maritime infrastructure along the African coastlines, furthering China's strategy of a maritime Silk Road.⁵⁹ This makes a number of port cities strategically important to Beijing. China's Digital Silk Road initiative aims to extend communication technology infrastructure across Africa by offering hardware and network connectivity through Chinese channels.⁶⁰

In the case of Djibouti, the Chinese government established its first overseas naval port in the strategically-located country that serves as a hub for several Western militaries. China also constructed a space launch facility in Djibouti due to its favorable location on the equator.⁶¹ In other African countries, Chinese firms have monopolized mining operations, most notably for cobalt, copper, and other critical minerals.⁶² It is clear that China is strategically competing for access and influence in Africa.

As a result, many of these projects have entrapped African states in untenable debt arrangements with China. Through these arrangements, China could gain coercive power over delinquent states that benefited from Chinese development. This is an example of Chinese economic statecraft which seeks to integrate economic and political power to achieve goals that provide it a relative advantage on the continent compared to other foreign states.⁶³

The extent of Chinese military involvement in Africa is relatively low compared to the United States and Russia. Historically, China contributed peacekeeping forces to multilateral stabilization missions like those that occurred in South Sudan and Mali.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, an increase in military involvement by the Chinese must be forecasted as it would complicate the balance of power in the region significantly. An irregular warfare strategy needs to gauge any future risk of Chinese entanglement with a U.S. campaign on this basis to include allegiance-switching, like in the cases of Somalia and Ethiopia.

Violent Extremist Organizations

Violent extremist organizations are rampant throughout the African continent, but particularly so in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa. In West Africa and the Sahel, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Boko Haram, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) are some of the major terrorist groups.⁶⁵ In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab is the most well-known, operating in Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda.⁶⁶ Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) remains active in North Africa, specifically Libya and Algeria.⁶⁷ In southern Africa, Mozambique continues to combat a radical Islamic extremist group aligned with the Islamic State, called Ansar al-Sunna.⁶⁸ In all cases, the United States is providing counterterrorism

support against these actors.

The proliferation of Islamic extremism on the African continent is a major challenge. Governments require foreign assistance to combat these groups, as is evident in the participation of U.S. forces in counterterrorism operations in more than a dozen African countries. When the United States is not a favored partner, states turn to Russian PMCs on loose terms and with questionable results. Although terrorism was less prolific during the Cold War, important lessons learned from those irregular warfare campaigns ought to inform the application of U.S. forces to this problem in Africa. This is true specifically for the risk of entanglement with competitor states and the maintenance of U.S. credibility to support broader strategic competition objectives.

Natural Resources

The African continent is rich in geologic deposits of critical minerals, including rare-earth elements important for the continued electrification of the global economy. In-demand mineral reserves like copper, cobalt, graphite, lithium, and nickel are concentrated in the central and southern regions of the continent in places like Namibia, Madagascar, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁶⁹ It is estimated that around 30% of the world's mineral resources belong to African states.⁷⁰

In 2020, the United States allowed the private sale of one of Congo's largest cobalt and copper mine to a Chinese entity.⁷¹ China now owns approximately 80% of the cobalt-producing mines in Congo.⁷² The consolidation of mineral resources by foreign states is indicative of broader competition taking place in Africa for resource rights.

Outside of minerals, Africa continues to be a major producer and exporter of oil and natural gas. Nigeria remains the largest oil producer on the continent and the 11th largest in the world.⁷³ Other major oil-producing African states include Algeria and Angola.

Exploitation of natural resources is a major external challenge for African states. Enticing investment terms by foreign companies with low standards for environmental protection and human rights will likely increase the number of non-Western energy companies operat-

ing in Africa. Energy policy is a potential source of future resource exploitation by foreign states.

The U.S.-led Mineral Security Partnership (MSP) aligns the mineral resource interests of all G7 and European Union (EU) states, with a growing focus on Africa.⁷⁴ The MSP addresses priorities, challenges, and opportunities for managing the global mineral supply chain. This includes the mining and processing of minerals which increasingly occurs on the African continent. As documented by the MSP, the security of the African supply chain is crucial to the global economy and will be in the U.S. national interest.

Consideration of mineral exports will be important in assessing the prioritization of a U.S. partnership with any African state. Balancing the security of the mineral supply chain against other states like Russia and China will be critical. Further, stability of states identified as key partners in the MSP will be a U.S. interest.

Political & Internal Stability

African states have experienced more than 200 political coups since decolonization in the mid-20th century.⁷⁵ For some states, coups are a cultural feature as much as they are a signal of instability. The intersection of natural resource wealth and foreign influence, as evident in the Cold War examples, created significant instability.

The resource curse phenomenon observes that states with an abundance of natural resources experience less economic growth, more corruption, and greater instability.⁷⁶ In the African case, mineral resources are increasingly important for the global economy, as they are used in the production of high-demand computing products. As mineral exports rise, it's likely the effects of the resource curse will also.

The transitional nature of many African governments can also contribute to instability. Many countries in Africa are identified as "not free" due to their authoritarian regimes.⁷⁷ Considering the political transformation of Africa continues, it should be expected that many of these "not free" states will experience their own political movements that will drive conflict and instability as populations grow and economies expand. Therefore, the political future for many African states is likely to be more unstable than in the past.

Climate Change

The effects of climate change create food insecurity and human migration that destabilize entire regions. Water scarcity, increases in temperature, desertification, and an increase in weather-related natural disasters are all major climate-related challenges impacting African countries.⁷⁸ The most vulnerable states are those with limited infrastructure and a dependence on agriculture, factors which exacerbate the effects of climate disasters.

The consequences of climate change, specifically droughts and famines, are significant drivers of instability that will need to be addressed. Disaster relief and humanitarian aid represent opportunities for foreign states to positively contribute to the African situation while benefiting from goodwill. It will be important to forecast the states most likely to be impacted by climate change to anticipate sources of instability.

Future Scenarios for Africa in 2035

Strategic foresight analysis is useful for imagining likely outcomes using key facts and trends from horizon scanning as inputs. Given varied levels of strategic competition and irregular warfare, these future scenarios are potential outcomes for Africa by 2035.

Stable and Independent

African states capitalize on rapid economic growth by leveraging multilateral organizations like the African Union (AU) to address the problems of terrorism, food insecurity, and climate change. Foreign influence is subdued as African states remain unaligned, avoiding deep partnerships with any one global power. Countries are able to diversify their economies away from commodities, reducing volatility and improving governance. Security concerns are addressed by coalitions of states with foreign security partners acting in an advisory role.

Polarized but Prosperous

Global powers jockey for power, resulting in essentially two blocs of African states. Those that are aligned

with the West demand continued military and economic aid for their allegiance and openness, burdening the U.S. government financially. A second bloc, aligned with China and other powers seeking to undermine Western influence, heavily support these states with economic and military assistance. Climate change is disruptive, but not insurmountable, as African states easily secure international aid from their respective partners to achieve stability and continued economic production. The heavily-involved foreign powers provide security, dampening terrorism while avoiding interstate conflict, proxy wars, and the subversion of opposing governments.

Fragmented and Contested

Economic prosperity remains elusive as fragile states experience near-constant political instability. The influence of foreign powers undermines the interests of African states. The electrification of the global economy is powered by resources from Africa extracted by foreign powers. The United States and China pursue access to these resources relentlessly, supporting irregular warfare activities that ensure friendly governments and groups continue to fulfill commercial interests. Resistance movements in aligned states fragment governments into factions, fueling conflict and regional instability. Civil wars and coups d'état become more common making partnerships volatile and unpredictable.

Insecure and Volatile

Terrorism undermines African states and discourages foreign investment. African and foreign-led security strategies are haphazard and uncoordinated. Opportunistic states seeking to consolidate power and wealth through corruption and resource exploitation further undermine security. Political instability results in low levels of foreign investment and disappointing economic growth. Climate change creates drought and famine, driving mass human migration. International assistance is minimal. U.S. military assistance is widespread to conduct counterterrorism and stabilization operations.

Application of Irregular Warfare

Irregular warfare doctrine is best applied to reinforce

fragile states against insecurity created by factors outside their control. As a matter of policy, unconventional warfare including support for resistance movements should be viewed as a destabilizing activity that will likely encourage African states to pursue deeper alignment with U.S. adversaries.

As for other forms, foreign internal defense creates an unnatural balance of power. This option may be strategically attractive, as it was during the Cold War, in cases where U.S. interests are aligned with a particular government. However, this too encourages African states to pursue deeper alignment. Such a course intensifies regional rivalries and polarization occurs. In all cases, polarization of African politics via alignment with foreign powers should be avoided.

Policy Questions

In assessing the usage of irregular warfare in strategic competition, the Cold War period and the future operating environment are instructive. Campaign planners can assess policy options using these seven questions:

1. How is the usage of irregular warfare capabilities integrated within a broader interagency strategy?
2. How is the strategy endorsed and/or integrated within a multilateral effort?
3. What is the risk of entanglement with other foreign states through the use of irregular warfare and how will these risks be mitigated?
4. What are the possible negative, long-term implications of U.S. military support for country and regional stability?
5. If support/funding was withdrawn for a given strategic competition campaign, what would be the resulting implications for the recipient country/region?
6. What is the specific end state and timeline for the campaign relative to other campaigns in the region and how may they interact?
7. Does the campaign forecast climate risks and mitigate the associated potential instability?

Conclusion

The era of strategic competition between powers is back, particularly in Africa. Historically, the Cold War era saw competition between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China result in widespread instability, conflict, and underdevelopment that persisted well after the competition ceased. Relatedly, the modern

conceptualization of irregular warfare provides military options that exist in the gray zone and are theoretically well-suited for competition, particularly in Africa where instability and terrorism are common.

The appeal of applying special operations to strategic competition campaigns in Africa is high, particularly given the security situation and applicability of irregular warfare. Before doing so however, policymakers ought to consult the Cold War, where a lack of foresight and restraint resulted in widespread suffering and underdevelopment for the continent. By answering the seven policy questions thoroughly, policymakers can adequately address the implications of irregular warfare in Africa.

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