Assessing a Decade of U.S. Military Strategy in Africa

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Abstract: *The past decade has witnessed a sea change in U.S. military engagement in Africa. With the establishment of a new permanent command, significant increases in security assistance, and the pioneering of new tactics driven by technical innovations in intelligence analysis and drone warfare, the U.S. military has become an integral player in the continent's security. Nevertheless, there exist few assessments of the extent to which increased U.S. military engagement is paying dividends. This article examines how the current U.S. military strategy in Africa is different from those in the past and whether it is meeting the stated U.S. objectives of neutralizing transnational threats while contributing to the continent's political stability. It finds that U.S. performance is mixed, with recent successes at containing the spread of al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliated groups coming at the potential detriment of longer-term regional security. The article concludes with recommendations aimed at helping the armed forces of the U.S. and other regional actors better fight terrorism while managing political risks.*

On May 5, 2017, Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator Kyle Milliken was killed during a military operation targeting al-Shabaab militants in Barii, Somalia. Milliken and his fellow special operations troops were conducting a joint raid with Somali forces against a building that housed al-Shabaab's al-Andalus radio station.[1] Milliken's death marked the first U.S. combat death in Africa since 1993, when 18 U.S. service members were killed and another 72 wounded 40 miles to the West of Barii, in the Somali capital of Mogadishu during the infamous "Black Hawk Down" incident.

Milliken's death, along with those of four additional U.S. soldiers who were ambushed and killed during a special forces raid in Niger, have raised new questions about the U.S. military's role in Africa. The spread of transnational terrorism, growing regional economies, and increased engagement by America's geopolitical rivals—such as China—have led U.S. officials to re-assess Africa's strategic importance. In 2007,

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[1] Helene Cooper, Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "Navy SEAL Killed in Somalia in First Combat Death There Since 1993," *New York Times*, May 5, 2017.

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the United States founded U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), for the first time giving Africa its own area of command responsibility within the U.S. defense establishment. In addition, the U.S. military now operates out of an official base and dozens of other small facilities and staging areas that collectively host thousands of troops. The rising U.S. military presence has transformed the tenor of U.S. engagement in Africa, from a policy that was driven primarily by aid workers and diplomats to one where U.S. soldiers play an increasingly central role.

Nevertheless, the U.S. military's expanding operations in Africa remain controversial, beset by basic questions concerning their size, mission and effectiveness. According to a recent mission statement, AFRICOM's central objectives are to "with partners, disrupt and neutralize transnational threats, protect U.S. personnel and facilities, prevent and mitigate conflict, and build African partner defense capability and capacity in order to promote regional security, stability and prosperity."[2] Yet, critics do not agree on whether the U.S. military's engagement with the continent prevents terrorism through operations against the continent's most menacing militant groups[3] or fuels it by helping to radicalize a generation of young recruits.[4] These critics do not agree about whether the United States contributes to the continent's political stability by enhancing the capacity of partner states to manage their own internal security[5] or generates political instability by abetting corruption and enabling repressive allies.[6] And they do not even agree on whether or not the U.S. military presence in Africa is large and unprecedented[7] or merely a modest continuation of prior security commitments.[8]

[2] U.S. Africa Command 2017 Mission Statement, Dec. 8, 2017, http://www.africom.mil/about-the-command.
[3] Andre Le Sage, "Africa's Irregular Security Threats: Challenges for U.S. Engagement," *Strategic Studies Forum* 255 (2010), pp. 1-12.
[4] Abdoulaye Saine, "The U.S.'s Global War on Terror in Africa," in Kelechi Kalu and George Klay Kieh, eds, *United States - Africa Security Relations: Terrorism, Regional Security and National Interests* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), pp. 109-112.
[5] Theresa Whelan, "Exploring the U.S. Africa Command and a New Strategic Relationship with Africa," Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on African Affairs, Aug. 1, 2007.
[6] Sean McFate, "Briefing: US Africa Command: Next Step or Next Stumble," *African Affairs* 107, no. 426 (2007), p. 120; Gilbert Taguem Fah and L. Gilbert, "Dealing with AFRICOM: The Political Economy of Anger and Protest," *The Journal of Pan African Studies,* vol. 3, no. 6 (2010), pp. 81-93; John Mukum Mbaku, "The Political Economy of U.S.-Africa Security Relations," in Kalu and Kieh, eds., *United States-Africa Security Relations*, pp. 140-141.
[7] Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Obama's Africa Policy: The Limits of Symbolic Power," *African Studies Review* vol. 56, no. 2 (2013), pp. 165-178; See also chapters 1-4 and 7-8 in Kalu and Kieh, eds., *United States - Africa Security Relations*, pp. 1-108, 147-168.
[8] J. Peter Pham, "The Development of the United States Africa Command and its Role in America's Africa Policy Under George W. Bush and Barack Obama," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa,* vol. 5, no. 3 (2014), pp. 245-275; Jessica Piombo, "Addressing Security Threats in Africa," in Jessica Piambo, ed., *The US Military in Africa: Enhancing Security and Development?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2015), pp. 1-9; James Forest, and Rebecca Crispin, "AFRICOM: Troubled Infancy, Promising Future", *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 1 (2009), p. 7.