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U.S. National Security and Defense Goals in Africa: A Curious Disconnect

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Despite the brief notoriety of U.S. special operations activities after the tragic ambush in Niger last October, U.S. strategic priorities in Africa remain inscrutable. For a recent example of the administration's enigmatic approach to the continent, look in turn at the Africa sections in the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS). You will find a curious disconnect.

The National Security Strategy frames the approach to Africa largely in economic terms, which, it explains, serves two purposes: profit and competition with China. "We will offer [African markets] American goods and services, both because it is profitable for us and because it serves as an alternative to China's often extractive economic footprint on the continent." Beyond the investment benefits to the United States of a healthier Africa, China's reach into the continent is the major reason for Washington to notice its 54 countries, and the United States will be doing what it can to supplant their relationships with Beijing. Although there are echoes of past American democratization and development goals in Africa, as well as the continuing challenges posed by insurgencies and terrorist groups, these are all a function—or a product—of economic performance. "Corruption and weak governance threaten to undermine the political benefits that should emerge from new economic opportunities."

What role might the Department of Defense (DoD) play to advance these priorities? The National Defense Strategy should be the place to look for the answer. And in many ways, the two documents nest nicely. Following the NSS, the NDS shifts national efforts globally from counterterrorism (CT) and irregular warfare (IW) back to great power competition. Yet the small section on Africa in the NDS appears to take note only of the two-sentence long "Military and Security" section of the NSS. This follows the letter of the national-level strategy but not the spirit: there is no language to complement the NSS's emphasis on state-based

competition. There is nothing explicitly about China or methods for securing African commerce or the future of African defense industries. Instead, the focus is on ways the United States may “address significant terrorist threats that threaten U.S. interests and contribute to challenges in Europe and the Middle East.”

Is the disconnect a sign that the administration does not consider Africa part of the supposedly global shift away from IW and toward state-on-state competition? Or does DoD not see a role for itself in state-level competition in Africa? A somewhat oblique reference to “the malign influence of non-African powers” in the NDS might indicate China but could just as well refer to Iran or even al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Perhaps the near-exclusive focus on terrorist groups is meant to complement economic and diplomatic efforts to generate conditions for economic growth, but given the diminishing emphasis on CT overall, along with the lack of specifics about how the United States can viably compete with China in Africa economically, the sum of these two strategic documents suggests that Africa will continue to be a low priority for both DoD and the administration as whole.

The irony is that Africa is, once again, becoming an arena for international competition. This is true even in a narrow military sense. A quick glance at the scramble for military basing rights in the Horn of Africa—mostly in the small country of Djibouti—reveal the extent to which Chinese, Middle Eastern, and even Russian interests have begun to vie for space alongside American and European forces. Djibouti is home to fully half of the U.S. military personnel forward deployed on the continent, and [China](#) opened its first overseas military base there this past summer. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is building bases on neighboring soil in Eritrea and Somaliland, and rumors of a planned [Russian](#) presence nearby abound.

Russian efforts are also well underway to establish a foothold on the continent, particularly in North Africa. News reporting indicates that Russian president Vladimir Putin is [aiding Khalifa Haftar](#), the Libyan militia leader who opposes the country’s internationally recognized and U.S.-supported government. Haftar’s Libyan National Army seized the country’s oil terminals in September 2016, shortly after Russia facilitated a series of [shipments](#) of military equipment to Haftar’s forces. Russia is also engaging in efforts to strengthen bilateral ties with Tunisia. Starting in 2016, the Russian government began [providing Tunisia with satellite imagery](#) of terrorist groups in the Maghreb to help foil a series of terrorist plots. Later that year, the two countries signed a [nuclear energy cooperation](#) agreement. Russian involvement in North Africa, given the

region's proximity to Europe and vast oil resources, warrants U.S. attention wholly aside from the threat of Islamist militancy.

China's economic footprint in Africa has been well-documented. The country long ago surpassed the United States as [Africa's largest trading partner](#). China has expanded African mining and oil industries in exchange for trade deals and has made large infrastructure investments via lucrative debt financing arrangements. Although the NSS is right to note the frequent imbalance in benefits between African and Chinese interests, on average, [63 percent of Africans](#) view Chinese economic and political influence positively. Although controversial business practices and low environmental and labor standards underpin these relationships, no alternative partner—[including the United States](#)—has been able to marshal resources at a scope and scale competitive with China.

Straining to compete with China economically, while limiting security-related engagements to terrorist groups, is likely to cede the strategically important elements of Africa's future to the very state adversaries both the NSS and NDS seek to dominate. The inconsistency will confuse resourcing requests for Department of State and DoD activities in Africa, not to mention policy. It will also continue to ignore traditional military investments by China, Russia, and others both north and south of the Sahara.

None of this is to claim that there are easy answers to either U.S.-China competition in Africa or enduring African domestic security challenges. The NSS is accurate in its portrayal of continuing instability and weak governance in some parts of the continent. Those areas are not the whole of Africa, however, and the United States would benefit from viewing the continent the way other powerful states do: as several strategic regions rather than one underdeveloped market.

But the issue is larger than Africa. The divergent themes for U.S. Africa policy articulated in the NSS and NDS also reveal that the tension between CT objectives and traditional state competition is artificial. As even the CT-focused Africa section of the NDS illustrates, violent extremism is still a major concern for our allies in Europe, let alone for the future of the Middle East. And to the extent that great power rivalries will be played out in so-called grey zones through nonstate and/or state-sponsored actors, the kinds of military and intelligence capabilities developed for use in IW environments may well continue to come in handy. The struggle for power in Africa among non-African states may be classic, but it will not always be conventional.

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