Less is More

A New Strategy for US Security Assistance to Africa

By Elizabeth Shackelford and Ethan Kessler
with Emma Sanderson

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Executive Summary

US policy in Africa has for too long prioritized short-term security to the detriment of long-term stability by prioritizing the provision of military and security assistance. This is done in hopes that partner countries will use this capacity to suppress radical groups at home and reduce the likelihood that they will spread disorder in the region or create threats to US interests at home and abroad. Yet, this strategy has neither produced security in Africa nor reduced threats to the United States and its interests. Washington should rein in its use of security assistance with partners that fail to demonstrate commitment to the reforms necessary to build long-term stability.

Partnerships and military assistance with illiberal, undemocratic countries have delivered little, if any, sustainable security improvements, and in many cases have prompted further instability and violence by building the capacity of abusive security forces. They have also provided harmful associations between the US government and the abuses committed by those we arm and assist. Since terrorism in Africa poses a low threat to US national security interests, there is no justification for focusing on short-term security issues at the cost of good governance, rule of law, and other factors that contribute to long-term stability. The costs of doing so are increasingly being recognized, with Congress today more likely to apply existing legal provisions to end security cooperation with abusive regimes. But these interventions typically come too late and are too inconsistent to influence behavior of illiberal regimes. A more systemic approach is needed to break the pattern of poor outcomes.

The rise of great-power competition exacerbates the risk that the US national security establishment will double down on its security cooperation strategy in the region out of concern that doing otherwise would leave a vacuum that America's competitors might fill. In reality, however, the argument for being more selective in distributing security assistance is even stronger with the return of great-power competition, as values and reputation become increasingly important in attracting support for the United States over other great powers.

Security and military assistance will continue to play a role in the region. However, the United States would be better off being more deliberate and cautious, only pursuing it after completing a holistic assessment of the potential impact of such assistance on governance, human rights, and broader stability. Security assistance can and must be more closely scrutinized with enhanced US government oversight tools to ensure it does not undermine governance and stability, and Washington should be more willing choose different tools when shaping relationships with weak partners, to condition assistance to ensure it does not facilitate bad outcomes, and to cut it off when partner countries use it to abuse civilians.

About the Authors

Elizabeth Shackelford is a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and a foreign affairs columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*. She was previously a career diplomat with the US Department of State. During her tenure in the Foreign Service, she served in Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan, Poland, and Washington, D.C. For her work in South Sudan during the outbreak of civil war in 2013, she received the Barbara Watson Award for Consular Excellence, the Department's highest honor for consular work. She is the author of *The Dissent Channel: American Diplomacy in a Dishonest Age*, winner of the Douglas Dillon Book Award. She can be reached at eshackelford@globalaffairs.org.

Ethan Kessler is a pursuing a master's degree in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. He was a research associate with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs from July 2021 to August 2023, where he researched sanctions, US security assistance, and Taiwan security issues. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan. He can be reached at ekessler@hks.harvard.edu.

Emma Sanderson provided extensive research and editing support and authored the case study on Ethiopia in the appendix. Sanderson is a research and communications assistant at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and a graduate of the University of Colorado-Boulder.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

While US strategy toward Africa has brought some discrete, concrete gains—most clearly in the fields of health and humanitarian relief—US efforts to expand democracy and secure peace and stability across the continent have proven elusive. This is because America's pursuit of these two goals have often been at odds with one another. Washington's tendency to provide security assistance to questionable African partners in the war on terrorism has undermined democratic progress. Security assistance has promised to defeat violent nonstate actors and the threat they pose to regional stability and vital US interests. Yet, in a story often repeated across the continent, this assistance has instead helped prop up abusive security forces that Washington views as essential partners.

The US approach to Africa today is neither effective nor sustainable. It's time to flip the script. Instead of prioritizing security partnerships, the United States should boost the most promising democracies and economic partnerships and focus on countries whose governments demonstrate the political will necessary to foster long-term stability through improved governance. Rather than presume that security assistance will enhance stability and increase our influence, the US government should recognize that security assistance in the hands of weak, fragile, or illiberal states is innately risky. Accordingly, it should use security assistance sparingly and only after assessing that the benefits, should they be attainable, are likely to outweigh the long-term costs. With the rise of great-power competition as Washington's primary focus comes a risk that the national security community will be tempted to expand security assistance with players it hopes to keep on-side, absent considerations of negative impacts. This is precisely why revisiting the approach to security sector assistance (SSA) in Africa is so critical now, and why the United States needs better guardrails in place to ensure SSA is only utilized when and where it will serve US interests in the long run.

This report focuses on the provision of security sector assistance. It proposes a path to fewer security partnerships on the continent and more restrained

use of security assistance as a tool of influence generally, which would reduce unintended negative impacts on long-term stability while facilitating more productive partnerships overall that better serve the wider range of US interests. This path would require dramatically reducing military engagement and other support for authoritarian and illiberal actors but would retain space for ongoing humanitarian, development, and public diplomacy activities even in those states. It would acknowledge that the United States faces national security threats in Africa, but those threats are in fact low and not urgent enough to categorically justify short-term security actions at the cost of long-term progress towards greater stability.

The 9/11 attacks were a unifying driver of a counterterrorism-first approach that relegated democratic values to the backburner. The approach presented here, on the other hand, emphasizes these values in US foreign policy choices on the continent in recognition of the role they play in facilitating long-term stability, and does so primarily by ensuring that the United States doesn't undermine them directly. Prioritizing a "do no harm" approach through more restrained use of security sector support would provide the space needed for US efforts to support democracy, governance, rule of law, and human rights to succeed, rather than stacking the deck against them.

> The US approach to Africa today is neither effective nor sustainable. It's time to flip the script.

Some administration officials insist that the urgent need to compete with China and Russia provides no space for considerations of governance, democracy, and human rights,[1] but President Joe Biden's framing of great-power competition today as an ideological struggle between democracies and autocracies makes the hypocrisy of boosting undemocratic powers even more obvious and costly. Propping up unjust and abusive regimes in the name of the liberal world order only undermines America's broader interest in promoting and building more reliable democratic partners worldwide.[2] If US partnerships

in Africa continue to openly clash with its stated values, the United States will find it harder to make the case that these values are the foundation of better national outcomes for all of its partners.

Others assert that the Departments of Defense and State are already taking governance and democracy seriously under the "three Ds" of diplomacy, development, and defense. This mantra recognizes that military solutions alone are insufficient to address underlying challenges to long-term stability. But in reality, US foreign policy remains militarized thanks to the gross disparity in resources and personnel, as well as a culture across the US national security establishment that puts greater stock in security solutions than soft power tools.

America doesn't have to outdo China or Russia in every country if its partners benefit from better economic and security outcomes and demonstrate the strength of a democratic and rule-of-law system. The current approach makes that harder, as our partners have not seen security improvements but have seen democratic backsliding. Consider Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, all of which have seen increased violence and coups following two decades of post-9/11 US security cooperation. The best the United States can hope for under the status quo is to have more unstable and increasingly dangerous states backing its positions at the UN General Assembly instead of backing China and Russia. That outcome isn't worth the cost.

America's Go-to Tool Isn't Delivering

US-Africa policy today has been heavily shaped by America's global war on terrorism. In this war, preventing terrorist attacks was the overarching priority and security sector assistance significantly increased, becoming America's tool of choice to support its partners in Africa. SSA includes everything from transfers and sales of military equipment and weapons to combat training, military education, and building defense institutions.[3] This policy sounds logical: train and equip other militaries so they can do the fighting and the United States doesn't have to. In practice, however, this approach has had

mixed results at best. Terrorist violence on the continent has increased 300 percent over the past decade, with the bulk of violence in the Sahel and Somalia, the two areas that have seen the greatest concentration of US security assistance on the continent.[4]

This should not be surprising given the results from a similar approach during the Cold War, when the United States prioritized preventing the growth of Soviet influence over stability and effective governance, which ultimately helped fuel violence and long-lasting instability.[5] Washington seems on track again to justify a similarly destabilizing approach in the name of great-power competition.

Total US Security Sector Assistance to Africa, 2000-2022
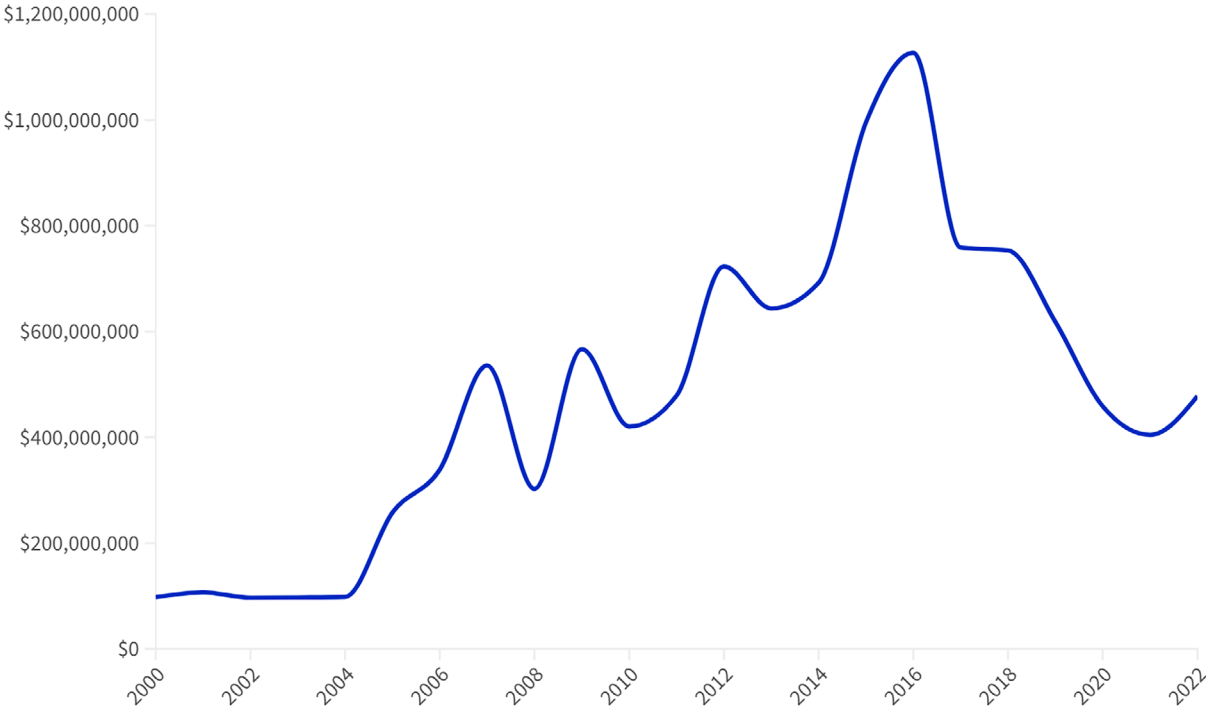
Source: Security Assistance Monitor • Note: Excludes Egypt
Some country-level data was not available for certain years.

Although SSA tends to be most effective in more-developed countries with good governance,[6] in Africa, the United States uses it extensively in countries where governance is poor. This is typically where the greatest need appears, as weaker states generally pose higher risks of insurgency and violence. But

once that assistance is provided, the United States has little control over how it is used, and beneficiary governments often use those capabilities to oppress and terrorize portions of their population, frequently targeting minority groups not connected to those in power. This, in turn, helps foment violence and instability. Research confirms that violence, oppression, inequity, and discrimination committed by state security services and other state-sanctioned violence can be structural or proximate drivers of increased political violence and conflict.[7] Thus, rather than reduce violence, this go-to tool proves counterproductive to stability goals by undermining democratic progress and enabling human rights violators instead.[8]

In this way, US support can unintentionally exacerbate economic and social drivers of terrorist recruitment. Even the second Bush administration recognized this fact, although its strategy did not give this concern significant weight. As the 2002 National Security Strategy stated, "Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders."[9] Biden's National Security Strategy similarly states that countering terrorism "necessitates addressing the root causes of radicalization by leveraging U.S. and partner efforts to support effective governance, promote stabilization and economic development, and resolve ongoing conflicts."[10] A 2017 United Nations report drew on hundreds of interviews with Africans who had joined extremist groups and found that 71 percent of them said they joined because of "government action," such as the killing or arrest of a family member or friend.[11] Government action against extremists by regimes with little concern for their people can fuel the resentment driving the extremism in the first place.

Indeed, these security partnerships often increase the risk to US interests, such as embassies and US citizens living abroad, because America's engagement in counterterrorism campaigns makes them a target for groups committing terrorism. Reducing engagement would, therefore, likely reduce the desire of African nonstate groups to harm US interests, even if those groups maintain their grievances against their own governments. While reducing US

engagement with certain counterterrorism partners may increase the short-term risk of violence, it would also disentangle America from campaigns that put US interests at risk.[12]

A recent comprehensive study of post-Cold War US security assistance to Africa was unable to find any robust statistical relationship between SSA and political violence in Africa (an indicator approximating stability). Although certain SSA programs may provide stability gains, the available data is not detailed enough to make even these judgments confidently. So, even the most detailed research cannot demonstrate that SSA is achieving its main goal.[13]

More scrutiny and better monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes and impact of SSA is clearly needed if this tool is to be used more effectively to achieve better outcomes.

America's Counterproductive Counterterrorism Campaigns in Action

There are numerous examples of unproductive or counterproductive US security partnerships on the continent. Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Ethiopia are all instructive, where close partnerships and significant support failed to prevent or end the terrorist threat that US assistance was meant to combat, facilitated abusive behavior by the partner country's military, and ultimately contributed to greater instability in the long term. These case studies are briefly summarized below and described at greater length in the appendix.

The United States brought Burkina Faso into its Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership to build up its counterterrorism capabilities in 2009, in an effort to prevent the emergence of terrorism in the country before it faced any specific threat. US national security interests in Burkina Faso were tangential at best, and the country at the time enjoyed relative peace and stability. In about a decade, US security assistance to Burkina Faso increased from approximately $200,000 a year to over $16 million and facilitated a growth in military capacity without correspondingly strengthening civilian oversight institutions.

The hefty influx of military support did nothing to address growing grievances that ultimately helped extremist groups gain a foothold, coming across the border from Mali and spreading across the north. The government responded with ruthless counterinsurgency tactics aimed largely at the country's Fulani ethnic minority, which was already suffering neglect. This response and a broad failure to address citizen needs helped drive local recruitment to the extremist cause, building up the ranks of the very groups that US assistance was meant to help defeat. US training, weapons, and intelligence strengthened Burkina Faso's military; however, that strength ultimately exacerbated the problem the United States hoped to prevent in the first place. Today, the country remains racked by terrorist and security force violence and, following two coups in the past two years, lacks even a pretense of democratic or popular rule, raising the question of what the United States has to show for more than a decade of intervention that was meant to prevent this outcome.

About 1,500 miles southeast of Burkina Faso is Cameroon, another country whose terrorist threat initially came from across its border, in this case from Nigeria to the west. US support, again, focused on external risks without considering the impact of boosting an abusive security service. US-affiliated troops in Cameroon have tortured and killed civilians in brutal counterterrorism campaigns to the north, including at a base they shared with US special operations forces. As these abuses came to light, the US government investigated but continued its assistance to Cameroon's forces. While regional Islamic extremist group Boko Haram was significantly weakened during this time, the region's overall stability was not improved, since the continued lack of a strong state presence spurred the rise of Islamic State-West Africa, which today exceeds Boko Haram's strength and violence.

Meanwhile, Cameroon launched a separate and unrelated campaign against the country's culturally distinct, marginalized Anglophone regions following protests and a brutal crackdown by the government against those regions, enabled in part by US SSA. Cameroon's future is uncertain, but it is no more stable today than when the United States ramped up its assistance in 2014.

Across the continent in the Horn, Ethiopia paints a bleak picture too. Though Ethiopia faced no terrorism at home, it became a key partner in US efforts to combat the increased influence of Islamic actors in Somalia. For decades, the United States provided security assistance to Ethiopia's autocratic government led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which represented only a small ethnic minority that benefitted disproportionately from the country's economic growth.

Years of government abuse and growing public discontent came to a head in 2018 when the TPLF was pushed from power by a coalition that promised reform and change, headed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The United States embraced Abiy heartily and unconditionally to win his trust, ignoring signs that he was leading his country to war against the TPLF. Although the United States would soon cut off some assistance in response to growing atrocities in the war, the damage was already done. Thanks to decades of US support, both the TPLF opposition and the remaining Ethiopian military were well armed for the fight. The central government largely defeated the TPLF and reached a peace deal to end the fighting, but Ethiopia remains fractured and at risk of further violence, as numerous ethnic groups vie for power and revenge after decades of repression boosted by US support. Somalia next door continues to fight a terrorist insurgency, and regional stability is at even greater risk than it was pre-US intervention.

The United States Can and Should Prioritize Governance over Counterterrorism

A counterterrorism-focused foreign policy has not served US interests in Africa well, so it's time to change course. The recommendations given here align US interests in long-term stability with a realistic understanding of the risks and limits of security assistance. They also align with a broader consensus developing within US foreign policy circles that America's counterterrorism approach in Africa has not been effective. But the US government lacks the tools and data necessary to assess the utility and soundness of current and future security assistance programs, so it risks

continuing to default to the same playbook in the future with current security partners as well as other countries in the region.

America has national security interests in greater political stability in Africa, but its security concerns in Africa are in fact limited and indirect. This means the United States doesn't have to fixate on short-term security needs, so it can choose to forego security cooperation where it risks worsening outcomes and instead tailor engagement with countries across the continent based on what has the best potential for promoting long-term stability and prosperity.

The United States Has Real but Limited National Security Interests in Africa

The first step in determining how the United States should approach Africa policy is to assess the nature of US national security interests on the continent. Africa's resource wealth and growing population indicate its global significance will increase in the decades to come, but it will remain a lower-priority region to US foreign policy than Asia, Europe, or the Middle East, where the United States faces more direct security threats (consider China, North Korea, Russia, and Iran). US financial and political means to engage with the continent are therefore limited and should be utilized deliberately. Accordingly, the US government must closely monitor whether its counterterrorism and security efforts are achieving their intended goals or leading to negative unintended outcomes. This would represent a refreshing break from policy during America's global war on terrorism.

Despite an overarching focus on counterterrorism over the last two decades, in absolute terms, the risk of Africa-based terrorists threatening the United States is very small. No African terrorist group has demonstrated both the capability to strike the US homeland and the drive to do so. Improved US intelligence capabilities and security practices since the 1998 African embassy bombings and the September 11, 2001, attacks have made it extremely difficult for any terrorist group to strike the US homeland or other vital US interests.[14] This means America's limited resources for the continent need not be focused

on short-term security priorities, leaving ample opportunity to enhance the prioritization of governance and other long-term interests.

The United States, however, does stand to benefit from more prosperous and stable states and regions in Africa in the long run. Greater stability and prosperity would ameliorate long-term drivers of mass migration, terrorism, and nonstate criminal groups, which can threaten global trade flows, US interests, and allies abroad. This suggests that US security cooperation across the continent should focus on the governments that seek to effect greater stability and prosperity themselves, as these are the most likely to be effective in achieving better security outcomes. This would ensure the United States gets the most benefit from the necessarily limited resources and focus available for countries in Africa in the grand scheme of US foreign policy. It would not preclude the use of other types of assistance, including development and humanitarian support, which should be the primary tools for engagement in the most fragile states, as they do not risk the same unintended negative stability impacts that security assistance can.

Better Governance as a Better Path to Long-Term Stability

Greater stability and prosperity depend on populations being satisfied with the existence and fair distribution of economic opportunity, resources, and justice within their societies. Legacies of colonialism, weak state power and corruption, and the unequal distribution of resources, public infrastructure, and power based on clan, ethnicity, or religion are among the biggest obstacles to realizing equality, prosperity, and justice in many countries across Africa.

These dynamics fuel migration and community violence, and drive people to create and join extremist and criminal organizations, all of which drive instability and impede commerce and economic growth. This, in turn, deepens enmities and weakens investment, fueling further destabilization. Climate change is creating new challenges while exacerbating all of these factors with increased competition over ever-more-limited resources and means of survival.[15]

What US strategy often characterizes as security solutions cannot address these underlying factors. When implemented abusively, these "solutions" often exacerbate them. They also often occur alongside investments in civilian institution building and democracy promotion programs, in recognition of the limitations of security solutions. Yet much of this investment is short-term relief aid that helps prevent unnecessary suffering but does little to strengthen durable civilian governance. And even relatively small amounts of security assistance can shift civil-military relations dramatically in states that have weak state institutions to begin with.[16] The end result is that fragile civilian institutions remain weaker than security institutions and unable to effectively govern them. This undermines civilian-led democratic progress in addressing the underlying grievances.

> History has shown that providing military assistance to fundamentally broken governments fails to improve national security.

Only good governance can effectively address these grievances and risk factors, which is why good governance is the foundation for long-term stability. Some observers have proposed a greater emphasis on security sector governance. One recently argued that Washington should focus more on "fostering civilian control and responsible use of force within Sahelian militaries."[17] While this could make direct security assistance more effective and less risky, it is only one part of the solution since a more effective security sector still cannot address the underlying grievances that fuel insurgency. Better civilian governance is an essential element of long-term stability that a more effective military cannot replace. History has shown that providing military assistance to fundamentally broken governments fails to improve national security.[18]

Strengthening abusive security services poses a risk to civilian institutions and democratic progress. A strategy that acknowledges that and seeks to do more

good than harm to governance overall would facilitate greater engagement with African states that demonstrate the political will to enhance stability through effective civilian-led governance. It would also require reducing and conditioning engagement—including disengagement, if needed—with regimes that do not.

Urgent and specific counterterrorism, great-power competition, or other security imperatives may sometimes change the balance of considerations, raising other priorities above America's long-term interests in boosting better governance. But these decisions should be made deliberately on a case-by-case basis, borne out by the facts at hand and a genuine cost-benefit analysis of the competing interests in the long-term. Such an approach would inevitably result in far fewer cases of US interest weighing in on the side of boosting the military capacity of illiberal regimes.

Prioritizing Better Governance in Practice

This report asserts that the United States can better pursue its national security interests over time simply by being more restrained in its use of SSA across Africa. But doing so will also create more opportunity and space to make progress on better governance using other foreign policy tools. This approach would entail investing more in the parts of the US foreign policy establishment that address governance issues, which means investing more in development and diplomacy. It would also require a recognition that improvements to governance and democratic progress are generational changes, so these investments must be made with modest expectations of near-term impact.

Among other duties, diplomatic personnel identify political and conflict risks and provide information to policymakers to help them better decide how to approach and engage effectively with political players, which is essential for assessing political will and obstacles to progress. Development programs, such as those under the US Agency for International Development, can specifically target the underlying grievances that help fuel extremism and insurgency directly by improving the provision of healthcare and education

across rural areas, and investing in entrepreneurialism, credit access, better agribusiness techniques, and market access, for example. They can also work with government institutions to improve their ability to respond to developmental and emergency needs. Diplomats and development workers are better suited for a strategy that aims to resolve governance failures above all else, so addressing funding and staffing shortfalls for civilian foreign affairs programs would be an essential part of shifting the US government's approach to Africa.

Though governance and development are stated priorities in the current US approach to Africa, they are far too frequently overshadowed and undermined by an excessive and misdirected focus on building up partner countries' military capacity with SSA. As one example, development and diplomatic personnel often lack the resources on the ground to monitor projects and political developments across a country, or to engage in sufficient outreach to build public goodwill and influence. Defense and security sector colleagues do not face the same restrictions and thus are often more frequently encountered by members of the public and government alike.

The recommendations of US civilian personnel in Africa often overlap with broad goals of democratizing Africa. This is unsurprising, since democratic processes are typically best suited to ensure more equitable access to economic opportunity, wealth, and justice between competing subnational groups—improving stability, which promotes US strategic goals. This doesn't mean, however, that the United States should pursue democratization efforts in all countries, as efforts to change distributions of power can foment conflict if those holding power are hostile to such initiatives.

For example, autocratic rule is so entrenched in some countries as to be irreversible except by force. In such cases, democratization policies targeting state actors and institutions are unrealistic and ineffective. In these cases, limiting engagement with the government to what is absolutely necessary is typically the best path, since strengthening autocratic governments undermines US interests in the long run. Consider Eritrea, which is led by one of the world's most autocratic regimes. The US policy of minimal essential

engagement remains the best approach since it is not in US interests to further strengthen that regime, yet direct action to undermine its central authority would likely just destabilize the region further.

In some countries, direct democracy promotion might be unrealistic in the near term, but political will for better governance and greater inclusion might be present and worth fostering nonetheless. In such cases, an interest in long-term stability might caution against rushing to hold elections, for example, as elections themselves can be manipulated, corrupted, or used to stoke conflict. In many fragile states, generational change is the best opportunity for durable stability, so the United States has an interest in maintaining a presence and building relationships with those political, technocratic, and civil society actors who offer promise for a better future, even if their influence remains limited today. Educational exchanges, civilian institution building, and public diplomacy outreach promoting US values are all low-cost and low-risk investments that could pay dividends in the future. But it remains essential in these countries that the United States ensures that its assistance does not stack the deck against progress for better governance in the name of stronger security infrastructure. Wherever the United States seeks to provide SSA, it should use that assistance as leverage to promote and enhance better governance for better long-term stability.

Many disputes within and between African states will ultimately still be hard to resolve, thanks in large part to the haphazardly drawn borders and legacies of injustice that emerged from European colonialism. In some regions, a state may be so weak that resolving political issues, even with democratic means, is infeasible in the near term. Traditionally, US policy has responded to these situations by doubling down on security assistance in an effort to overcome civilian shortcomings.

But in practice this has built up security services at the expense of civilian institutions. In turn, this has reinforced barriers to the emergence of democratic champions, within or outside government, frustrating the desired end of more representative and inclusive governance, which holds greater potential for long-term stability. Stronger, more-legitimate civilian

governments are the only safe bet for stability in the long term. This is why ending military support for regimes that neither serve the long-term interests of their people nor align with US values should be the rule instead of the exception.

To facilitate this approach and an enhanced focus on governance first requires Congress to reassert its oversight role over SSA programs. This requires expanding tools available for evaluating the likely impact of security assistance programs at the outset, and making better use of existing tools to rein in assistance to abusive governments sooner, more predictably, and more robustly. Congress can and should reclaim its authority by closing loopholes in the Leahy Laws, which are designed to prevent the US government from providing military assistance to foreign security services that violate human rights, and by expanding their mandate to cover entire governments when appropriate, rather than being limited only to specific, identified military units. Congress should also invoke other authorities under the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act to reevaluate security partnerships on a country-by-country basis.

But these congressional tools alone are insufficient. For example, in response to military coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso in the last three years, Congress implemented "Section 7008" holds on US security assistance, demonstrating a willingness to prioritize governance.[19] In these cases, the holds came too late to prevent significant harm to local populations at the hand of local security forces or undemocratic military takeovers. Congressional restrictions on SSA are also not imposed nearly consistently enough, making US intervention unlikely to change partner behavior.[20] Better efforts and more resources to measure the potential and actual impact of SSA and monitor governance and stability indicators in partner countries are needed. Without these tools, the United States will remain largely unable to discourage coups and other actions that trigger instability in partner countries. And absent a more institutionalized process for tracking and responsibly shaping SSA, Washington will likely be tempted by the pressures of great-power competition to waive coup-related holds liberally and otherwise use security assistance irresponsibly.

Operationally, an approach that prioritizes governance would put more emphasis on ensuring informed decisions on the front end about whether and what type of SSA can be effectively offered without undermining institutions or human security, and more routine monitoring of impact. This would require the State Department to develop a stronger, in-house capacity to monitor human rights violations by partner governments, supplemented by directives to train and focus members of the intelligence community to do the same. The US government should also collect more, and more precise, data on the impact of SSA programs to enable systematic risk assessments for future programs. Too often, the likely downsides of SSA are ignored because country-specific data on outcomes from other programs is unavailable.

Lastly, Washington should reorient its SSA through multilateral, regional organizations wherever possible. This helps boost regional organizations that often have greater leverage on target governments and better understanding of the transnational threats they face, and it can provide the US government more bandwidth to prioritize other concerns in its bilateral dealings. Moreover, Washington should prioritize nonmilitary assistance focused on improving economic opportunity, civilian governance, and democratic institutions in lieu of military assistance in many cases.

The Tradeoffs of Shifting US Strategy

Shifting America's strategy in Africa to one that prioritizes governance over counterterrorism will change the balance of America's activities on the continent, but it will not harm US interests. This section addresses the most consequential concerns regarding potential tradeoffs.

Loss of Influence

Gaining influence with important partner nations is one of America's primary stated reasons for providing SSA to African countries.[21] Even if target countries don't achieve better security outcomes, this influence is meant to help the United States shape actions abroad that serve US national interests.

This assumption doesn't pan out in practice though, even with close counterterrorism partners. SSA programs routinely fail to persuade partner militaries to abide by rule-of-law or democratic norms.[22] Indeed, there is little evidence that this support translates into much influence on the receiving country at all. Of course, influencing partner countries to improve their governance is sometimes not even a goal of US security assistance. For example, US security assistance to Israel and Egypt is largely aimed at keeping peace between the two, so Washington has tolerated illiberal policies by both partners.

US assistance fails to influence partners in Africa in part because their interests and ours are not necessarily aligned, and the United States, in most cases, takes no steps to change that through routine use of conditionality. Instead, US SSA programs rely almost exclusively on persuading partners to change their behavior willfully rather than using conditions with tradeoffs to press change. This helps head off allegations of imperialism and coercion, but it also tends to neutralize any influence Washington's assistance might otherwise render.[23]

The problem with persuasion is that it presumes that what US assistance aims to achieve is in the US partner's self-interest. Security assistance implementers and advisers work to build trust and rapport with the security partner in hopes that this will make them more amenable to advice and suggestion.[24] If it is not in the partner's interest to cooperate, however, then other incentives are necessary.

For example, many of the largest recipients of US SSA have weak political and military institutions and are governed by leaders who have little interest in improving institutional efficacy, since that could put their own personal power at risk.[25] This makes it unlikely that simple persuasion will be effective.

That's where conditionality comes in. Carrots and sticks credibly promised and threatened can change the calculation for the leadership in partner militaries and governments. For example, leaders who are motivated to maintain political power might not want a stronger and more effective military that

could impede their own power. But if those same leaders need US intelligence and security assistance to stay in power, they might be more amenable to prioritizing institutional reforms the United States promotes.[26]

The United States, however, has repeatedly demonstrated that it will continue to provide assistance despite bad behavior that undermines other US interests. This means America is failing to use the leverage SSA is meant to provide, significantly reducing its utility to US national security interests.

During a March 2020 hearing of a subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee, David Hale, under secretary of state for political affairs, captured the reluctance of the US government to resort to cutting assistance. When asked by then-Ranking Member Patrick Leahy, "If [partner] governments are not punishing their troops when they commit atrocities, should we withdraw our aid?" Hale replied, "I think we need to have a strategy to try to prevent us from reaching that consequence."[27] Unfortunately, US partners recognize this lack of enthusiasm for punishing bad behavior and use it to their advantage.

US policymakers use public and private statements, training, institution building related to accountability mechanisms, and capacity building within civil society in an attempt to create better outcomes.[28] But none of these efforts outweigh the harm caused by military capacity in the hands of actors who lack the political will to institute governance improvements and the rule of law.

Changing America's approach could provide other avenues for enhancing influence though. Divesting from repressive governments would boost US credibility by reducing the divide between US rhetoric and practice regarding democracy. Given the Biden administration's focus on aligning democracies against nondemocratic threats, that credibility is essential. Partnering with autocracies may sometimes be necessary for achieving essential national security goals, but the US image and soft power suffer for it, as it makes the US position of the solidarity of democratic nations seem hypocritical. When it isn't essential, America can and should avoid doing so.

The United States has the tools to make these decisions and has used them in the past.[29] In 2014, the Obama administration chose not to deliver military helicopters to Nigeria's army after it conducted mass killings of civilians in its campaign against Boko Haram, and in 2015 it suspended some SSA to Burundi due to human rights abuses as well.[30] But far more often, partner abuses are ignored or met only with public or private statements, thus reinforcing the sense in recipient states that such behavior is acceptable or without consequence.

Although it goes against America's instinct for intervention, walking away from repressive partners will be a net positive for US policy.

Weakened Position in Great-Power Competition

The resurgence of great-power competition as a driving force in today's foreign policy environment further exacerbates the fear of losing influence in Africa. This is fostered by China's rise and Russia's increased aggression and enhanced efforts to gain client states globally. In a flashback to the Cold War, countries are increasingly expected to pick a side in what will ultimately shake down to a numbers game on the floor of the UN General Assembly.

But great-power competition is no excuse for continuing security assistance to bad actors. China's strength in Africa comes from diplomatic engagement, investment in infrastructure, trade, and increased physical presence, with an eye toward establishing a long-term position to enable Beijing to continue harvesting the resources it needs back home. China takes its diplomatic engagement with Africa seriously. Every Chinese foreign minister for the last three decades has taken his first foreign trip to Africa. China has hosted China-Africa summits regularly for nearly two decades, has more embassies and consulates than the United States, and hosts more African students than the United States.[31]

Chinese foreign direct investment to Africa has grown for 25 years at an average compound rate of 18 percent. By 2016, it was the largest exporter to Africa. Since 2010, one-third of Africa's power grid and infrastructure has

been financed and constructed by Chinese state-owned companies.[32] By comparison, US trade with Africa dropped by 49 percent from 2011 to 2021.[33]

China's approach seems to be delivering. While Washington prioritized military engagement, Beijing doubled down on economic engagement and investment, and the latter seems to have generated significantly more influence. Since 2001, China has secured a 78 percent increase in voting alignment in the UN General Assembly for African countries toward its positions. During that same period, Africa voting alignment with the United States dropped by about 8 percent.[34] The United States tends to characterize China's economic actions in Africa as exploitative, often referring to them as "debt diplomacy," but even in a worst-case scenario, China offers investment that African countries struggle to secure elsewhere.

China's military presence on the continent is limited to its naval base in Djibouti and UN peacekeeping missions, though it has exported weapons and has some private military and security contractors on the continent. China's contractors are primarily deployed to protect Chinese infrastructure projects or mining facilities. Beijing generally steers clear of SSA missions beyond arms sales, and its military engagement has not been linked to violence against civilians, either directly or through partner militaries, or to other destabilizing offenses.[35]

> Great-power competition is no excuse for continuing security assistance to bad actors.

Russia's engagement in Africa is far more transactional and controversial, focusing heavily on mercenary activity. Russia has deployed military or security contractors to 31 African countries and weapons systems to 14. It has provided arms or training to Nigeria and Cameroon after human rights violations led Western countries to limit assistance.[36] These actions help entrench autocratic governments across the continent, which risks continued instability and buys votes against US policies in the UN and other multilateral fora. The Wagner Group, a private Russian mercenary organization with close

ties to the Kremlin, is increasingly the face of the Russian state in Africa. It is engaged in paramilitary activity, extraction of resources and minerals, and disinformation campaigns fomenting anti-Western sentiment across more than a dozen African countries.[37]

When the United States makes the case to African governments and people that Russia and Wagner do not offer a solution for them, it routinely focuses on Wagner's abuses and failure to adhere to rule of law, ethics, or human rights.[38] US efforts to instill human rights and accountability in our training programs and to speak out against abuses are still far better than the Russian approach, which dismisses them entirely and directly commits violations. But if America stakes its case on the cost of Russia's abuses, it must take them more seriously in its own efforts too. In an ideological struggle with Russia, the US government cannot leverage its values on one hand while neglecting them on the other. More hypocrisy in our approach to Africa only does more damage to our political goals there. Furthermore, if US values are reflected in its partnerships, China and Russia lose the ability to leverage American hypocrisy in their own partnerships.

The concern in Washington is that disengagement with key African states would create a vacuum that Moscow or Beijing would fill. In a redux of the Cold War, many advocate for increased US aid to and engagement with African states mainly to prevent them from aligning with US adversaries.[39]

But ineffective US policy has already helped create that opening, and a reactive foreign policy in Africa is a recipe for continued failure. Not all partners equally benefit US interests, particularly since engagement alone does not equal influence.

US security assistance policy during the Cold War focused exclusively on alignment and failed to consider governance or other state values. This approach led the United States to facilitate and prop up abusive authoritarian regimes with consequences that continue today. For example, the United States launched a covert program against Patrice Lumumba, the democratically elected prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the

Congo, and provided extensive support to Joseph Mobutu, the army chief of staff who carried out a coup and ruled the country ruthlessly for three decades until his ouster in a civil war in 1997. The country has remained violent and unstable since. In 1980, the United States also backed a coup in Liberia simply because the brutal and corrupt coup leader, Samuel Doe, was willing to cut ties with the Soviet Union.[40] Doe's brutal rule led the country to a lengthy and costly civil war.

The renewed focus on great-power competition risks luring America into a similar posture and further worsening domestic stability in countries we assist. The United States cannot seek to beat out Russia and China by maintaining low standards; instead, it should carefully avoid using arms sales and military assistance to win the allegiance of countries that have poor governance and human rights records and lack significant strategic value.[41]

The best way to enhance US influence on the continent is bilateral engagement designed to match US interests and comparative advantages to the needs of specific African states. This is one area where US values bring an added advantage given the popularity of democracy and human rights in local populations, but it would require deeper engagement in areas where China has taken the lead in recent years, like educational exchanges, public diplomacy, and diplomatic presence.

The knock-on effect of Chinese or Russian influence could merit special consideration in some instances, and these should be taken on a case-by-case basis with careful review of the costs and benefits at issue. For example, reports of a potential Chinese naval base in Equatorial Guinea on Africa's Atlantic coast raise a high-priority case that might merit a different calculation for engagement on the continent. Equatorial Guinea's autocratic government certainly does not align with interests in stability or US values, but preserving US freedom of navigation in the Atlantic Ocean may require offering Malabo incentives to prevent Beijing from acquiring a naval base there.[42] The Democratic Republic of the Congo is also gaining importance, as it produces 70 percent of the world's cobalt and is also rich in lithium, both key components for the batteries essential to the world's shift away from

fossil fuels.[43] China has already secured significant mineral rights in this large, unstable state in Central Africa. This will inevitably factor into Washington's response to challenging elections in late 2023 as well as increasing violence in the east of the country. Washington's ultimate decision on how to engage with these countries should be based on more than just short-term considerations, however.

The United States would be best served by focusing on its partnerships with Africa's leading successful and democratic states. Doing so would enhance the US image on the continent and help insulate Washington from charges of hypocrisy, which have historically followed US engagement with autocratic leaders in Africa. Even though this approach may thin out the total number of close US partners in Africa, quality matters over quantity. The cost of doing so would be minimal and outweighed by the gain for US credibility.

Loss of Counterterrorism Capabilities

Many advocates of SSA believe reducing it will hinder America's ability to protect itself. But SSA has failed to reduce the terrorist threat in Africa, and the United States has better tools to address terrorism directed at the United States or vital US interests.[44] Although Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates have been able to conduct direct attacks on NATO allies and inspire attacks inside the United States after 9/11, these were by-products of regionally specific factors that were exacerbated by American actions, such as radicalism in the Middle East,[45] and large civil wars involving organized extremists in Iraq and Syria.[46] Islamic State affiliates in Africa, in contrast, have not demonstrated an interest in attacking the United States directly or have been incapable of overcoming homeland security measures by the United States or its NATO allies in order to pose a direct threat.

Of course, US policymakers should not assume that the risk of terrorist threats to the homeland from Africa will necessarily remain low. But even so, military tools are not historically effective in rooting out terrorist threats, so leading with security sector assistance to enhance partner militaries to fight terrorism

is not actually a sound approach to addressing terrorism risks that arise. Military responses have only successfully destroyed terrorist groups in about 7 percent of cases historically, whereas a combination of policing, intelligence, and political inclusion to address underlying grievances has succeeded far more often.[47]

US intelligence and internationally coordinated law enforcement efforts would continue to monitor the world for potential threats and cooperate where necessary to address specific incidents. But the best way to ensure that the risk stays low is to cultivate long-term political stability in Africa, and this is best achieved with strategies that address root causes of terrorism rather than focusing on the organizations and people that commit it.[48]

The absolute risk posed to commerce by African nonstate actors can also be addressed by other, more effective means. While instability in Somalia exacerbated piracy in the early 2010s, for example, NATO countries engaged directly in counter-piracy operations to deter and disrupt pirate attacks off the Horn of Africa, almost entirely eliminating the piracy threat, while commercial interests took their own steps to manage risk exposure.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The US policy approach to Africa has failed to deliver increased security, democracy, and prosperity and will continue to fail if security sector assistance remains America's default tool. The first step to a better approach is to stop assuming that more security assistance delivers better outcomes and instead recognize the risks inherent in security assistance unless certain conditions are met.

Military action might suppress the problem of terrorism, but it will not relieve the underlying conditions that feed it. Only improved governance can address these grievances, which means good governance is the foundation for long-term stability. Militarily backing partners that exhibit autocratic or abusive behavior often exacerbates these conditions, raising questions about what

America's goals are for security cooperation in these countries. And the United States currently lacks the data needed to evaluate the success or failures of past security cooperation or to determine optimal conditions for using it responsibly in the future.

Poor governance often comes down to institutional weakness or a simple lack of political will that guns and money will not fix. Accordingly, Washington should pursue security partnerships more deliberately and cautiously. This means being accountable for the impact of security assistance over the long term and relying more on nonsecurity tools to help move the needle toward our long-term security interests.

These concrete steps can help transition our approach and reduce the unintended negative consequences of unaccountable security support:

- Develop robust and well-resourced in-house human rights vetting and monitoring and evaluation capacity inside the US State Department.
- Require a full and systematic risk assessment for all new or planned SSA programs to consider potential impact on long-term US interests, such as governance issues that impact political stability, including anti-democratic tendencies, ethnic conflict exacerbation, inequality of resource distribution and government services and accountability of the security services. Provide annual assessments for multiyear programs.[49]
- Build in more consistent, extensive, and precise data collection from SSA programs to measure impact on local populations, institutions, public perceptions of government institutions, and other measures that affect peace and security.
- Train and engage the intelligence community in tracking and reporting on human rights violations to contribute to the body of knowledge that can inform SSA decisions and provide early warning of destabilizing behavior that can lead to conflict.
- Close loopholes in Leahy Laws that enable workarounds on legal prohibitions to providing security assistance to units found to violate human rights, and expand prohibitions to apply to the institution and government level for weapons and equipment sales.[50]

- Encourage members of Congress to invoke Section 502b of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act to prompt reevaluation of partner countries receiving US security assistance and ban US assistance on a country-by-country basis. No member of Congress has used their power under Section 502b to request a report on security assistance partners from the State Department since 1976, and to date no Congress has voted on a Section 502b joint resolution of disapproval.[51]
- Pursue more security sector support through regional bodies like the Economic Community of West African States in lieu of direct country support where leadership is weak and civilian protections questionable.
- Prioritize the provision of nonmilitary assistance to address underlying causes of violence, instability, and extremism, including governance, civilian institutional capacity building, and economic growth development.
- Where security partnerships are not warranted by an assessment of the full range of risks, maintain a diplomatic and development presence focused on soft-power engagement that reiterates America's commitment to democratic values and enhancing prosperity, such as increased use of educational exchanges, public diplomacy outreach, and healthcare and education development.

Appendix: Case Studies

The following case studies are instructive examples of unproductive or counterproductive US security partnerships on the continent. In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Ethiopia, security sector assistance failed to prevent or end the terrorist threat that US assistance was meant to combat, facilitated abusive behavior by the partner country's military, and ultimately contributed to greater instability in the long term.

Burkina Faso: If It's Not Broke, Don't Break It

Burkina Faso is a poor, landlocked country in West Africa that gained independence from France in 1960. It faced coups and political struggles frequently during the next three decades, but relative stability emerged after Blaise Compaore took over (also in a coup) in 1987 and began introducing limited democratic reforms. Compaore ruled for 27 years until he was ousted from power himself in the face of popular protests in 2014 following his attempt to defy constitutional limits and stand for a fifth term as president.

While the country held multiparty elections, Burkina Faso during this period was more semi-authoritarian than democratic. Nonetheless, it was relatively peaceful and stable, without much of the religious or ethnic conflict that had already begun plaguing other countries in the region.

Conditions in Burkina Faso began to change, though, as often happens when an undemocratic leader has stayed too long and lost touch with the contract between the government and its people. Compaore jealously guarded his power, and the government, dominated by a minority Christian political class, became more oppressive.[52] Discontent in the country grew as resources diminished, poverty increased, and a corrupt government failed to alleviate suffering. These conditions made Burkina Faso susceptible to the increasing terrorist insurgencies spreading elsewhere across the Sahel.

Enter America's Counterterrorism Push

As Burkina Faso's situation under Compaore began to deteriorate, the longstanding ruler got a needed boost of support. In 2009, the United

States added Burkina Faso to its Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, a program begun as part of a wide-ranging preventative counterterrorism approach launched after the September 11 attacks.[53]

Though the country was home to no specific terrorist threats during this time, and certainly none to the United States, the US government began supplying a significant influx of funding, weapons, and training to Burkina Faso's military. The connection between this assistance and US national security interests was tangential at best, and there was little reason to be confident that Burkina Faso's military would be a good steward of America's generous support.

Before 2009, US security assistance to Burkina Faso was minimal by US standards, about $200,000 per year. It jumped to $1.8 million in 2010 and grew to more than $16 million by 2018, though these publicly disclosed numbers are only part of the story. Since money spent on US counterterrorism efforts notoriously lacks transparency, actual spending was likely far higher. Some estimates based on investigative research put the figure closer to $100 million.[54] The government of Burkina Faso followed suit and also increased its military spending more than threefold by 2019.[55] All of this helped push the government to see military solutions to any problem.

In 2016, only a few weeks after Roch Marc Christian Kabore was elected to succeed Compaore, the insurgency that had begun in Mali in 2012 began to take root across the border in Burkina Faso too. That year, an al-Qaeda affiliate launched a terrorist attack in Burkina Faso's capital city of Ouagadougou, and Burkina Faso saw its own insurgency emerge in the north.

Kabore inherited a mess. He was reelected in 2020 but faced growing discontent over the security situation and poor economy.[56] He struggled to improve either. Rather than take aim at the underlying causes of grievance within the country, his government continued the path his predecessor had taken, leaning in on the counterterrorism focus the United States had instilled in it for seven years.

Violence ticked up in the country, and the government responded with ruthless counterinsurgency tactics. It quickly became clear that the government's main target was the Fulani ethnic group, a Muslim minority. The cruelty and bias in the government's response, in addition to its broader neglect of citizens' needs, helped drive local recruitment to these otherwise

external militant groups, turning a border problem into a homegrown one. A military strengthened by US training, weapons, and intelligence helped create the very problem US assistance was meant to prevent.

No End in Sight

In 2018, militants launched attacks on several targets in Ouagadougou, including the French embassy and national military headquarters. President Kabore's response was to double down on the Western counterterrorism approach, and he asked the French to expand their operations in the country.

From that time, France became the face of Western counterterrorism operations, but the United States had been present there far longer and remained an active player, contributing intelligence and operating an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platform in Ouagadougou.[57] Despite clear evidence that the approach was not reducing violence and instability in the country, and that the government's own tactics were helping drive locals to the militant cause, no effort was made to realign priorities or approaches, to address growing religious and communal tensions or the state-backed torture and murder that drove citizens to support insurgents.[58]

The fundamental problem was that the military-first counterterrorism approach only exacerbated the underlying grievances fueling the growing conflict. As the West taught these militaries to be more effective, they used the skills to oppress the population more effectively.

Government forces and state-sponsored "self-defense" groups armed but not managed by the government, such as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, were implicated in many crimes against civilians, including unlawful killings, torture, and arbitrary detentions, particularly between 2018 and 2020.[59] The government responded to public concern by enacting legislation in 2019 to bar citizens from sharing any information on terrorist attacks or military operations in order to help hide the evidence. Rather than investigate these incidents, it has worked to insulate its forces against accountability.[60]

For the most part, the United States and other international partners were hesitant to condemn violence by Burkina Faso's security services or to push for investigations into their offenses against civilians.[61] Instead, they responded to these rights violations by supporting programs to improve the justice

system, address prison overcrowding, and provide human rights training for security forces. But these programs provided little more than window dressing to a system embedded with impunity.

In 2021, the state's security forces were responsible for more than 1,100 deaths, nearly half of the people killed in the conflict that year, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.[62]

The United States occasionally warned that military aid could be cut, including in mid-2020, if human rights concerns were not addressed. The FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act called on the executive branch to submit a plan to address the human rights violations by Burkinabe security forces and those in other Sahel countries. But no meaningful action was taken until it was too late to change the government's course to a more productive one.

In January 2022, Kabore was ousted in a coup. Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who led the coup, had participated in many US military training programs between 2010 and 2020, including in military intelligence, but he wasn't the first. Lt. Col. Isaac Zida, who led the 2014 coup that pushed out Compaore under the guise of public pressure, was also a beneficiary of US counterterrorism and military intelligence training.[63]

US training promotes the concept of civilian leadership, but US assistance in practice helped build a culture of military primacy in the country, used to justify military intervention in government affairs.[64]

And the coups didn't stop with the ouster of Kabore. In September 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traore took control from Damiba in another coup. This new junta has promoted greater cooperation with Russia and, as of January 2023, forced out the French military and ambassador.

Today, Western countries that previously had close counterterrorism relationships with Burkina Faso are asking how they can compete with or expel Russian influence in the country and continue addressing their own counterterrorism concerns.

What they should be asking instead is why more than a decade of Western intervention led to less Western influence in the country and wholly failed to prevent violence from emerging and growing.

Cameroon: Which War Are We Fighting?

Cameroon is a country of 29 million straddling West and Central Africa, rich in natural resources but weak in state capacity and with a GDP of only around $45 billion as of 2021.[65] The country's most severe internal conflicts lie along the porous border with northeastern Nigeria, where it fights Boko Haram insurgents and an Islamic State-affiliated splinter group that emerged in 2016.[66] Cameroon has joined Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and others to fight these insurgent groups since 2014. US forces have been by Cameroon's side, boosting Cameroonian forces in an effort to prevent terrorist groups in the region from growing powerful enough to threaten vital US interests.

However, backing the government in Yaoundé has not addressed the root drivers of insurgency in and near Cameroon, and may in fact be exacerbating them. Cameroon's military has tortured and killed civilians in its US-assisted campaign against violent extremists. The US affiliation with troops that commit these abuses damages America's image in Cameroon, and this problem has been compounded since 2017, when Cameroon's government launched an additional campaign against Anglophone separatists in the country's North West and South West. This conflict has racked Cameroon even more than the fight against terrorism. Yaoundé's efforts to forcefully stamp out Anglophone resentment of the central government's abuses also risks kindling long-term instability in Cameroon, working against US goals in the region.

Since the skills and resources America imparts to the Cameroonian military cannot be easily confined to one conflict or the other, US security assistance is implicated in the government's war against Anglophone separatists too, raising the question: is this a conflict America wants to help Cameroon fight?

America's Counterterrorism Focus: Boko Haram

US policy toward Cameroon since 2014 has focused primarily on counterterrorism. In 2009, Nigerian security efforts forced Boko Haram underground, so it began recruiting and setting up logistic hubs in Cameroon's Far North. Here, the population's deep poverty and religious, ethnic, and linguistic ties with Nigerians across the border make it fertile ground for Boko Haram's messaging.

The US approach to combatting Boko Haram involved ongoing training and multilateral military exercises with West African countries since 2007 and supporting troop deployments to Nigeria and neighboring allies. In 2014, these countries formed the Multinational Joint Task Force to coordinate counterterrorism activities. US support also included supplying military equipment.

Cameroon became a prominent partner in this effort starting in 2014, when growing instability in Mali and Libya exacerbated US concerns about the greater Sahel region's potential as a terrorist safe haven.

US Military Support for Cameroon

As Cameroon became a frontline partner in the fight against Boko Haram and Islamic State-West Africa (IS-WA), it received more US military support, including a train-and-assist program for Cameroon's Rapid Intervention Brigade (BIR).[67] Around 300 US forces deployed to northern Cameroon in 2015 to conduct regional intelligence and surveillance operations.

By that time, the BIR was "an army-within-an-army," with roughly 5,000 members who were better trained, equipped, and paid than the regular army.[68] It reports directly to President Paul Biya, presumably as a form of anti-coup insurance.

In 2014–2015, Boko Haram attacked military bases and communities believed to be cooperating with Cameroon's government, largely in Cameroon's Far North region. After suffering defeats in 2015, Boko Haram shifted to an irregular approach using bombs and suicide attacks.[69] By 2016, Boko Haram attacks dominated most of Cameroon's military focus, as the majority of the country's roughly 12,500 troops were shifted north.[70]

Although Boko Haram's strength subsequently fell dramatically, this was far from a simple counterterrorism success story. Instability and violence only continued with the rise of IS-WA, which UN monitors estimated had surpassed Boko Haram's strength in 2020. In May 2021, IS-WA insurgents killed Boko Haram's leader, triggering thousands of Boko Haram fighters, family members, and refugees to surrender to Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities.[71]

The United States would like to take credit for helping rollback Boko Haram by 2020, but the situation overall was no more stable, with IS-WA continuing to harm local civilians and Cameroon's military committing numerous human rights abuses against civilians and suspected insurgents. An Amnesty International report from 2017 documented that government forces arbitrarily detained, tortured, and extrajudicially killed 101 Cameroonians from March 2013 to March 2017. Most of the victims were military-age men, but numerous victims were women or children.[72]

Allegations that US-backed forces conducted torture at a base where US forces were present were particularly concerning, since US forces would likely have at least been aware of the torture.[73] Torture allegations spurred US Africa Command (AFRICOM) to investigate in 2017.[74] But even after 2017, Cameroon's security services were still reportedly committing human rights abuses. In 2018, Amnesty International released footage that appears to show Cameroonian forces shooting at least a dozen unarmed people.[75]

Following these allegations, the State Department announced cuts in February 2019 for some $17 million in planned security assistance to Cameroon. Nevertheless, a 2022 investigative report alleges that US special operations coordination with the BIR continued until September 2019.[76] By the time of the security assistance cuts, US yearly training expenditures had grown to a post-2013 high of $10.3 million, and two years had passed since AFRICOM launched its internal investigation in response to the Amnesty International report.[77] During six years of abuses, from 2013 to 2018, Cameroon received around $219 million in security assistance (including both direct assistance to Cameroon's forces and US intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations that assisted Cameroonian forces).[78]

Even still, in 2019—the same year Washington slashed military aid to Cameroon in response to human rights abuses—the State Department's country reports on terrorism stated that Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria (all of the Multinational Joint Task Force countries) lacked the military capacity to clear Boko Haram and IS-WA safe havens in northeast Nigeria and on islands in Lake Chad.[79]

The long-term risks of continued US support for Cameroonian forces are substantial. Abuses by government forces have likely strengthened recruitment for IS-WA and may trigger the emergence of new insurgent

groups in the future. This is all the more possible because Cameroon's state capacity remains relatively weak; increased US security assistance has changed neither the societal divisions nor the coup-proofed, highly inefficient security services that prevent larger economic growth and more legitimate distribution of opportunity. Not only is the outcome far from US national security goals for the country, but should Cameroon's leadership change in the future, US support for this abusive regime could be a hard legacy for it to overcome with the Cameroonian public and subsequent governments.

The Anglophone Conflict

The downsides of apparent US complicity in Cameroon's human rights abuses have increased since 2017 with the onset of the Anglophone conflict. The central government's growing marginalization of Cameroon's English-speaking regions spurred protests in 2016. When the Biya government arrested and prosecuted hundreds of civil society activists in a harsh police crackdown, armed separatist groups began attacking government forces, alleged government sympathizers, and schools. The resulting war between separatists and government forces has killed thousands, and both sides have been accused of torture and other human rights abuses.

The BIR, whose abuses in the war against Boko Haram have been well documented, has been and will likely continue to be a central part of Yaoundé's counterinsurgency strategy against the Anglophone separatists, further implicating US assistance in civilian abuse.

This war also distracts Cameroon's government from the efforts the United States wants to support, as some analysis has shown that Cameroon's fight against Anglophone separatists has weakened its fight against Boko Haram and IS-WA.[80] Washington may be unable to track whether US-provided equipment or munitions are being diverted to the Anglophone fight.[81]

Even if the Anglophone rebels are eventually defeated, the war will likely exacerbate the country's Anglophone-Francophone tensions for a long time to come. Cameroon will remain vulnerable to future internal conflicts—along with instability-fueled terrorist violence—unless Yaoundé can better govern the Anglophone regions. This likely means delegating more authority to regional authorities (the trend under Biya has been centralizing authority instead), but US security assistance does not make this outcome any more likely.[82]

Continuing security assistance to Yaoundé fails to address key drivers of conflict and violence, and further implicates Washington in human rights abuses. This ultimately widens the gulf between US values and behavior.

Ethiopia: Propping up One Strongman after Another

Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country and the oldest independent nation on the continent. From 1991 to 2018, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) led Ethiopia's autocratic government, despite representing an ethnic minority that makes up just 6 percent of the country's population. Under TPLF leadership, Ethiopia was one of Africa's fastest-growing economies, earning the praise of the United States and other supporters, who did little to push back on the TPLF's harsh rule. However, much of that wealth went to the civilian, military, and political elite dominated by the Tigrayan minority, which spurred discontent and mistrust in much of the population.[83]

Tensions came to a head in 2018, and Ethiopia's two largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and Amhara, joined forces to oust the TPLF from leadership in the governing coalition, placing Abiy Ahmed at the helm as prime minister. Abiy, an Oromo with Amhara heritage, was seen as a consensus candidate who could lead reform, but he led the country to war against the Tigray region instead.

In November 2020, war broke out between the federal government and the TPLF and devastated Ethiopia's northernmost region. A tenuous peace agreement has been in place since November 2022, but human rights abuses are reportedly continuing, and conflicts are still flaring up in other regions as well. Ethiopia today remains in a precarious position.

America's Enabling Role

For decades, the United States considered Ethiopia a key partner in America's global fight against terrorism, so it provided largely unconditional support to the federal government, first under the TPLF and later under Abiy, overlooking bad behavior. This ultimately helped arm the country for war against itself, undermining prospects for peace and America's interests in stability across the region.

The US-Ethiopia relationship dates back over 100 years, but it was only after the 1998 embassy terror attacks in Kenya and Tanzania that Washington pursued a close security partnership with Ethiopia. At the time, Ethiopia was engaged in a bloody border war with Eritrea that claimed over 100,000 lives.

In 2000, the United States and other international partners helped broker a peace deal that awarded the disputed territory to Eritrea. Despite agreeing to the deal, the TPLF regime never gave up the territory. The United States failed to press Ethiopia to implement the agreement, and shortly after, it began boosting Ethiopia with significant security support.[84] This not only empowered Ethiopia to ignore its obligations but also helped push Eritrea toward the isolationist path it remains on today, distrusting of the international community generally, and the West in particular.

Between 2000 and 2020, the United States provided at least $152.7 million in security aid to Ethiopia and trained at least 4,000 of the country's troops.[85] Much of that assistance went toward counterterrorism efforts in Somalia. In 2006, the United States backed Ethiopia's invasion to oust that country's Islamic government. Instead of mitigating the terrorist threat from Somalia, the foreign intervention spurred the rise of al-Shabaab and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Somalis, many of whom sought refuge in Ethiopia.

Even so, Ethiopia's role in Somalia ushered in a new era of international clout and political power for the TPLF. The Ethiopian government became the world's top supplier of UN peacekeepers and hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees from other neighboring conflicts. In return, the United States provided substantial development assistance. In the 2010s, Ethiopia was one of the highest recipients of US development aid, behind only Israel, Afghanistan, Jordan, and Egypt.[86]

But tensions within Ethiopia grew over the years as the Tigray minority held a monopoly on power and opportunity, benefitting disproportionately from Ethiopia's economic growth, while the majority of Ethiopia's population benefitted little.

America's unconditional security sector assistance helped facilitate Ethiopia's violent responses to opposition. In 2007, the TPLF retaliated brutally to a separatist movement in Ethiopia's Somali region with collective punishment, conducting widespread attacks on civilians and villages.[87] The government also passed an "anti-terrorism" law in 2009 that facilitated the arrests of journalists and political opponents under the guise of fighting the war on terror. In 2014, security forces responded to protests over planned displacements of farmers in the Oromia region with excessive and lethal force, killing hundreds, injuring thousands, and arresting tens of thousands.[88]

In all cases, the United States failed to push back publicly against the Ethiopian government or to persuade it to change its behavior. It largely turned a blind eye while the security forces it supported were used to oppress the Ethiopian people.[89]

Changing of the Guard and a Reckoning

After years of public protests against TPLF abuses, the regime was pushed out of power in 2018, and Abiy Ahmed came to the helm. As Ethiopia's premier security partner during the TPLF years, the United States had to grapple with suspicion about its close relationship to the now-ousted authorities.

Rather than use the major shift in leadership to change the nature of the US-Ethiopia relationship and set new expectations, US officials embraced Abiy heartily and unconditionally. In turn, Abiy gave indications early on of being pro-America, promising to import more American goods over Chinese alternatives and claiming he would liberalize and privatize Ethiopia's markets.[90] Before he was a politician, Abiy had even received US training as an intelligence officer for the war on terror in Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan.[91]

Abiy's early tenure was promising. He ordered the release of political prisoners, decried the use of torture in Ethiopia's prisons, built new federal buildings, launched an initiative to improve Ethiopia's renewable energy and sustainable agriculture, appointed more women to leadership positions, and granted amnesty to dissidents who had been criminalized by the TPLF. The United States, like so many others Western partners, hailed Abiy for his plans for reform and modernization.[92]

The United States also celebrated the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal Abiy forged with President Isaias Afwerki, which earned him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. Not long after, the United States publicly reaffirmed its commitment to Ethiopia as a partner and highlighted the "significant increase in security cooperation" between the two countries since Abiy took office.[93]

But these positive public moves masked an ugly reality unfolding behind the scenes as Abiy sought to silence political opposition and consolidate power. Violence erupted between ethnic groups, and government forces reportedly killed hundreds of civilians in response. Abiy's administration arrested

protesters, activists, and opposition politicians by the thousands and accused "external forces" of trying to destabilize the country.[94]

The US position remained very supportive, framing much of the conflict as inevitable effects of reforming an autocratic government in an ethnically complex environment.[95] The United States also ignored signs that mounting tensions between Addis Ababa and the TPLF would erupt into war. Even as Abiy claimed he would not attack Tigray, his coalition in parliament warned that military intervention into Tigray was justified.[96]

What looked like a peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia had in fact laid the groundwork for a joint and highly destabilizing war against the TPLF in Tigray. When violence broke out in November 2020, the Eritrean army fought alongside Ethiopian forces in an offensive that has left an estimated 600,000 people dead and 5.4 million in need of dire assistance.[97] After decades of US assistance training and equipping the TPLF, it was prepared to put up a fight against the rest of the Ethiopian army under Abiy's control. Only a scorched-earth campaign in Tigray and near complete blockade of the region ultimately forced the TPLF to the negotiating table, with a peace deal that resembled resignation.

A UN commission of inquiry accused the Ethiopian government forces, Eritrean forces, and Tigrayan forces of war crimes and crimes against humanity and found that Ethiopian and Eritrean forces used starvation as a tool of war.[98]

The United States took action six months into the war, imposing sanctions on Ethiopian and Eritrean officials and freezing security and economic assistance.[99] But by then, Abiy was too vested in the war effort to be easily swayed.

In a clear demonstration of the limits of a friendship built on security sector assistance, Abiy refused to even meet with top US officials when they came to visit Ethiopia in 2021.[100]

While the United States was part of the international coalition that helped press Abiy's government into a peace deal in November 2022, this came only after Abiy had secured a clear upper hand on the battlefield, and that peace deal remains fragile and implementation incomplete. Meanwhile, the United

States has settled into an awkward position of trying to rebuild trust with Abiy's government while also pressing it for accountability for horrific crimes its troops committed during the war.

With neighboring Somalia still facing a violent terrorist insurgency and Ethiopia itself coming unraveled, America has little to show for its loyal commitment to Ethiopia's military capabilities.

Endnotes

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3. Stephen Watts, Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Sean Mann, Michael J. McNerney, and Andrew Brooks, Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), ix.

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17. Alexander Noyes, "The Case For A Governance First U.S. Security Policy In The Sahel," Hoover Institution, June 6, 2023.

18. United States Institute of Peace Working Group on Elite Capture and Corruption of Security Sectors, Elite Capture and Corruption of Security Sectors (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2023), xiii-xvii.

19. US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations by Alexis Arieff, Nick M. Brown, and Travis A. Ferrell, IF11267 (March 16, 2023). For other governance-related restrictions on security assistance, see US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, Child Soldiers Prevention Act: Security Assistance Restrictions by Michael A. Weber, IF10901 (October 31, 2022).

20. A good example of insufficient oversight is Chad, where Congress has frozen some but not all US military assistance. The State Department has avoided triggering automatic cuts to assistance to Chad by refraining from calling the 2021 military takeover a coup. See Congressional Research Service, Coup-Related Restrictions, 2, and Rachel Chason, "As Russians plot against

Chad, concerns mount over important U.S. ally," Washington Post, April 24, 2023.

21. Watts, et al., Building Security, xviii.

22. Sokolsky and Adams, "Governance and Security Sector Assistance."

23. Rachel Tecott Metz, "The Cult of the Persuasive: Why U.S. Security Assistance Fails," International Security 47, no. 3 (Winter 2022/2023): 110-111.

24. Ibid., 103.

25. Ibid., 97; United States Institute of Peace Working Group, Elite Capture and Corruption of Security Sectors, 16-20.

26. Metz explores the example of the Iraqi military, where US goals of creating a strong national army were impeded by military leaders who permitted or encouraged soldiers to reshuffle into homogenous ethno-sectarian units or were motivated to fill their officer corps with loyalists. No level of persuasion succeeded in convincing these military leaders to abide by more professional norms, but US security assistance continued to flow anyway. Metz, "Cult of the Persuasive," 115-118.

27. State, Foreign Operations, and Related Program Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2021, Before the Senate Comm. on Appropriations, 116th Cong. 21 (2020) (statement of David Hale, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, U.S. Department of State).

28. See William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Public Law 116-283, U.S. Statutes at Large 134 (2021): 3992-3994.

29. See Morgan Ortagus, "Allegations of Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the Sahel," US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, July 9, 2020; "Digital Press Briefing with Ambassador J. Peter Pham, US Special Envoy for the Sahel," US Department of State, January 5, 2021; and Metz, "Cult of the Persuasive," 99.

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