The Evolution of U.S. Defense Posture in North and West Africa

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THE ISSUE

- A review of U.S. defense posture in North and West Africa since 2012 reveals that changes have been crisis-driven and constrained by AFRICOM’s persistent lack of resourcing, rather than being informed by strategic objectives.
- Proposals being considered at the Defense Department to drastically reduce troop levels in Africa may depart from this pattern, while leaving the United States no better prepared to face emerging security threats in the region.
- The United States should scale its resourcing to meet its policy objectives, but these objectives should themselves be tailored to realistic threat assessments.

What is the U.S. military presence in North and West Africa, and how did it evolve? The Defense Department is considering adjustments to its North and West Africa posture in response to a fatal ambush on a U.S. special operations forces team in Niger last fall. Without some historical context, it is difficult to assess if these adjustments reflect substantial changes in U.S. presence, and how they might affect U.S. Africa policy in the future. This brief provides such context.

POSTURE FACTORS IN AFRICA

Defense posture has been described as a mix of “forces, footprint, and agreements.” In other words, posture is the sum of the diplomatic permissions to conduct military activities, the physical facilities, and the DoD personnel and military platforms either stationed or temporarily assigned to a defined geographic area. Adjustments to forces can be easier to make than either installations or access agreements, although the three are often interdependent.

Three major factors affect posture choices: (1) U.S. strategic objectives; (2) reliability of access in terms of diplomatic relations and political stability; and (3) availability of personnel, assets, and other resources. Officials at the Pentagon, the State Department, and the relevant combatant commands must periodically assess these factors to ensure a rational fit between posture constraints and policy ambitions.

In the Africa area of operations, conserving resources is the driving consideration among these three factors. Policymakers and defense planners tend to think of force allocations to Africa as a drain on resources from other theatres rather than as a strategic investment. AFRICOM does not have assigned forces, African hosts generally are politically sensitive to any U.S. military presence, and the costs of military construction can be high relative to other locations.
As of 2012, AFRICOM had one forward operating site in Djibouti, and a series of access locations across the continent, many of them considered austere, without exclusive-use facilities. The Sahara Desert forms a natural and enormous obstacle between much of the population centers in West Africa and locations in the European Command (EUCOM) area of operations, upon which AFRICOM depends heavily in the event of a crisis. On a regular basis, the command frequently and temporarily borrows assets from other commanders. Personnel assigned to the continent are rotationally, rather than permanently, assigned.

Our review of the evolution of U.S. defense posture and presence in Africa over the past six years revealed a recurring pattern:

- **Step 1:** Crisis is met with ad-hoc U.S. response.
- **Step 2:** Policymakers, operators, and congressional actors recognize revealed posture gaps in AFRICOM.
- **Step 3:** The United States makes modest adjustments, consistent with the principle of low-cost, light footprint approaches—largely including ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), regional operations, partner capacity-building, and special operations.

This process unfolded in at least five major episodes over the past six years: the attack on the U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya; U.S. support to the French intervention in Mali; the brazen actions of Boko Haram; the battle for Sirte in Libya; and the ambush of U.S. forces in Niger. The U.S. response to date to the 2017 ambush in Niger may signal a potential break from this script. These events, and the posture adjustments that followed, are described below.

**CRISIS 1: ATTACK ON THE AMERICAN FACILITIES IN BENGHAZI (2012)**

On September 11, 2012, Libyan militants attacked the U.S. Temporary Mission Facility in Benghazi, Libya. Although the U.S. mobilized surveillance aircraft, two Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team (FAST) platoons, and special operations forces from various sites to respond to the situation, these units were not able to reach the facility in time to prevent the deaths of four U.S. citizens, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens. The ensuing congressional investigations attributed the outcomes in Benghazi to AFRICOM’s “lack of operational assets,” including no nearby forward-operating base, Marine Expeditionary Unit, or in-extremis force to engage in rapid crisis response.

The Benghazi attacks revealed to a much wider audience the paucity of defense assets in or dedicated to North Africa specifically and AFRICOM generally. Under congressional and internal pressure to make commensurate adjustments, DoD worked to increase its readiness to respond to “high risk, high threat” environments in Africa. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta detailed the department’s lessons-learned, which would serve as a blueprint for adjusting U.S. posture.

First, the United States sought to expand host nation capacity through train-and-equip assistance. Second, per congressional mandate, the United States deployed 1000 additional marines to the Marine Security Guard Program to enhance diplomatic security. Third, DoD provided AFRICOM more capabilities by assigning it Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Forces for Crisis Response and a Commander In-Extremis Force. AFRICOM also secured agreements to share forces with other combatant commands and relocate ISR assets. Although the United States adjusted its posture to reduce its vulnerability to another Benghazi-like attack, AFRICOM continued to base primarily from Djibouti and Europe and rely on partnered forces. AFRICOM’s then-commander,
General David Rodriguez, succinctly summarized the approach in 2014: “Our strategic posture and presence are premised on the concept of a tailored, flexible, light footprint that leverages and supports the posture and presence of partners and is supported by expeditionary infrastructure.”

CRISIS 2: AL QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB THREATEN MALI, FRANCE INTERVENES (2012-2013)

In 2012, after a series of defeats at the hands of a Tuareg rebels, the Malian military launched a coup that overthrew the government. In the resulting security vacuum, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) increased its control over the northern half of the country and began to expand southward toward the capital, Bamako. In January 2013, the French launched Operation Serval, a robust counterterrorism intervention in northern Mali, and requested U.S. assistance. The United States agreed to provide logistical support in the form of intelligence sharing, aerial refueling, and airlift. At the same time, defense officials repeatedly expressed U.S. unwillingness to insert ground forces into Mali.

The situation in Mali led to calls for supplementing AFRICOM’s limited ISR assets and triggered an expansion in U.S. access and facilities for ISR in the region. To support the French mission, the United States began flying unmanned surveillance assets from Niger and sent 200 U.S. troops to the country to facilitate intelligence-sharing. In early 2013, reports indicated defense officials were considering expanding the U.S. presence in Niger by building an airfield in Agadez to base ISR assets and monitor extremist elements in the region. Plans for the construction of Niger Air Base 201, the second largest U.S. installation on the continent, materialized in 2014, and the base is set to be operational by 2019. As AFRICOM Spokesperson Samantha Reho explained, “The location in Agadez will improve U.S. Africa Command’s capability to facilitate intelligence-sharing that better supports Niger and other partner nations, such as Nigeria, Chad, Mali and other neighbors in the region and will improve our capability to respond to regional security issues.”


In April of 2014, the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram conducted a mass kidnapping of over 200 Nigerian schoolgirls. The audacity of the attack and the wave of social media activism it inspired prompted another round of congressional inquiry into U.S. military capacity in West Africa. The immediate U.S. response was to send an 18-member, multidisciplinary team to advise and assist the Nigerian government on locating and rescuing the girls. The United States also lent ISR capabilities to the mission, sending 80 troops to Chad in May 2014 to operate unmanned surveillance assets there and share intelligence with the Nigerians. Shortly after the deployment, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel insisted “these are not boots on the ground,” signaling U.S. unwillingness to use force or take unilateral action on the continent.

The global response to #BringBackOurGirls and the increasing lethality of Boko Haram prompted regional governments to take joint action, and the United States offered to help. In October 2015, the administration authorized another 300 troops to assist with ISR in Cameroon in the ongoing fight against Boko Haram. Nevertheless, by June 2014, AFRICOM had begun diverting its limited ISR assets from the mission in
Nigeria to other areas on the continent, claiming “ISR is at a premium in Africa.”29 In 2015, AFRICOM Commander General David Rodriguez acknowledged his command was operating at only 13 percent of its requested ISR capacity and remained dependent on assets from EUCOM.30 As General Rodriguez told the Senate in March 2015, “With our requirements expanding faster than resources are increasing, we are utilizing innovative and creative ways to mitigate capability gaps.”31

CRISIS 4: THE BATTLE FOR SIRTE (2016)

After the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) took control of Sirte in 2015, the United States reportedly stationed small teams of special operators around Libya to cultivate local partnerships and gather intelligence.32 U.S. involvement intensified after August 1, 2016, when the Government of National Accord (GNA) requested U.S. airstrikes to support its forces in the battle to control Sirte.33 The United States sent amphibious assault ships carrying Marine-piloted Harrier jets and SuperCobra helicopters to conduct the strikes in what became known as Operation Odyssey Lightning.34 After Libyan forces recaptured Sirte in December 2016, AFRICOM announced the completion of 495 precision airstrikes.35

The U.S. counter-ISIL strategy in Libya has been characterized by ISR support, partner capacity-building through train-and-equip programs, and advise and assist missions by special forces.36 Although the Pentagon downplays the presence of any ground forces, officials have indicated “a small number of U.S. forces” have participated in counter-ISIL operations from Libya.37 Authorities from such efforts derive from train-and-equip programs under 10 USC 333 and advise and assist operations under 10 USC 127e.38 Reflecting the by, with, and through approach, DoD Spokesman Peter Cook said the strikes in Sirte were “consistent with our approach to combating ISIL by working with capable and motivated local forces.”39

The Battle of Sirte revealed the tension in U.S. policy between maintaining a small, secretive footprint and sustaining commitment to defeat transnational terror on the continent. Early on, the Pentagon insisted the operation would not consist of “boots on the ground,”40 typifying the emphasis on “low-visibility operations”41 in Africa. Yet, statements by defense officials throughout Odyssey Lightning also expressed the enduring nature of the U.S. military commitment to defeating ISIL and acknowledged Libya would require “strategic patience.”42 Despite their expulsion from Sirte, ISIL members continue to operate in remote inland areas, and concerns about an ISIL resurgence in Libya remain. In late 2016, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford indicated the United States would retain a posture in Africa conducive to a global counter-ISIL
strategy. Since then, AFRICOM has announced that it has conducted several airstrikes against ISIL targets in Libya—and also against AQIM targets, illustrating the extent to which the campaigns against these two groups overlap geographically. At least one anonymous U.S. official source indicated the use of armed UAVs for such strikes. The campaign in Sirte, then, appears to have led to a persistent mission involving air assets. This implies a need for ongoing regional access for such platforms.

**CRISIS 5: THE AMBUSH IN NIGER (2017)**

In October of 2017, a joint U.S.-Nigerien mission was ambushed by militants from the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. Four U.S. servicemembers were killed, along with four Nigerien soldiers. The event prompted extended media scrutiny and a series of internal DoD reviews, some of which have been released to the public. An AFRICOM investigation concluded that tactical and operational decisions, not posture gaps, led to the tragedy in Niger, but also indicated that ground mobility, close air support, and ISR coverage were significant factors in the outcome and revealed a dependency on French and Nigerien quick reaction assets.

This indirect relationship with resources may partially explain why subsequent debates and decisions over posture adjustments have pointed to both investment and divestment choices. The commander of AFRICOM, General Thomas D. Waldhauser, recently stated the command began to arm drones operating out of Niamey in the wake of the ambush and has made adjustments to reduce medical evacuation response times. While this limited expansion in capabilities reflects the U.S. response to earlier crises, *The New York Times* has reported that Secretary of Defense Mattis ordered AFRICOM and Special Operations Command to consider options for cutting the number of special operators rotating to Africa by 50 percent, and that Waldhauser has incorporated SOF cuts into his own plan. This may represent a departure from the cycle of crisis response that has thus far defined the U.S. experience in North and West Africa—or it may indicate a greater reliance on unmanned options, with their accompanying posture requirements.

**CONCLUSION**

Cumulatively, contingency-generated posture changes in North and West Africa over the past six years have expanded access, inspired a modest growth in facilities construction and use, and increased the number of forces rotating through the region. The question is whether the whole is more strategic than the sum of its parts, or if it is instead a Frankenstein posture, with functions disconnected from larger policy goals. The by, with, and through approach appears to serve as a compromise for making substantial changes to U.S. posture. AFRICOM has struggled with resource deficiencies since its inception—a condition that constrains U.S. freedom of action in a vast and dynamic theater, as recent incidents reveal. The desire for efficiencies and a low profile has driven the “light footprint” strategy, at the expense of operational flexibility. Made consciously, this choice can be justified and objectives adjusted. Stumbled into, it prevents the realization of strategic goals and runs unseen risks that can eventually endanger U.S. personnel.

General Waldhauser’s recent public pronouncements about planned reductions in special operations suggest that, once again, U.S. military presence in Africa is being de-emphasized for the sake of conserving strategic assets. Secretary Mattis apparently intends to focus these resources on competitions in other theaters. The administration’s plans to withdraw troops signal that it prefers to decrease commitments and operational and tactical risk rather than increase investment in the North and West African theater. It remains to be seen whether buying down operational and tactical risk...
increases overall risk from security threats in the region or instead reduces risk overall.

North and West Africa remains a contentious region, where violent extremism, state fragility, and increasing competition among global state actors continue to affect U.S., allied, and partner interests. The United States must scale its resourcing to meet its policy objectives, but these objectives must themselves be tailored to realistic threat assessments. Changes to U.S. presence affect U.S. preparation to face the next crisis. When that crisis hits, the cycle may simply resume.

### A History of Low-Cost, Light Footprint Approaches

“In Africa, we are to seek a light footprint and innovative approaches and low-cost approaches to achieving the United States’ security objectives.”

– General Carter Ham, AFRICOM commander, in January 2013

“AFRICOM recognizes that Africa is a “low-cost, small-footprint” theater and that adequate resources to conduct every desired engagement, exercise, and other military-to-military activities will not be available.”

– Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in February 2013

“With limited forces and infrastructure, we are working to maximize our adaptability and flexibility to respond effectively to crisis.”

– General David Rodriguez, AFRICOM commander, in March 2015

### Building African Security Capacity, Not U.S. Bases

“Our cooperation builds security capacity and can help to reinforce our partners’ willingness to advance our shared interests.”

– General David Rodriguez, AFRICOM commander, in March 2014

“Even with limited resources or capabilities, Africa Command aggressively works with partners and allies to execute our missions and mitigate risk. Moving forward, we continue to focus our decisive effort on building African partner capacity and will continue to work closely with the international and interagency partners to make small, wise investments which pay huge dividends in building stable and effective governments, the foundation for long-term security in Africa.”

– General Thomas Waldhauser, AFRICOM commander, in March 2017

“Secretary Mattis has placed a significant emphasis on building and strengthening partnerships to both lessen the demand for U.S. forces and to ensure sustainable indigenous solutions to these problems. In the simplest terms, DoD seeks to work by, with, and through our partners in Africa to find African solutions to African problems.”

– David Trachtenberg, acting under secretary of Defense for Policy, in December 2017

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ENDNOTES


44. Ryan (2016).


50. S. Hrg. 113-164.


