

COMMENTARY

Fifty-Four Durand Lines: The Importance of Persistent Security Assistance in Africa

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The US has long faced criticism about being a 'fair weather friend' to foreign states only as it suits current policy interests. Such inconsistent engagement results in opportunity costs that are both fiscally draining and damaging to US social and political capital. US defense, development, and diplomatic establishments can more easily realize progress and encourage positive forward movement with African states by initiating and maintaining more consistent collaboration with foreign nation representatives. An increased commitment to persistent engagement will be especially important for the Department of Defense, which has been sharply criticized for its heavy-handedness when partnering with foreign security forces over the past decade.

As the international community has observed through recent events across the African continent, it is important that the US government conduct policy planning and operations with a mind to building long-term relationships rather than dabbling in flings and ill-suited one night stands. This is particularly important with programs that involve potentially sensitive knowledge and skills transfers, such as the military reform and security force capacity building that the US has favored more heavily as of late. As the US continues to shift from heavy presence, high-visibility interventions to more subtle and nuanced capacity enhancement initiatives, government representatives will need to rely less on muscle and more on craft. The type of work that is required to truly effect change and build durable institutional relationships is hard, slow, and methodical work that does not lend itself to a quick fix.

The US has long faced criticism that it is a 'fair weather friend' to foreign states, acting only as it suits current policy interests. Such inconsistent engagement incurs opportunity costs that are damaging to US political capital and fiscally draining. US defense, development, and diplomatic establishments can achieve US objectives by initiating and maintaining more consistent collaboration with foreign counterparts in African states. An increased commitment to persistent engagement will be especially important for

the Department of Defense (DoD), which has been criticized for its heavy-handedness and insensitivity to host nation norms when partnering with foreign security forces over the past decade.

As the international community has observed through recent events across the African continent,¹ it is important that the US Government (USG) conduct policy planning and operations with a mind to building long-term relationships rather than dabbling in ill-suited flings (Whitlock 2012). Events in West Africa and across the continent demonstrate that the US has a long-term strategic interest in African stability, for challenges that are born in the undergoverned spaces of

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Africa are increasingly likely to mutate and spread out of foreign territories and into the American homeland (Norris 2013).

The United States' African Command (AFRICOM) is currently supporting French operations in Mali against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates. Other groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria², have also become increasingly active and are looking to achieve an even wider impact (Walker 2012). New efforts should focus on developing relationships that will contribute to the stability and security of the continent while making diplomatic gains that will pay dividends later through such benefits as increased military interoperability and strengthened political collaboration.

Building durable security relationships is particularly important for nation-to-nation partnerships that involve the transfer of sensitive knowledge and skills, such as those contained within the military reform and security force capacity building programs that the USG has favored as of late (Keating 2012). While the US continues to shift from heavy presence, high-visibility interventions to more subtle and nuanced capacity-enhancement initiatives, government representatives will need to rely less on muscle and more on craft.

The type of work that is required to truly effect change and build durable institutional relationships must be steady and persistent. At its core, this approach to conflict prevention through increased institutional capacity is simply, 'helping friends to help themselves so they can help us' (Roberts et al 2013). Furthermore, security assistance programs must be complemented by robust economic, diplomatic, and development engagement to advance human rights, promote sustainable development, advance the rule of law, and encourage commercial participation, all of which will combat the underlying drivers of instability. These capacity building collaborations with African partners combating domestic threats, such as those in Somalia, are beginning to produce encouraging results and could provide the blueprint

for future engagements in West Africa and around the globe.

Understanding the Battle Space

In order to efficiently engage partner nations across Africa, it is imperative that the USG and American public take a more active role in understanding the people and nations of the region. As expansive and diverse as the African continent is, it is under-accessed and poorly understood. The American public rarely views events in Africa that go beyond news clips of violent conflicts or safari photo shoots, and typically knows little of the vast cultural, religious, linguistic, and sociopolitical diversity of African societies. The US provides only a small number of tourists, minimal study abroad engagement, and few opportunities for full cultural immersion of US nationals in African countries outside of the Peace Corps and Fulbright programs. Additionally, although Africa is comprised of fifty-four distinct sovereign nations, relatively few people understand the size and diversity of the continent's geography.

It is important that the USG encourage the cultivation of subject- and area-matter experts in its ranks in order to develop a cadre of professionals with informed points of view. While the USG has begun to encourage this through educational incentive programs such as Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) scholarships and Boren Awards and Fellowships, there is a dearth of qualified individuals in both military and civilian pools to draw from when advising or consultation proves necessary. Even more importantly, it is essential to remember that capacity building and security assistance programs in Africa – or any foreign environment for that matter – will require both patience and persistence, rare qualities in American foreign engagement.

Why Persistent Security Engagement?

Instability is highly contextual and its differing causes do not lend themselves to a uniform solution. That being said, it is far easier

– and more measurable – to allocate specific resources to strengthen security forces than to attempt to strengthen broader governance and other factors that reduce instability. Military cultures tend to be somewhat isolated from other primary societal facets like the government and civil society, and this segregation allows for easier planning, training delivery, and evaluation. Because of this institutional detachment from destabilizing influences, it is easier to measure military and police advancement than, for example, the improvement of economic security or increased educational attainment. Nevertheless, capacity building for security forces is not as simple as buying soldiers guns and reorganizing their staff into internationally recognized command structures. It is the development of the underlying institution that is vital, as well as that institution's ability to be sustainable and self-supporting. As one ISAF general noted at a 2012 Pentagon briefing of military training practices in Afghanistan, 'We tend to focus on war fighting skills, but those aren't what produce warfighters'.

As the US saw in the aftermath of the recent coup in Mali, it is vital to have a persistent presence in at-risk environments. At the National Defense Industrial Association's 24th Annual SO/LIC (Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict) Conference, keynote speaker and Commander of US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Admiral McRaven candidly admitted that the US had an episodic presence in Mali, and that perhaps a lack of consistent and integrated engagement contributed to the problems that necessitated the military intervention in the first place, i.e. the presence and activities of non-state actors. 'Missions are not secretive, they are not sexy,' said McRaven. '[It is] hard, slow, and methodical work that does not lend itself to a quick win....It's about patience, persistence, and building trust with our partners' (McRaven 2013). Military training and other capacity building initiatives have done this on a large scale for decades – most recently and conspicuously in the training of the Afghan National Security Forces – yet

US officials are somewhat slow to embrace the idea that trust is developed over years of one-on-one interactions. McRaven summed up this lesson concisely when he stated, 'You can't surge trust' (McRaven 2013).

The complexity of these situations requires a nuanced understanding of the realities on the ground and is further reason why international engagement should be continuous, not merely responsive to imminent threats. While the nature of relationships with host countries implies the partner nation's willingness to receive US-directed training, it is better to work together consistently rather than sporadically. Expanding security partnerships is a two-way street and countries have to want to partner with the USG to maximize program efficacy. Recent international trade and contracting trends indicate that countries around the world will continue wanting to constructively engage and interact with US representatives and to acquire US defense systems, including skills transfers (Mulholland et al 2013). As a senior USG employee familiar with the matter observed, the increased interest in acquiring defense systems, 'demonstrates the continued centrality of our country, and it really represents an important strategic opportunity for our nation' (Mulholland et al 2013).

Buy-in from the host nation needs to manifest itself on many levels to make these programs truly integrated and effective; this is why it is critical to have the support of US defense, development, and diplomacy establishments to align policies and goals. The last decade of war has resulted in countless assessments and reports on the importance of winning 'hearts and minds' and this is a lesson that should not be forgotten. Engaging the civilian population and winning their support for international capacity assistance programs is as important as having the support of the partner government. The DoD has candidly accepted that its role demands 'human domain' insight³, which applies to all aspects of the physical, cultural, and social environment that influence behavior and

decision-making (Sacolick 2012). ‘Success in current and future operations depends on understanding and shaping social and cultural landscape including patterns of life’ (Maybury 2011).

What Does It Look Like?

Instead of nation-building with large, traditional military forces, civilian policymakers and military leadership are increasingly choosing to use a combination of special operators, intelligence agents, host country nationals, and contractors to further develop relationships with allies and enable partner militaries to have a more active role in their own defense development. As Maj. Fernando Lujan wrote in a recent analysis, ‘Prevention is the new “victory”’ (Lujan 2013).

Rare are the cases when it may be better for the US to intercede rather than assisting the host nation in performing their own intervention. Indeed, the partner government’s actions are an exercise in the sovereignty of the state and the territory, and there is an inherent legal basis for action within their own borders. Partner governments innately have a better understanding of the setting and the problem. If the US or another foreign actor visibly intervenes, it decreases the legitimacy of the host government and shifts the responsibility and blame of any negative repercussions onto the US. In many cases, it can allow maligned actors to condemn the host country government as a puppet of the US, which may further delegitimize the government’s reputation.

The primary form of assistance operations that blend US and partner nation capabilities is US support from behind, going ‘through, with, and by’ the host nation. When intervention support is requested or proves necessary, there are measures that can be taken to mitigate the criticisms previously mentioned. Primarily, it is important that US assistance consider what the partner is capable of on its own and then discreetly backfill in the missing stabilizers. These stabilizers may be enablers or advanced logistical support such

as medevac, augmented communications equipment, or other delivery assistance.

An example of increased support is the establishment of a new base in Niger from which unarmed unmanned aerial systems (UAS, or ‘drones’) can operate to provide amplified intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. This recent addition to the US military infrastructure in Africa will join a number of smaller airstrips that have been developed over the past few years in strategic locations to support surveillance missions via UAS. The new base will provide increased coverage and situational awareness for the host country and its allies who strive to help stabilize West Africa, and will complement the aerial coverage that has already been established out of sites in East Africa.

The ultimate aim of bolstering allies’ capabilities to operate efficiently and independently is achieved through the ability of training programs to impart leave-behind skill sets that will only require the US to act in a support capacity in the background to provide advice, assistance, and strategic commentary. These roles, though less visible than boots on the ground, are equally, if not more, important. As Special Operations Command Africa Commander Rear Admiral Brian Losey affirmed, ‘Light signature and light footprint does not mean light impact’ (Roberts et al 2013).

The Way Ahead

Improving, expanding, and strengthening international assistance partnerships is going to be a critical national security priority over the coming decade. While earlier generations felt that the biggest threat to their security was world domination by Soviet military influence, the millennial generation recognizes that future battles will not be conventional wars against superpowers or clearly defined state actors. They will instead be contests against enemies with unclear structures and provenance, a marked shift away from an easily definable opponent. While these

groups may not have equally sophisticated technologies, they likely will have ideological drivers that will present a serious challenge to the resolve of US and allied objectives.

Because state actors will likely not be the primary source of conflict in the coming years, the success of warfare in the future will depend on the dominance of the human domain.⁴ US advisory and assistance forces are already reorienting their attentions on skill sets that will allow for the maximization of interactions with partner nation military personnel and civilian populations. Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz captured this sentiment when he observed, 'Cultural understanding is extremely important to our ability to affect positive outcomes. As we pursue our interests in an interconnected, globalized world, we must be cognizant not only of socio-economic and political institutions; we must genuinely and increasingly appreciate linguistic, regional, and cultural constructs' (Schwartz 2011). In order to understand Africans, US personnel need to dedicate time and resources to experience life in Africa as their host counterparts do.

General Ray Odierno, former US Joint Forces Commander and current Army Chief of Staff, is already focused on developing regional-specific forces with advanced understanding of the sociocultural dynamics of the areas that they are expected to operate in (McRaven 2013). To revisit the idea of understanding the battle space, while it may not be feasible for all participants of these programs to undertake intensive training regimes like the hallmark language training delivered at the Defense Language Institute, it is still important that people learn to speak the languages and develop an understanding of the environment that they will be working within.

While a more integrated and comprehensive human security approach is required in contemporary security contexts across the African continent, this fact does not mandate that military forces must be used, nor imply that they are always best suited to address

the complexities of the requisite dimensions of this strategy. Rather, there are alternative civilian elements of governments, civil society actors, and international organizations that possess more appropriate expertise, skill sets, past performance, and mandates that may more directly address and mitigate the driving forces of instability and conflict. The key imperative for stakeholders in security sector reform and strengthening in these contexts is the recognition that complementary dimensions, such as development and governance, are vital to the holistic success of such programs and that it is both appropriate and necessary to continuously coordinate with other entities that are operating in the same environments with similar end goals.

Conclusion

Persistent engagement with African governments is necessary to accomplish US objectives of developing secure societies with compatible rule of law frameworks that will allow for partner states to mitigate threats to themselves, their regional neighbors, and the broader geopolitical world order in a responsible but autonomous fashion. When designed, delivered, and overseen responsibly, security assistance is the most practical and cost-effective form of this engagement. The US should continue to facilitate programs that focus on helping vetted partner governments develop the capacity to secure and stabilize their territories. By enabling host states to proactively address challenges in locally appropriate and responsive manners, the US will simultaneously reduce demands on its own increasingly scarce resources like fiscal and human capital while building capable allies to advance joint interests in the years ahead.

The importance of persistent engagement has been recognized outside of US military and government entities as well. Civil society organizations, such as the Fund for Peace (FfP), dedicate significant resources to conflict assessment and security and their impact on human rights. J.J. Messner, Direc-

tor of Sustainable Development and Security at FfP, asserts, 'We firmly believe that where communities and societies are protected by properly trained security forces, it follows that their security and respect for human rights will also improve. But this is a continuing process; as such, training needs to be provided to all officers, soldiers, and combatants – and it also needs to be continually reinforced in order to be effective' (Messner 2013).

As the old adage teaches, 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'. Such sayings do not endure for so long when they are not true. This should be remembered especially when the 'cure' comes at the risk of putting lives in harm's way.

Notes

¹ In recent decades the US has spent substantial resources educating the African continent's military leadership, ranging from Egyptian military leaders to the American-trained Malian coup leaders. Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, for example, led a renegade military faction to depose Mali's democratically elected president in March of 2012 after having visited the US repeatedly to receive professional military education at the expense of the USG (Whitlock 2012). Up until the coup, which the US denounced and after which cut off funding, roughly US\$600,000 per year had been allocated for Malian military training (Keating 2012). Billions of dollars have been funneled to the training and capacity building of the Egyptian military, both before and after Mubarak's fall from power (Norris 2013). President Yahya Jammeh, after completing military police training in Alabama in 1994, returned to his home in The Gambia to lead a successful coup. He has been in power ever since (Keating 2012).

² Boko Haram is an Islamic sect that believes politics in northern Nigeria has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims. It wants to wage a war against

them, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a 'pure' Islamic state ruled by sharia law. Since August 2011 Boko Haram has planted bombs almost weekly in public places and churches in Nigeria's northeast. The group has also broadened its targets to include schools; in March 2012, some twelve public schools in Maiduguri were burned down during the night, and as many as 10,000 pupils were forced out of education. Boko Haram is not in the same global jihadist bracket as Algeria's al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or Somalia's al Shabab.

³ These considerations may inform decision making to the extent that the success of a military effort could be determined by the application of unique capabilities that are designed to overcome population-centric conflicts.

⁴ This is demonstrated by the fact that the vast majority of recent conflicts are non-state conflicts, with the last truly interstate conflict being the Russo-Georgian territorial dispute of 2008.

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