



U.S. ‘Burden-Shifting’ Strategy in Africa Validates France’s Ambition for Greater European Strategic Autonomy

By Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer and Martin Quencez

The Trump administration’s reorientation of U.S. priorities back toward “near-peer” competitors China and Russia has important implications for France and European allies. Washington is no longer willing or even able to play the role of “global policeman,” especially in the Middle East and Africa, where it wants to shift the burden of crisis management and counterterrorism to regional and European partners. Furthermore, the United States’ increasing focus in outpacing China and Russia in the technology, cyber, and space domains is largely bipartisan and will likely survive the Trump presidency. This means Europe needs to adjust its strategy and achieve full strategic autonomy in crisis response, across the whole spectrum of operations, especially its Southern neighborhood.

“Assist” is the key phrase,” U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo said in his January Cairo speech. U.S. security engagement in Africa and the Sahel more specifically has been designed to develop the capacity of states to defend themselves. To this end, the Pentagon is accelerating what it calls “force optimization,” which involves cutting 10 percent of its 7,200 forces deployed in Africa over the next years, especially in West Africa, where they will shift from tactical assistance to advising, assisting, liaising and sharing intelligence. Drones will increasingly replace U.S. boots on the ground. The BUILD Act, passed by Congress in October 2018 and meant to

better articulate U.S. development aid and foreign policy interests, is designed to be an instrumental improvement for U.S. soft power. The United States also wants to see more regional cooperative security organizations, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, emerge in Africa and around the world. The short-term U.S. training programs of African forces – between thirty and sixty days – will therefore continue, but Trump is putting an end to US “strategic patience.”

For France, the evolution of the U.S. posture in Africa is particularly significant. Sahelian and Sub-Saharan security will likely fall lower on the priority list in both engagement and expenditure. Washington expects French troops in West Africa to backfill U.S. troop withdrawal. In April 2017, on the day of France’s first-round election, former US Secretary of defense Jim Mattis traveled to Djibouti and urged France to continue its African counterterrorism operations under its new presidency. Washington sees great utility in having a deputy sheriff in Africa, as French “leadership from the front” has saved the United States from having to assume another major military mission. The United States relies on French leadership and savoir-faire in Africa, and its quick reaction assets in Niger, while France relies on US critical capabilities in Mali, in particular, intelligence sharing, aerial refueling, and airlift. Without the United States on its side, France’s ability to project power and conduct counterterrorism operations is limited,



making defense and foreign policy cooperation with European partners all the more crucial to ensuring the stability of the region.

Indeed, France faces a similar burden-sharing problem: budgetary pressures add a degree of urgency to French efforts to deepen European defense cooperation and to build the capacity of regional partners. France's support for the G5 Sahel initiative reflects a broader desire to reduce France's leadership in counterterrorism operations in the region over the long term.

There are some positive signs, but the quest for more European solidarity remains difficult. The French-led Barkhane operation conducted 120 combat operations in 2018, with the support of Estonia, Spain, and the UK, while

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Germany is also increasingly supporting France's counterterrorism forces in the region, including in Niger and Mali. However, as the debates surrounding the creation of the European Intervention Initiative revealed, there is still plenty of suspicion in European capitals that national interests drive Paris's traditional focus on Africa. The shifts in the U.S. presence in Africa strengthen the French case for greater European strategic autonomy and the need to think beyond the scope of the European territory. As for Washington, it should support any initiative that effectively strengthens Europeans' ability to act as security providers in their neighborhoods, and not be too fixated on concerns that Europe is undermining NATO if it duplicates capabilities.

Indeed, Europe will need all the capacity it can muster since Washington's policies cede room to rivals. Even as the Pentagon focuses on competition with China, Trump's policies will leave the U.S. unprepared to deal with Beijing's and others' growing investment and influence in Africa. The more militaristic approach to Africa currently advocated by the administration will backfire because it does not address the root causes of violent extremism, nor does it bring about

the structural changes needed to make African militaries more effective. Washington is ceding leadership to rivals who offer African countries, not just security cooperation but also business deals, cultural exchanges, and humanitarian assistance. African countries see advantages to having an alternative to Washington and are diversifying their relationships, with China, Gulf States, Russia, India, and Turkey.

Washington knows that it relies on a strong French presence in Africa, but the Trump administration's disregard for international organizations weakens French strategy in the region, which features a comprehensive approach involving the UN, EU and the African Union. If Europe wants to continue to push for a comprehensive approach, all the more important because rivals are already doing it, then it quickly needs to gain the common strength to do so. The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

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