



SPECIAL REPORT:

07 September 2021

POST-AFGHANISTAN FOREIGN MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS IN AFRICA

The withdrawal of western troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent highly publicised evacuation from Kabul is reshaping engagements by foreign military forces in Africa. The US, France, and other European powers will slow down planned withdrawals of troops from the Sahel region and other hotspots for insecurity and militancy, and even increase deployments in some regions. Meanwhile, non-traditional military partners, spearheaded by Russia, China, and some Middle Eastern countries, are stepping up engagements on the continent.

In August, Nigeria and Russia signed a new military agreement that provides for Russian military equipment exports to Nigeria. The deal is highly significant as Nigeria has traditionally depended on defence and security equipment derived from the United States and other western countries. However, several large military deals between Nigeria and the US have recently been stalled by US lawmakers over human rights abuses and other concerns. The same month, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari said Nigeria and neighbouring countries needed more military equipment to allow its own soldiers to combat Islamist militants and other insurgents in the Sahel region. Buhari's statement and his government's new military deal with Russia seem significant in the wake of post-Afghanistan geopolitics.

The legacy of the western evacuation from Afghanistan, which was closely watched in African capitals, and the ongoing US troops withdrawal from the Middle East are driving other key defence and security trends on the African continent. France is backtracking from a complete withdrawal of its troops from the Sahel region, while its European partners are stepping up military deployments to the restive region. Non-traditional security partners, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, and others, are now competing with the US, Europe, and Russia for military export deals on the continent. Although the US military role in Africa is far more limited than its presence in the Middle East and South Asia, the current administration is unlikely to draw down troops from African insecurity hotspots, as it faces such growing competition.

PANGEA-RISK looks at the growing military competition between foreign powers in Africa and assesses how the post-Afghanistan geopolitical outlook is set to change military influence dynamics and commercial ties.

Nigeria turns to Russia for military support

On 23 August, the Nigerian and Russian federal governments signed "a legal framework" allowing Russia to supply military equipment and training to the Nigerian military. Nigerian President Buhari originally expressed interest in such a deal covering new equipment and military training from Russia at a Russia-Africa summit in Moscow in 2019. Three years later, the Nigerian Embassy in Moscow released a statement calling the new agreement "a landmark development in bilateral relations." It provides a framework "for the supply of military equipment, provision of after sales services, training of personnel in respective educational establishments and technology transfer, among others." Abdullahi Shehu, Nigeria's envoy to Russia, said to the media that the agreement furthers "our bilateral cooperation with the Russian Federation in this area."



THE MIL MI-24 ATTACK HELICOPTER



NIGERIAN A-29 SUPER TUCANO ATTACK PLANE

Despite such broad official statements, there is little detail publicly available on the new military deal. Nigeria's air force already uses some Russian-made military hardware, such as Mil Mi-24 attack and Mil Mi-17 utility helicopters, as well as combat aircraft like the Chinese-made Chengdu F-7, which is a licensed version of the Russian MiG-21. Most of its military equipment has been procured from European countries, the US, and China and Pakistan. A US State Department Fact Sheet says that between 2016 and 2020, the US spent USD 71 million for Nigerian military training and USD 590 million in "active government to government" military sales cases. It is unclear whether the new Russian military deal will add to the Nigerian Air Force's inventory or foresees land or maritime equipment. A good indicator of the Russian deal would be the detail of the latest US military deal that is being stalled by US lawmakers.

The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee is currently holding up a sale of 12 AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters to Nigeria's air force due to human rights concerns (see SPECIAL REPORT: NIGERIA'S SOUTHERN INSECURITY DRIVES POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL RISK OUTLOOK). In total, US lawmakers have put a hold on a proposal to sell almost USD 1 billion worth of weapons to Nigeria, including the Cobras. The US congress looks unlikely to lift the halt on the arms deal soon, and it has a precedent of holding up such military deals for protracted periods of time, i.e., several years. The 2016 sale of a dozen A-29 Super Tucano attack planes worth more than USD 494 million was held up by the Obama administration, but later approved by the Trump administration. Six of the Super Tucanos were delivered in July, and the other six arrived in Nigeria in early September – more than five years after their initial sale agreement. Meanwhile, Nigerian retired Naval Commodore Kunle Olawunmi recently suggested that Islamist militants had infiltrated the Nigerian security services and the political system, which may strengthen US resistance to more arms deals to Nigeria.

Nigeria's envoy to Russia has denied that the Russian military deal was motivated by the US congressional review of its arms deals. Shehu claims that "Nigeria is not looking for alternatives but complementarity and mutual benefits. So, the fact that Nigeria has signed [this] agreement with Russia does not affect Nigeria's relationship and cooperation with its strategic partners around the world." However, President Buhari's recent editorial article in the Financial Times indicates otherwise. Buhari wrote that "As Africans, we face our day of reckoning just as some sense the west is losing its will for the fight," thus drawing parallels to the fall of the Afghan capital Kabul to Taliban Islamist militants a few days previously. He also called for more weapons, drones, and access to intelligence and surveillance to be delivered to Africans, while saying that Africa has enough soldiers to fight its own battles against Islamist militants.

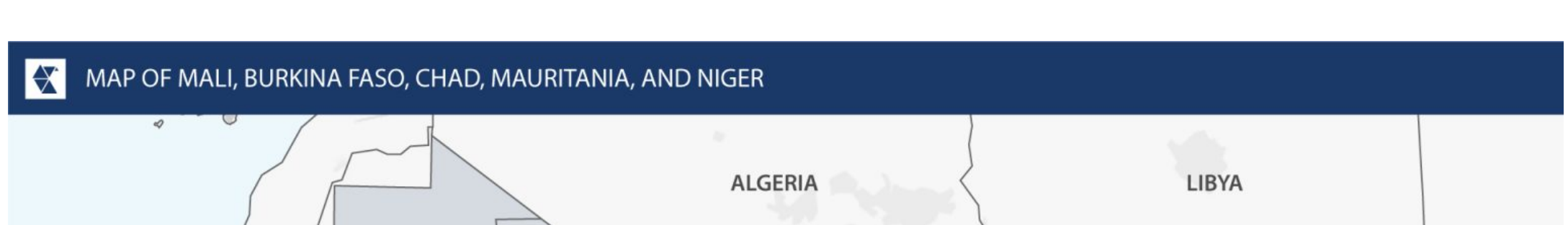


NIGERIA PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI AND RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN

Based on Buhari's statements, it seems that the Russian military deal is motivated by the US congressional stalling of its arms deal, while also capitalising on the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which has weakened the global power's international reputation. Buhari, a Muslim, is a divisive person in the US congress, where some lawmakers blame him for ongoing killings of Nigerian Christians by Muslims. Buhari's comments seem to call for a limited role of the US and the West in Africa, which is reflected in his government's outreach to non-traditional sources of military equipment and support, specifically from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, China, Turkey, and now Russia.

A changing role for France in the Sahel

Meanwhile, domestic politics in Europe in the aftermath of the evacuation from Afghanistan is changing the outlook for European interventionism in Africa, particularly the Sahel region. In June, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that France's seven-year-old counterinsurgency Operation Barkhane in the Sahel would be slimmed down. The statement immediately prompted fears of an imminent French military withdrawal, which would leave beleaguered regional security forces and United Nations troops to tackle the region's escalating security crisis alone. At that time, pressure from local French politicians called for a swift exit strategy, while Sahelian governments sought the withdrawal of the unpopular French deployment, which replaced France's Opération Serval in Mali in 2013.



With little to show for over seven years of military operations, France's security engagement in the Sahel has come under significant political pressure in the last two years, both within the region and at home. The financial cost of Barkhane has also steadily climbed, estimated at USD 1.1 billion in 2020 alone. French politicians have correspondingly labelled the cost of the intervention as "too great" and a public opinion survey conducted in France in early January showed that 51 percent of respondents disapproved of Operation Barkhane. At the same time, negative sentiment towards Operation Barkhane within the Sahelian states has grown rapidly over recent years, with local critiques of the French presence ranging from the perceived failure of Barkhane to protect civilian populations, to the role of the military intervention in furthering France's alleged neo-colonial ambitions. This impression has been helped little by allegations of civilian deaths at the hands of French forces.



FRENCH SOLDIERS OF THE OPERATION BARKHANE

But, on 9 July, Macron specified that 2,500-3,000 of France's 5,100 troops would remain in theatre. Even the planned French withdrawal from northern Mali bases – at Kidal, Tessalit and Timbuktu – is now in doubt. This about-turn seems mostly driven by the lessons learned from Afghanistan. Just before the fall of Kabul in Afghanistan on 15 August, the leader of the Al Qaida-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) militant alliance, Iyad ag Ghalay, congratulated the Taliban in Afghanistan for their victory over US and western forces. Ag Ghalay also noted the parallels with Islamist militants in the Sahel, who need to be patient for the foreign forces to withdraw. In response to the hasty Afghanistan evacuation and the fall of the western-backed government in Kabul, French and other European politics is shifting toward maintaining a troop presence in the Sahel. France has been keen to offer its support to the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger (the G5 alliance of Sahel countries). Although these governments are more stable than those set up by the US in Afghanistan, Sahel leaders will need European military support to avoid a destabilisation from Islamist militants. France is placing an increased emphasis on the employment of small detachments of European special operations forces (SOF) to support security operations by regional security partners.

Under these conditions, France has taken steps to shift its engagement in the region from a unilateral to multilateral framework, ostensibly with the aim of alleviating political pressure back home, as well as to recover some semblance of legitimacy for French operations in the region. The central component of this shift is the establishment of the French-led Task Force Takuba. Comprised of European SOF, Takuba falls under the operational umbrella of Operation Barkhane, and is intended to focus on the Liptako-Gourma region, which borders Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Takuba's primary role is to advise and assist regional security forces during joint operations, as well as to maintain a rapid incident response capability and conduct direct action operations against those militant groups which have exploited the porous borders of the Liptako-Gourma and threaten all three Sahelian states (see SAHEL: FRANCE RESHAPES SECURITY ENGAGEMENT WITH TASK FORCE TAKUBA).



OPERATION TAKUBA SOLDIERS IN THE SAHEL

The European Task Force Takuba is set to eventually take over from Opération Barkhane in the Sahel over the coming months. Task Force Takuba is already 600-strong and will soon be joined by a deployment of Italian special forces with helicopters. Takuba has received extensive pledges of support, including from Estonia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Portugal. Greece, Hungary, and Ukraine have recently expressed firm interest in contributing personnel and are expected to send troops to Takuba in the coming months. The role of Force Takuba will become more prominent as the G5 military alliance remains slow to mobilise and as Chad withdraws half of its 1,200 soldiers from the tri-border militant hotspot region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

In the post-Afghanistan climate, the European Task Force Takuba and France's Opération Barkhane are set to collaborate more with the G5 Sahel alliance to stage counterinsurgency operations. France is consulting G5 leaders and European partners on its planned withdrawal, which has no fixed deadline unlike in Afghanistan, while France and wider African politics is now more supportive of a phased, rather than hasty, withdrawal from the region. Indeed, any perceived failure of the French withdrawal in Africa may have political implications for France's national elections in early 2022.

The US in Africa

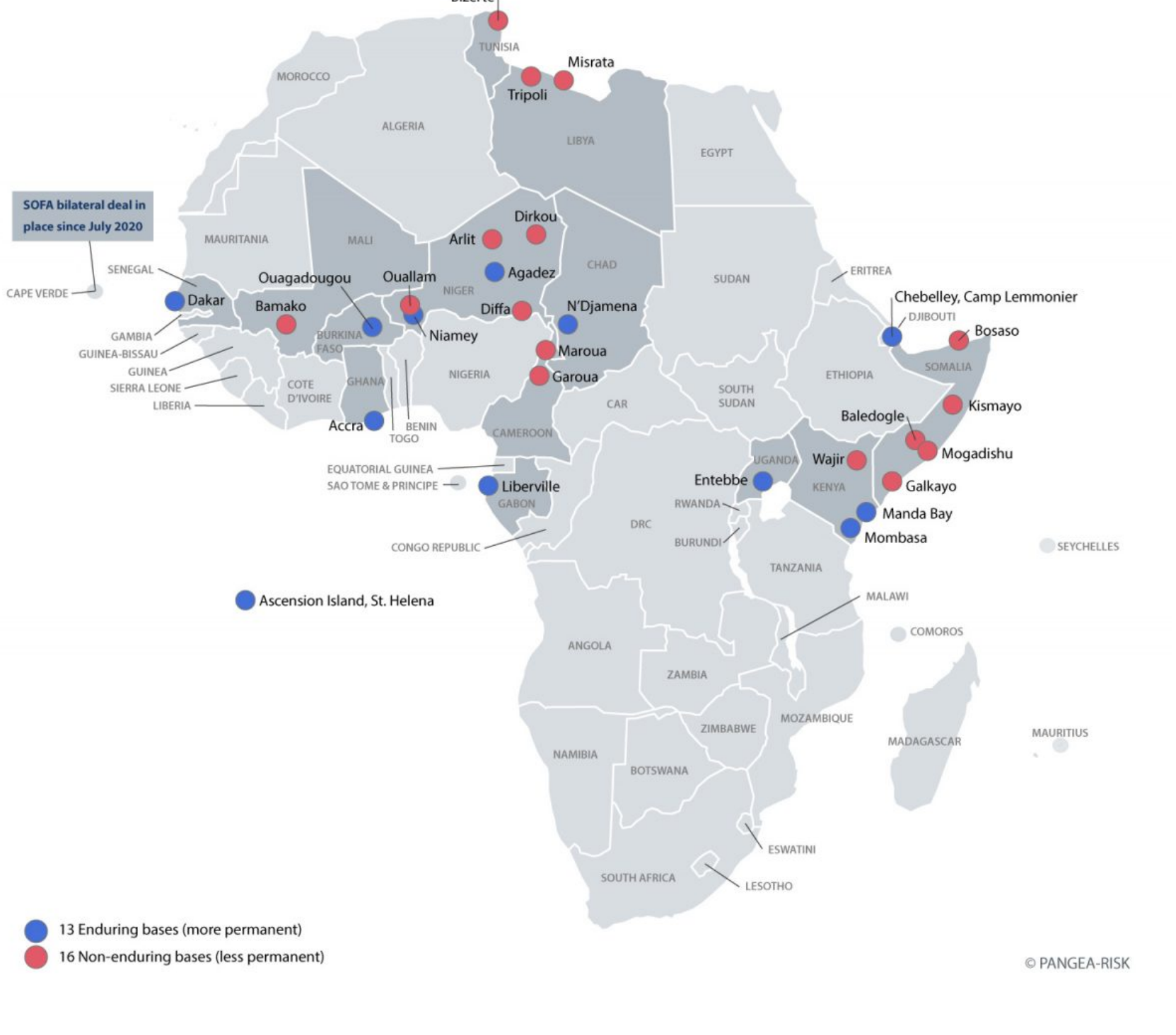
The lessons learned from Afghanistan will also extensively impact the US's role in Africa going forward. Indeed, the US is set to maintain, and even step up, its "hard power" presence on the continent. Despite commitments by the previous US administration to draw down some of its 6,000 military personnel stationed in Africa, the Biden administration is set to maintain most of the US military's bases, which are focussed on East Africa and the Horn, and West Africa and the Sahel regions. There are currently 27 US military outposts in both a permanent and less permanent format across Africa, especially in the continent's northern tier. These include 15 "enduring locations" and 12 less permanent "contingency locations", with the highest concentrations in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa (see AFRICA & US: LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN US MILITARY FOOTPRINT EXPANSION IN AFRICA).



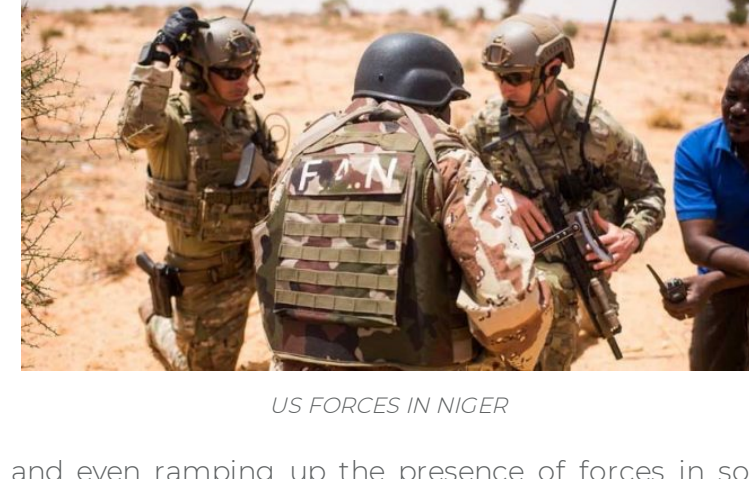
US MILITARY FORCES AND BASES IN AFRICA

ENDURING FOOTPRINT 2019
Chebelley, Djibouti
Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti
Entebbe, Uganda
Mombassa, Kenya
Manda Bay, Kenya
Liberville, Gabon
St. Helena, Ascension Island
Accra, Ghana
Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
Dakar, Senegal
Agadez, Niger
Niamey, Niger
N'Djamena, Chad

NON-ENDURING FOOTPRINT 2019
Bizerte, Tunisia
Arlit, Niger
Dirkou, Niger
Ouallam, Niger
Bamako, Mali
Maroua, Cameroon
Maroua, Nigeria
Misrata, Libya
Tripoli, Libya
Baledogle, Somalia
Bosaso, Somalia
Galkayo, Somalia
Kismayo, Somalia
Mogadishu, Somalia
Wajir, Kenya



Moreover, the US military is set to significantly spend on ramping up base sites and related infrastructure across Africa in coming years, based on government appropriations. The US military's Africa Command (AFRICOM) is set to spend more than USD 330 million between 2021 and 2025 on military construction projects, particularly in Kenya, Niger, and Djibouti. Moreover, AFRICOM is drawing up longer term 20-year plans to enhance its unmanned aerial vehicle (UAE or drone) ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) and drone warfare capability. These budgetary appropriations were confirmed under the previous administration and still retain support among the newly appointed Africa policy leaders under the Biden administration.



US FORCES IN NIGER

Based on AFRICOM documents, publicly available under the US Freedom of Information Act and previously reported by US online publication "The Intercept", AFRICOM will prioritise its counterterrorism objectives, which explains the continued focus on the Horn and Sahel regions. The 20-year plans also indicate that the proposed drawdown of US forces as mooted by the Trump administration, particularly in West Africa, is unlikely to happen – or at least implemented in a more subdued form. Militant attacks in recent years on US forces deployed in Niger, such as at Manda Bay, Kenya, in January 2020, and in Tongo Tongo, Niger, in October 2017, have brought attention to previously under-reported US military activities in the region. While the US military is maintaining its footprint in Africa, unlike in the Middle East from where it is mostly withdrawing, and even ramping up the presence of forces in some African countries, its motivations, strategies, and the regional implications of such a military presence have attracted broader criticism.

The withdrawal of western troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent highly publicised evacuation from Kabul is reshaping engagements by foreign military forces in Africa. The US, France, and other European powers will slow planned withdrawals from the Sahel region and other hotspots for insecurity and militancy, while non-traditional military partners, spearheaded by Russia, China, and some Middle Eastern countries, are stepping up engagements on the continent.

The US administration is gradually formulating its Africa policy through "soft power" pledges, such as aid and investment, vaccine donation, and diplomacy. Meanwhile, the US government is also seeking to maintain its military footprint in Africa, as it faces a rival challenge from other global powers. It is therefore unlikely that the US will withdraw its 6,000 troops stationed in Africa at any one time. The US is also unlikely to proceed with previously proposed base closures, even though the US military is withdrawing troops from the Middle East and closing bases in that operational region.

In the Sahel, the creation and prioritisation of Task Force Takuba indicates that there has been little change in the overall strategic orientation of regional states and their Western security partners in the Sahel, which remains overtly focused on military solutions at the expense of broad social, economic, and political issues. While the presence of additional SOF personnel as front-line mentors is likely to serve as a force multiplier for regional security forces, contributing to further tactical successes, it will not address this strategic deficit.

Meanwhile, non-traditional security partners, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, and others, are now competing with the US, Europe, and Russia for military export deals on the continent. Although the US military role in Africa is far more limited than its presence in the Middle East and South Asia, the current administration is unlikely to draw down troops from African insecurity hotspots, as it faces such growing competition.