

Research Briefing | Africa

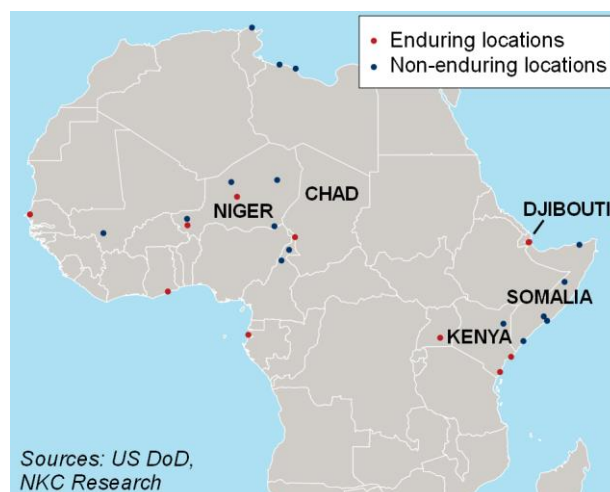
Foreign military involvement in Africa

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- **Foreign militaries, especially those from the US and France, have invested enormous resources in battling Islamist militancy in Africa, but also to entrench and expand their influence. Insecurity and lack of development have given militants a foothold in many parts of Africa, but it is the corruption and indifference of local elites that have allowed militant groups to thrive.**
- The US's Africa Command is headquartered in Germany, but the country operates at least 27 bases on the continent. Drone strikes remain the mainstay of US direct involvement in Africa with large drone bases having been built in Niger and Djibouti.
- France maintains a bigger presence – and troop complement – than any other former colonial power. In the Sahel, Operation Barkhane operates alongside a UN mission (Minusma) and the G5 Sahel. The border area where Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger meet has become the most violent in the region.
- Paris is inconsistent in its treatment of friendly regimes, indulging an unconstitutional transfer of power in Chad but taking a harder line following a coup in Mali.
- Russia is seeking to usurp the status quo and develop relationships with regimes that have strained relations with the West. Direct involvement often comes in the form of mercenaries, as seen in Libya and Central African Republic (CAR).
- Foreign militaries in Africa are not always focused on the continent itself, especially those bases located in the Horn of Africa which look to the Gulf and Indian Ocean. India is looking to join the UK and US in building an Indian Ocean base in Mauritius.
- African states have a complicated relationship with deploying countries but recognise that domestic security is often dependent on the continued presence of these troops. Any sudden withdrawal of troops will have potentially far-reaching consequences.

US presence in Africa



Africom is headquartered in Germany, but the US maintains 27 enduring and non-enduring locations in Africa.

Large drone bases in Niger and Djibouti are key to the US's operations on the continent but also in Yemen and elsewhere in the Gulf.

**Bases everywhere,
but not all focused
on Africa**

The US and France, in particular, have invested vast resources in battling Islamist militancy in Africa but also to entrench their influence and, in some places, dominance. Insecurity and lack of development have given Salafi jihadists a foothold in many parts of Africa, but it is the corruption of local elites and their indifference to the enormous challenges faced by their citizens that have allowed militant groups to thrive. The problem is exacerbated by poor institutions and a lack of opportunity for political participation by historically marginalised groups. Some groups are supported by foreign actors, but funds are raised, by and large, through rents or extortion, as well as through illicit activities ranging from smuggling contraband to human trafficking.

It is important to recognise that military deployments to Africa, much like missions elsewhere in the world, are motivated by self-interest. For the US, military aid and support are often a proxy for foreign relations and relationship-building. France, much more than any other former colonial power, uses its troops to maintain its influence and prop up friendly regimes. European involvement in Africa is largely focused on neutralising terrorist threats and stemming the flow of migrants via the Mediterranean. Nor is foreign military presence in Africa always focused on Africa. This is especially true for East Africa and the Horn, where foreign powers have planted their flags but cast their gaze towards the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

US ‘War on Terror’ in the Sahel, Horn

The US has a massive presence in Africa. Despite its Africa Command (Africom) being headquartered in Germany, the country operates at least 27 bases on the continent, predominantly in North and West Africa, as well as the Horn. As mentioned in [our December profile on the incoming administration of Joe Biden](#), the US has built large drone bases on the continent, including in Agadez, Niger, and Chabelley, Djibouti. These bases aid in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) operations throughout the region, and the facility in Djibouti has the added benefit of helping the US operate missions in Yemen and elsewhere in the Red Sea. **Drone strikes have become the mainstay of US direct involvement in Africa, along with the deployment of special forces, with Washington reticent to put US service members on the front lines.** In a somewhat strange report, **President Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) announced on August 15 that he was authorising US special forces to help the Congolese army** in their fight against the terrorists of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the eastern DRC – as of writing it is not clear what exact shape the deployment will take.

**Washington is
reticent to put US
troops on the front
lines**

The US's competition with other foreign powers is most evident in the Horn where Djibouti, in particular, is successfully playing off rivals against one another. The country is host to the US, China, France, UAE, Italy, Saudi Arabia and Japan. As such, there is little reason to expect Americans to draw down their forces or scale back operations in Africa over the short to medium term. Indeed, **the US would have taken note of the triumphant tone struck by Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin in Mali following its withdrawal from Afghanistan.** These are only some of the militant groups that have no doubt been emboldened by images of the recent chaotic evacuation in Kabul.

The US also supports its partners through training, joint exercises and humanitarian assistance. In June, the US House of Representatives passed the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program Act, which establishes a new interagency programme that promises to “*balance security activities with diplomatic and development*

efforts.” The programme is a welcome initiative from the Biden administration and could do plenty of good alongside the relaunched Prosper Africa initiative.

France fighting jihadis *and* waning influence

France has 5,100 troops in the Sahel under the command of Operation Barkhane, which has a remit to fight terrorism in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger. France first deployed to the region in December 2012, with Operation Serval launched to combat Tuareg-led separatist militants who had captured northern Mali. Barkhane operates shoulder-to-shoulder with two other international missions based in the region: the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (Minusma), launched in 2013, and the G5 Sahel initiative, a collective self-defence force involving the aforementioned nations, launched in 2017.

In early June, in response to [the coup in Mali by Colonel Assimi Goïta in May](#), France said that it was suspending joint operations with Malian forces “*while we await guarantees*” that the junta would respect the roadmap for a return to civilian rule. Having received those assurances – the Malian government still promises that elections will be held next February – Armies Minister Florence Parly announced in early July that it would resume such joint operations, but in the same week, French President Emmanuel Macron said that the French contingent would be reduced from over 5,000 to “*between 2,500 and 3,000*” troops. Mr Macron further promised that France’s troops would “*remain permanently ready to intervene rapidly in support of partner forces*”, and explained that the focus of operations would shift south: from the northern part of Mali, where a de facto separation in 2013 was the original motivation for France’s decision to get involved, to the area where the territories of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso meet. **The ‘region of the three borders’ has been a slaughterhouse for the past year or more. Operation Barkhane is formally set to end in 2022 and will be superseded by the EU-led Takuba Task Force**, an initiative which was first announced in March 2020 and currently has about 600 soldiers stationed at bases in Mali and Chad.

France’s mission in the Sahel has echoes of Afghanistan, insofar as it involves a seemingly interminable battle against a patient, indefatigable foe. But also, because it involves Paris propping up regimes that have questionable legitimacy, adding to the growing fatigue and scepticism back home. **After Chad’s President Idriss Deby Itno died in battle against domestic rebels in April of this year (in which French air support aided government forces), Mr Macron attended the late field marshal’s funeral in person and then endorsed the transfer of power to his son, General Mahamat Idriss Deby.** And it is clear that under the younger Mr Deby Chad will still be entitled to French help. As head of a transitional military council (CMT), he will exercise power for 18 months at the conclusion of which “*free and democratic*” elections are promised. This transition plan constitutes a violation of the constitutional order, since the constitutional remedy for a vacancy in the office of the president is that the Speaker of the National Assembly take over for a period not exceeding 90 days, within which a fresh presidential election is to be held. Four days after Mr Macron sat next to the younger Mr Deby, soldiers shot dead nine people in the streets of Ndjamená for protesting for a return to constitutional governance. It was interesting that those marches had a message of opposition to France: many protesters carried posters denouncing France’s support for the military-led transition, and a Total petrol station was vandalised.

It may be that Colonel Assimi Goïta of Mali was counting on similar indulgence from Paris when he “*discharged the prerogatives*” of the president and prime minister in

Coup in Mali threatens cooperation as Operation Barkhane winds down

Paris frets over waning influence and rise in anti-French sentiment

May and re-established military rule. If he was, he miscalculated. Mr Macron called the coup “*unacceptable*” and it was shortly afterwards that he announced the suspension of military cooperation with the Malian army. Since then, there have been more notable demonstrations of hostility to France in the streets of Bamako and other Malian cities. In many of these, Russian flags and posters praising the Russian government are in evidence. Given the clear negative trend in political stability in Mali, there is reason to consider the danger that it might end up looking like the CAR, where President Faustin-Archange Touadéra’s weak government is essentially kept in place by Russian muscle: the mercenaries of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group. In late May, some of these mercenaries, supporting CAR soldiers, killed a Chadian soldier. More such incidents are likely.

In less volatile countries in West Africa, such as Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon and Senegal, French involvement tends to be lower key, but the potential for troop deployment is always present. In Côte d’Ivoire, Paris ended up deciding the outcome of the post-election conflict between Alassane Ouattara and Laurent Gbagbo when it intervened on the side of the former, and 950 French troops are still stationed in that country as a “*reserve for intervention in central and West Africa*”, in the words of the armies ministry. In these countries, too, French meddling has translated into rising anti-French sentiment. The most vivid recent example is from Senegal, where [riots in March in support of radical opposition figure Ousmane Sonko](#) and against President Macky Sall very explicitly channelled pan-African and anti-imperialist energies. In a popular narrative, Mr Sonko is an incorruptible patriot fighting for clean government and economic independence from the West, whereas Mr Sall is a corrupt front for French economic interests.

A bullish bear challenging the status quo

Several conflicts in Africa were fuelled by Cold War rivalries and the involvement of the US (and its Western allies) and Soviet Union. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia’s influence has been marginal, but this has been changing. **Nowhere has Russia’s influence been starker than in post-Gadhafi Libya where its mercenaries have been fighting in the corner of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar**, the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) which fought on behalf of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR). The LNA’s push to capture Tripoli in 2020 was ultimately thwarted by Turkish air power, leading to a ceasefire and a promising but fragile political transition which is supposed to deliver an election in four months’ time. However, forces on Moscow’s payroll have stayed put despite an agreement for foreign fighters to leave, and continue to maintain the balance of power in a country still very much divided. Recent reports suggest fresh recruits have arrived from Syria, making it clear Russia has little intention of quitting the country. As mentioned previously, Russian mercenaries prop up Mr Touadéra’s fragile administration in the CAR but fared much worse in Mozambique’s northern Cabo Delgado province where the Wagner Group quit the fight in 2020 following a series of reverses.

Elsewhere in Africa, Russia is deploying a familiar playbook of befriending countries that have fallen out with Western partners. This typically involves diplomatic support, including on multilateral fora like the UN Security Council, and the supply of armaments. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Ethiopia where a devastating military campaign in the northern Tigray region has caused Western governments to reassess their relationship with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s administration. Relations were already strained, as Ethiopia felt that the US, in particular, was siding with Egypt in the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Gerd). US Secretary of State Antony Blinken

Russia is looking to take advantage where countries have fallen out with Western partners

infuriated Addis Ababa in March when [he told a congressional committee that forces engaged in the conflict were engaged in “ethnic cleansing”](#). US President Joe Biden has also weighed in, calling for an end to “*large-scale human rights abuses ... [including] widespread sexual violence*” and sanctioning visa restrictions and a freeze on economic and security assistance to the country. The US also turned up the heat by suggesting that the US’s International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) agency could withdraw from [the Safaricom consortium that was successful in its bid for a telecom operator licence in May](#), which could upset the country’s flagship privatisation drive. Enter Russia whose Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov hosted his Ethiopian counterpart, Demeke Mekonnen, in Moscow on June 23 amid efforts to boost bilateral relations. Moscow also deployed election observers to Ethiopia precisely as EU observers quit the country in a huff. Mr Demeke said Addis Ababa was prepared to host an Africa-Russia Forum in 2022.

Significantly, Russia has provided Addis Ababa with strategic weapons, including the sophisticated Pantsir-S1 mobile air defence system. One such battery was moved to the Benishangul-Gumuz region, where Gerd is located, in 2020 as Egyptian sabre rattling over the dam escalated, along with suggestions that the Egyptians might launch a strike on it. [Gains by the Tigray Defence Force \(TDF\), which has captured parts of the Afar and Amhara regions in recent weeks](#), make the provision of desperately needed weapons all the more important for Addis Ababa, and Moscow is likely to oblige to such a request, possibly on a buy-now-pay-later basis. In a sign of things to come, **Ethiopia and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement in July, focused specifically on knowledge and technology transfers**. However, countries like Ethiopia will be wary of allowing Russian personnel to be deployed there in anything other than a training capacity.

Something similar is happening in Nigeria where Abuja signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia on August 25. This will involve “*the supply of military equipment, provision of after sales services, training of personnel and technology transfer,*” according to the Nigerian embassy in Moscow. President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration has been at odds with the US, historically a key trade and diplomatic partner, helped in no way by the #EndSARS campaign in 2020 which was successfully driven by the Nigerian diaspora, including in the US, and the more recent spat with Twitter. Nigeria has not made significant gains in its efforts to address insecurity in many parts of the country, including in the North East where the Salafi-jihadist Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (Is wap) militant groups continue to cause havoc. The Nigerian armed forces recently took delivery of six more US-built A-29 Super Tucano light attack aircraft, but it should come as no surprise if future deliveries come via Russia.

India looks at African real estate, but with a view on the ocean

The UK and US both maintain Indian Ocean bases off Africa, the former with its **disputed dominion over the Chagos Islands – which the UK calls the British Indian Ocean Territory – and the latter by leasing part of the chain, Diego Garcia**. Mauritius and its former colonisers have been locked in a dispute over the archipelago for decades and, in January, Prime Minister Pravin Jugnauth urged the UK to end its “*unlawful occupation*” after the UN Special International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) rejected the country’s sovereignty claim over the territory. This followed a similar decision by the International Court of Justice in 2019.

In December last year, satellite footage showed that India is in the advanced stages of building a 3 km runway on Mauritius’s North Agaléga Island. Major airfield and port developments on the island are well underway but, so far, the construction has been

Nigeria also signs military cooperation agreement with Russia

largely kept secret. India sought access to the island in 2015 to develop it as an air and naval staging point for surveillance of the southwest Indian Ocean. After recent Google Earth images caused public panic about India building a military base on the island, Mr Jugnauth addressed the issue in Parliament in May. He assured MPs that the base will not include storage facilities for weapons or ammunition, and fuel storage facilities will be limited to refuelling ships and aircrafts. **India had previously looked at establishing a similar presence in Seychelles and Madagascar.** India and Madagascar have been developing defence ties, ostensibly focused on securing the Mozambique Channel. Delhi concluded an agreement with Victoria in 2015 to develop a base on the Assumption Island, but domestic opposition and a change of leadership in Seychelles scuppered the deal.

Although not (yet) a threat to maritime traffic in the Channel, **the growing Islamist insurgency in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province has become a major threat.** It has already shuttered several liquefied natural gas (LNG) mega-projects in the region, including Total's Afungi site which was evacuated in March as militants captured the nearby town of Palma. Maputo had shown a preference for using private security companies to try to restore security, but after both the Wagner Group and the South Africa-based Dyck Advisory Group failed to make any gains, it relented and reluctantly agreed to accept an offer from the Southern African Development Community (Sadc) to deploy a multilateral force. However, following a visit to Kigali, President Felipe Nyusi announced on July 9 that the country had concluded a bilateral agreement with Rwanda for the deployment of a 1,000-person military contingent. The agreement seemed to catch Sadc unawares, and prompted mutterings of disapproval, but [early indications are that Rwandese forces are making gains](#). The unusual deployment to Cabo Delgado followed soon after [Mr Macron visited Kigali in May](#), causing some to suggest that President Paul Kagame offered or was asked to help salvage Total's investment there. But it also reminded of Rwanda's deployment of troops to the CAR in 2020 as part of a bilateral agreement with Bangui, and South Africa's disastrous deployment there in 2013.

As mentioned at the start of this report, foreign military deployments are driven by self-interest, but these are varied, complicated, and often interwoven. **Several countries have a complicated relationship with the deploying countries but recognise that security in their countries is dependent on the continued presence of these troops.** As with Afghanistan, any sudden withdrawals will have potentially far-reaching consequences.

India building in Mauritius, looking to Seychelles and Madagascar