

Issue brief

Addressing China's military expansion in West Africa and beyond

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As China expands its military reach in West Africa, the United States risks losing strategic ground on the continent. The next National Defense Strategy must confront China's ambitions beyond the Indo-Pacific, balancing defense diplomacy, bilateral military relationships, and counterterrorism.

Bottom lines up front

- The United States is poised to cede strategic space in Africa to China and needs a defense strategy that addresses real security challenges on the continent, especially China's military focus on West Africa.
- With the next National Defense Strategy, the administration will need to address the role of China outside the Indo-Pacific, including the possibility of China building a military base or other major military capability in West Africa from which it could project military power directly into the Atlantic Ocean.
- While the Trump administration may be looking to narrow the United States' role on the continent, Africa is too vast, important, and complex to attempt bilateral defense diplomacy, military-to-military relations, and counterterrorism efforts on the cheap, by proxy, or from afar.

The continent of Africa, especially West Africa, is an underappreciated US strategic opportunity and vulnerability. For instance, Gabon, a remote nation of just 2.5 million people on Africa's west coast, is unlikely to be the first country that comes to mind as the Donald Trump administration contemplates the next Department of Defense (DoD) National Defense Strategy (NDS). Yet, for the defense and military strategists

working toward the August deadline for the NDS set by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, the strategic future of Gabon and other West African countries should feature prominently as DoD addresses China's military ambitions beyond the Indo-Pacific and how DoD intends to allocate its resources and attention to that effort.¹

1. For the purposes of this piece West Africa is defined broadly to include countries extending from Mauritania and as far south as Namibia along the Atlantic Ocean. This broad lens includes many complex and important subregions, including countries that are part of the Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, and southwest Africa; Jacob Zenn, "China Sets Sight on Gabon for Second African Military Base," Foreign Military Studies Office, February 15, 2025, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2025/china-sets-sight-on-gabon-for-second-african-military-base/>.

The NDS drafters will need to consider a range of scenarios involving China in Africa, including the potential establishment of a Chinese base in West Africa, from which Beijing could project military power directly into the Atlantic Ocean and uncomfortably close to the United States' backyard.² Gabon and other resource-rich countries on Africa's West Coast could be in China's sights for such a base. But even if concerns about China's military basing ambitions in West Africa ultimately turn out to be overstated, the DoD must develop a strategic approach that is resilient, versatile, and agile enough to address the full spectrum of possible Chinese actions across West Africa, the continent, and globally.³

The next NDS is being drafted at a critical moment when the United States risks permanently ceding strategic influence to China in Africa, especially West Africa, without a reimagined approach to the continent. With lifesaving foreign assistance drastically reduced due to the administration's budget cuts to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and State Department programs, along with uncertain economic effects from tariffs, the United States has voluntarily weakened its diplomatic and economic tools to influence and support Africa.

This reality gives additional weight to the importance of defense diplomacy and military cooperation as critical means by which the United States can exercise strategic influence in the region.⁴ Key issues for DoD include acknowledging the looming strategic dilemma posed by the increased Chinese influence in Africa while developing a cohesive and responsive strategy to counter that influence, managing bilateral defense relationships, and addressing other regional priorities such as Russia's growing influence and counterterrorism issues, which also have inextricable connections to China. The new NDS needs to lay a foundation to address these issues. The alternative is over-regionalization of the China challenge to the Indo-Pacific, which could impose short-sighted limitations that will impact the US role in Africa for years to come.

■ Old concepts, new emphasis?

The core tenets of the 2022 NDS as they pertain to Africa should still hold: counter violent extremist groups, support allies and partners, and address strategic competition with China and Russia. While the NDS is not intended to provide detailed regional prescriptions, it must establish a framework conducive to deeper regional work within the DoD. The Trump administration's "America First" approach will likely extend to Africa. This approach could result in fewer US military resources for the continent, along with a push for countries to assume greater responsibility for their own security.⁵ The emerging "trade not aid" approach may also be a key tenet of how this administration operates in Africa, although that lens is still undefined with twenty-two Africa countries facing tariffs between 15 and 30 percent.⁶ This reality creates risk, as China is likely to seize on the perception of material reductions in US commitments worldwide. It also comes at a time when economic and political factors on the ground, especially in West Africa, have gradually shifted to the disadvantage of the United States. This process has happened over the course of several US administrations.

With the loss of its military presence in Niger in 2024 (and no clear nearby alternatives to restore comparable capabilities), a diplomatic departure in Sudan, and potential embassy and consulate closures and consolidations, the United States' access to the continent is challenged. In contrast, China, Russia, Iran, and even countries such as Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey have significantly expanded their security-related activities across the continent, sometimes in ways that directly challenge US defense cooperation objectives. Meanwhile, countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger face growing instability, with military juntas in control and serious terrorist and insurgent threats looming within their borders. Terrorist groups from the Sahel are also making inroads into

2. Alex Vines, Armida van Rij, and Henry Tugendhat, "Is China eyeing a second military base in Africa as the US struggles to maintain one in Niger?," Chatham House, May 14, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/china-eyeing-second-military-base-africa-us-struggles-maintain-one-niger>; Michael M. Phillips, "U.S.-China Tensions Have a New Front: A Naval Base in Africa," *Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/u-s-china-tensions-have-a-new-front-a-naval-base-in-africa-616e9e77>.
3. Cobus van Staden, "Fears of a Chinese Naval Base in West Africa are Overblown," *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/03/china-pla-navy-base-west-africa-atlantic-equatorial-guinea/>.
4. Rose P. Keravouri, Peter G. Bailey, Eric A. Swett, and William P. Duval, "Defense Diplomacy: Professionalizing the Purple to Gold Pipeline," National Defense University Press, October 30, 2023, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3571016/defense-diplomacy-professionalizing-the-purple-to-gold-pipeline/>.
5. Curtis Bell and Christopher Faulkner, "The 'America First' Case for U.S. Engagement in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/19/america-first-africa-trump-engagement/>; Brandi Vincent, "U.S. Military Posture in Africa Shifts While Terrorist Threats Intensify," *Defense Scoop*, May 29, 2025, <https://defensescoop.com/2025/05/29/africom-military-posture-shifts-terrorist-threats-intensify/>.
6. Elian Peltier, "U.S. Says It Wants Trade, Not Aid, in Africa. Cuts Threaten Both," *New York Times*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/20/world/africa/us-africa-foreign-assistance.html>.

coastal countries such as Togo and Benin, and Western allies such as France have seen their footprint diminish in West Africa and the Sahel.⁷ Additionally, China has emerged as a dominant player in African critical minerals—resources vital to the US and allied defense industry—with notable partnerships in Nigeria and Mali.⁸

■ China, Serious about Africa

China is serious about improving its strategic position in Africa. As home to the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) largest military presence outside of China, the continent is not a peripheral priority for Beijing. Africa is already home to the PLA's largest operating base outside of China. Africa is a core pillar of its Belt and Road Initiative. The original One Belt One Road strategy of 2013 did not include Africa as a focus. In contrast, China's Global Security Initiative which, as outlined in Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Partnership (FOCAC), includes extensive plans to train military and police, educate five hundred young African military officers in China, expand assistance grants, conduct joint military training and exercises, assist with mine clearing, and other efforts.⁹

Beijing has also built a notable peacekeeping presence via the United Nations and African Union. These actions appear to have had impact on public perceptions in the region. Surveys indicate that popularity of China's development and peacekeeping models doubled between 2015 and 2020 with the Burkinabe public, for instance, going from twenty percent to thirty-nine percent in support.¹⁰ More recently, 67 percent of the Togolese public view China somewhat or very favorably

compared to 60 percent for the United States and 34 percent for France.¹¹

China's arms transfers to Africa have surpassed those of Russia and far exceed those of the United States. Roughly 70 percent of African militaries operate Chinese-made armored vehicles.¹² In recent decades, China has conducted twenty military exercises, forty-four naval port calls, hundreds of senior defense exchanges, extensive professional military education and joint training efforts, and quick-fix military equipment deals.¹³ China maintains a "logistics facility" west of Djibouti—widely recognized as a military base—while the United States operates the Navy's Camp Lemonnier and associated installations nearby. These facilities enable power projection across vital maritime chokepoints including the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. China's Djibouti base has rapidly expanded in capability and size, offering a likely blueprint for a potential base on Africa's west coast base if it were to occur.

China has not yet succeeded in obtaining a base along Africa's west coast—in that sense, the tenets of the 2022 NDS have held. Some analysts say the concern about west coast basing is overhyped by US officials, but regardless of intention and the ultimate outcome, China has been willing to show up with cash and personnel in Africa in a way that cannot be ignored by US strategists. For instance, China has become Gabon's largest trading partner, and has provided a suite of so-called preferential loans, as well as medical collaboration, vocational training, and a visit from its "Peace Ark" naval hospital in 2024.¹⁴

7. Rachel Chason and Adrian Blanco Ramos, "A Powerful, Opaque al-Qaeda Affiliate is Rampaging Across West Africa," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/08/jnim-militants-west-africa-sahel-terrorism/>.
8. Sydney Tucker, "Competing for Africa's Resources: How the US and China Invest in Critical Minerals," *Stimson*, February 28, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/competing-for-africas-resources-how-the-us-and-china-invest-in-critical-minerals/>.
9. "Full text: Xi Jinping's Speech at Opening Ceremony of 2024 FOCAC Summit," CGTN, September 5, 2024, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-09-05/Full-text-Xi-s-speech-at-opening-ceremony-of-2024-FOCAC-summit-1wDYKL8Fhx/p.html>.
10. "How Popular is China in Africa? New Survey Sheds Light on What Ordinary People Think," *Afrobarometer*, November 17, 2020, www.afrobarometer.org/publication/how-popular-is-china-in-africa-new-survey-sheds-light-on-what-ordinary-people-think/.
11. Leonie Back and Ariel Kekeli Henodji, "AD974: Critiques à l'égard de la France, la majorité des Togolais apprécie l'influence chinoise," April 29, 2025, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad974-critiques-a-legard-de-la-france-la-majorite-des-togolais-apprecient-linfluence-chinoise/>.
12. "Chinese arms sales in Sub-Saharan Africa," *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2024/12/chinese-arms-sales-in-sub-saharan-africa/>.
13. Paul Nantulya, "China Widening Its Influence in Africa through Expanded Security Engagements," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-influence-africa-security-engagements/>; Paul Nantulya, "The Growing Militarization of China's Africa Policy," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, December 2, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Growing-Militarization-of-Chinas-Africa-Policy.pdf>.
14. Yixin Yu, "China-Gabon Relations Get an Upgrade," *Diplomat*, April 24, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/china-gabon-relations-get-an-upgrade/>.

China signed a formal strategic partnership with Libreville in 2023, and in 2024 it signed a deal reportedly worth \$4.3 billion in direct investment and public/private partnerships at the 2024 FOCAC conference in Beijing, although it is unclear how those numbers will be operationalized or implemented. China has often found affinity with autocratic regimes, and it appears largely focused on preserving the status quo with the governments with which it works, extolling a mutual right towards modernization and emphasizing policies such as “zero tariff treatment” and expanded market access in sectors such as agriculture and pharmaceuticals.¹⁵

For its part, the United States hosted Gabon's President Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema in 2024. Nguema came to power in a coup that deposed the Bongo regime in 2023. The Joe Biden administration offered Gabon a package of development and economic proposals and took Nguema to visit US Navy and Coast Guard facilities in Norfolk. This offering was understandably and rightfully tempered by concerns over Gabon's post-coup democratic trajectory and the fact that the United States simply has fewer immediate resources with which to counter what China offers for military access. It is unclear how the Trump administration intends to proceed, but it has engaged Gabon in recent months. The US senior advisor for Africa, Massad Boulos, reportedly attended Nguema's presidential inauguration in May. Nguema also recently participated in a small summit of West African leaders at the White House where he urged the United States to invest in Gabon.¹⁶

China has also made concerted efforts to engage Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and other countries along the west coast, although the precise objectives of these courtships are not always clear and do not necessarily equate to precursors for a military basing arrangement.¹⁷ It has paired these efforts with an expansive commercial port strategy running from Mauritania to Namibia along the west coast. Some of these sites have clear dual-use potential,

have already hosted People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships, and are capable of berthing those vessels, according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.¹⁸ Of course, African countries are sovereign and free to work with whomever they choose, and compelling economic and trade considerations have played a prominent role in China's successful expansion of its port access across the continent.

A key feature of the new administration's approach to Africa will be how and whether it creates strategic dilemmas for China in Africa—and, most importantly, how consistently it follows through on the implementation of deals. The June 27 US-backed DRC-Rwanda deal is welcome news for the prospects of peace in a longstanding and horrific conflict. The deal outlines a framework to bring greater access to critical minerals such as tantalum and tungsten for US and Western companies.

The prospect of the return of US mining to the Great Lakes area could one day create pressure on China's extensive mineral operations in southern DRC. But for that to happen, the administration will need to follow up with an intensive and sustained implementation plan that focuses not only on economic opportunity, but also on enforcement of sovereign borders, expanded humanitarian access, dealing with dozens of armed militia groups, and combating illegal mining and smuggling.¹⁹ Following through could mean a historic end to one of the world's worst conflicts and serve as a model for US leadership on the continent. But failure to follow through could damage US credibility, potentially benefitting China and Russia.

■ Countering terrorism, watching Russia

Two other important factors should be on the minds of the NDS drafters when it comes to China's military ambitions in West Africa and across the continent. The first is how the United States plans to balance its counterterrorism objectives and resources in the region while keeping China at bay and

15. Georg Lammich, “China's evolving security engagement in Africa: Policies, strategies, and implications,” *European Journal of International Security*, (2025): 1-18, accessed July 8, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.3>; “Full text: Xi Jinping's Speech at Opening Ceremony of 2024 FOCAC Summit.”

16. Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Ruth Maclean, “Trump Discusses Economic Investment With African Leaders at White House Meeting,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/09/us/politics/trump-african-leaders-china.html>.

17. “CRBC Signs the Business Contract for Pointe Noire New Port Project in Congo-Brazzaville,” China Road and Bridge Corporation, accessed July 8, 2025, <https://www.crbc.com/site/crbcEN/77953/info/2016/46841231.html>; Lea Thome, “China Continues Its Search for a Maritime Military Presence in West Africa,” *Diplomat*, February 20, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/china-continues-its-search-for-a-maritime-military-presence-in-west-africa/>.

18. Paul Nantulya, “Mapping China's Strategic Port Development in Africa,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 10, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Mapping-Chinas-Port-Development.pdf>.

19. Frannie Léautier, Tressa Guenov, Alexandria Maloney, and Will Mortensen, “Experts react: The DRC and Rwanda agreed to a US-backed peace deal. Can critical minerals help end this conflict?”, *The Atlantic Council*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-the-drc-and-rwanda-agreed-to-a-us-backed-peace-deal-can-critical-minerals-help-end-this-conflict/>.

achieving key bilateral military-to-military objectives. Africa policymakers in the first Trump administration understood that the United States cannot take for granted that these threats will not one day reach US shores. Today, China's engagement in the region has increased and the importance of the region continues to grow, including when it comes to natural resources.

Terrorism and related insurgent behaviors continue to morph and grow in the Sahel and West Africa. In 2024, there were an estimated 18,900 fatalities in Africa connected to militant Islamist groups, with the Sahel being the epicenter of violence and destabilization, along with Somalia in East Africa.²⁰ The Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Musilmeen, Boko Haram, and al-Shabaab are the top groups of concern, with some creating proto-state areas that are almost completely devoid of central government presence. In recent weeks, Burkina Faso has seen increased terrorist attacks, for instance, with as many as one hundred soldiers being killed at a military base in July.

On June 5, Trump imposed total or partial travel bans to the United States on several West African countries, including Equatorial Guinea, Togo, and Sierra Leone, ostensibly in part to address the terrorist threat and immigration and vetting issues. The list also includes Chad, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, and Burundi. Press reports indicate that the administration is considering restrictions for thirty-six additional countries, including Djibouti where the United States holds a base, plus key West African countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and Angola.²¹ It is unclear how bans or partial bans will impact military-to-military interactions with some of these countries or precisely what outcomes the administration wishes to achieve with the bans.

Given the intense focus on the Indo-Pacific theater, it is still unclear how the Trump administration will treat combatting terrorism in West Africa, Somalia, and other parts of the continent. Despite efforts on the ground by United States Africa Com-

mand (AFRICOM), the United States has struggled to build the next iteration of its counterterrorism partnerships in the Sahel and with West African partners after the Niger withdrawal, and it has lost key intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities over areas with extensive terrorist activity.²² Robust and meaningful bilateral US defense partnerships exist with countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and Cote d'Ivoire, but a comprehensive US counterterrorism strategy has been challenged by issues of physical access, stretched resources, long US planning horizons, and the limited flexibility of US military cooperation programs. Indeed, AFRICOM has reportedly been pulling back on US physical presence in the region while focusing more on intelligence and information sharing, which has always been a challenge given the frequent preference of West African states to work bilaterally rather than multilaterally.²³ NDS planners will need to weigh, refresh, and relate priorities and resources to the changing US counterterrorism strategy in Somalia and East Africa as well.

Former AFRICOM Commander General Michael Langley has emphasized the desire of regional terrorist groups to expand their reach to Africa's west coast to "diversify their revenue streams and evolve their tactics more easily—exporting terrorism to American shores."²⁴ Whether this strategy will succeed remains unclear, as does how the administration can, when possible and appropriate, leverage its counterterrorism objectives to optimize or complement its approach to China. This challenge will be especially difficult to address if the United States further reduces its presence in the region. Beijing also has a global counterterrorism strategy. According to a 2023 DoD analysis, China pursues this agenda to protect its citizens and economic projects abroad, while seeking the extradition of alleged Uighur terrorists and advancing counterterrorism cooperation.²⁵ Nevertheless, the expansion of dangerous terrorist groups likely undermines China's objectives just as much as those of the United States.

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20. "Militant Islamist Groups in Africa Sustain High Pace of Lethality," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 18, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2025-militant-islamist-groups-in-africa/>.
 21. Humeyra Pamuk, "Trump Administration Weighs Adding 36 Countries to Travel Ban, Memo Says," Reuters, June 16, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-administration-weighs-adding-36-countries-travel-ban-memo-says-2025-06-15/>.
 22. Unshin Lee Harpley and Chris Gordon, "US Closes Last Drone Base in Niger, with Uncertain Future for Counterterrorism Fight," *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/us-closes-last-drone-base-niger/>.
 23. Brandi Vincent, "DOD Turns to Tech as Physical Presence Around Africa Dwindles," DefenseScoop, June 24, 2024, <https://defensescoop.com/2024/06/24/dod-turns-to-tech-as-physical-presence-around-africa-dwindles/>.
 24. Brandi Vincent, "U.S. Military Posture in Africa Shifts While Terrorist Threats Intensify," DefenseScoop, May 29, 2025, <https://defensescoop.com/2025/05/29/africom-military-posture-shifts-terrorist-threats-intensify/>.
 25. "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of Defense, 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409-1-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

The second major consideration for Africa policy in the NDS is Russia. Regardless of whether the Trump team is comfortable ceding strategic space to Russia globally, it should be concerned that Russia's gains in Africa are often closely linked to China's expansion there—sometimes coincidentally, and sometimes as a result of deliberate coordination between Moscow and Beijing. Russia's influence in Africa has a deeply rooted history and now spans the continent from Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali, Libya, Niger, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, and Eritrea to several other countries.²⁶ Russia cannot currently match China's investments in Africa, but its actions there are considerable, disruptive, and often predatory.

Russia has welcomed the retreat of US foreign assistance in Africa, moving quickly to fill the void left by the United States after its withdrawal of troops from Niger. In West Africa, for instance, Moscow has sought to expand its influence, recently signing a military cooperation agreement with Togo. The agreement could give Russia increased port access to support its Sahel-wide logistical network stretching from Mali to Libya.²⁷ Russia also effectively blocks or complicates US economic interests and has conducted extensive counter-messaging targeting previous US development programming and military access in Africa. Russia also fiercely competes with China, the United States, Europe, and other players for a cut of the continent's critical minerals and other strategic resources.

For years, Russia has skillfully saturated African countries with disinformation about the United States and NATO member states, advancing itself as an anti-colonialist hero. Russia also favors unstable, undemocratic regimes and seeks to perpetuate that instability whenever possible. With minimal foreign assistance to local populations but maximal transactionalism with some of Africa's most dubious and entrenched leaders, Russia ranks second only to China as the continent's top arms dealer, partly to fuel its economy and support its war against Ukraine. Its Africa Corps paramilitary group provides mercena-

ry support to coup regimes. In 2024, for instance, Russia reportedly deployed up to 200 military instructors to Equatorial Guinea in support of President Obiang.²⁸ Gabon has also reportedly issued low-quality shipping flags that enable Russia's shadow fleet to circumvent sanctions worldwide.²⁹

Russian and Chinese objectives in Africa are often distinct and underpinned by different motivations, although they are frequently united in their focus on undermining Western and US influence. The two are vested in South Africa, for example, as members of the BRICS grouping of emerging economies, but Russia has played a more direct and often disruptive role in countries such as the CAR, where it has sought to uphold the regime of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra through the Wagner Group and its recent iterations. Russia or Russian proxies have been accused of human rights violations in the CAR, Mali, and elsewhere.³⁰ For its part, China has pursued a more holistic diplomatic approach in nearly every African country, rhetorically emphasizing friendship, economic development, and shared values. For the purposes of the NDS planners, it is important to address the collective impact of Chinese and Russian actions on US objectives, even if these actions are not always coordinated.

■ Retaining US advantages

Based on analysis as recent as 2021, the United States has been engaged in more effective and sustained military operations in Africa than the Chinese military, as measured across several indicators.³¹ Today, those advantages have diminished, but there remain at least two unique capabilities that NDS planners should prize. First, China does well volume and resources, but less so on the quality of its engagement in the region. Many West African militaries want to work with the United States and appreciate the substance and professionalism of those interactions, whether by major military exercises (the United States recently completed African Lion, AFRICOM's

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26. Mariel Ferragamo, "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa," Council on Foreign Relations, December 28, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.
 27. Liam Kerr, Yale Ford, and Elery White, "Russia, US compete in West Africa: Africa File, July 31" Institute for the Study of War, July 31, 2025, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-us-compete-west-africa-africa-file-july-31-2025>.
 28. Basillioh Rukanga, "Russia sends military instructors to Equatorial Guinea - reports," BBC, November 13, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c30pjv8vp80o>.
 29. Lester Grau, "Gabon Shadow Tanker Fleet Transports Sanctioned Russian Oil," Foreign Military Studies Office, January 22, 2025, <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/gabon-shadow-tanker-fleet-transport-sanctioned-russian-oil/>.
 30. Zane Irwin and Sam Mednick, "Mali's Army and Suspected Russia-linked Mercenaries Committed 'New Atrocities,' Rights Group Says," Associated Press, July 24, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-human-rights-abuses-wagner-military-fulani-19a045521448453dd9ecb5b464941955>.
 31. Judd Devermont, Marielle Harris, and Alison Albelda, "Personal Ties: Measuring Chinese and U.S. Engagement with African Security Chiefs," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 1, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/personal-ties-measuring-chinese-and-us-engagement-african-security-chiefs>.

largest annual exercise) or through the power of the State Partnership Program (SPP), which the Trump administration should seek to preserve.³²

The SPP between Senegal and the Vermont National Guard, for instance, focuses on a range of medical, engineering, and disaster response capabilities that mutually benefit both countries and strengthen Senegal's ability to serve as a regional security exporter. AFRICOM also brings unique capabilities in major exercises, maritime domain awareness, space domain awareness, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, border security, military medical preparedness, institution building, military education, and special operations, to name a few. These types of operations, activities, and investments create important secondary and tertiary benefits by providing a clear and meaningful alternative to Chinese and Russian influence on the continent.

Second, the NDS review also comes at a time when some African countries have begun to question China's geopolitical proposition on the continent—even as they remain understandably wary of getting caught in Sino-Russian-US rivalries. China's role as Africa's largest bilateral creditor has exposed its playbook of coercion, high-interest loans, shaky economic guarantees, dual-use ports and terminals, and a willingness to harm the environment. These tactics have worn thin with some African governments, presenting an opportunity, at least in theory, for the United States to make economic, diplomatic, security, and democratic inroads in Africa if the United States can make its case in a compelling manner. This window, if it exists, is fleeting. To be clear, the NDS should not seek to counter China's every move around the globe or in Africa, but this is a moment the Trump administration should challenge China's record of dubious practices and transactional relationships on the continent. It remains unclear whether the administration will prioritize this opportunity in Africa, even as it continues to emphasize China as the pacing threat in the Indo-Pacific above all others.

■ Doing more with less?

We can posit that, at minimum, the new NDS will continue to embrace a resource-and posture-constrained approach in Africa. We can also expect a direct challenge to countries to take greater control of their own security and share costs, much as the Trump administration has pushed for change with Europe and its allies and partners in Asia. With an even smal-

ler security profile in Africa, however, the odds are stacked against the United States. According to Langley, the AFRICOM commander, China is outspending AFRICOM "one hundred to one" militarily. A winnowed down AFRICOM would only diminish those odds further.³³ Indeed, there was already little to trim—with approximately 6,500 US personnel across Africa and few meaningful capabilities on the continent.

In some cases, the administration's transactional inclination may work in its favor in West Africa, but it should prioritize preserving what the United States still has in the region and across the continent in terms of existing security cooperation tools. Specifically, it should consider the following:

1. It is important that the DoD maintains AFRICOM as a full command. This does not mean that AFRICOM, like all combatant commands, does not need reform and periodic iteration. However, now more than ever, with the US toolkit in Africa so diminished, the power of a visit by a four-star US commander and associated defense diplomacy carries weight in African countries and can be an important counterweight to China's efforts, especially in West Africa. Arguments for cost savings to subsume AFRICOM as a command are outweighed by the scope of the Chinese military proposition in Africa and by how few real US military assets are stationed in Africa. Further, AFRICOM needs to continue to maintain force protection capabilities and planning that accounts for vast distances (it is about 5,200 miles between Dakar and Djibouti City; New York to LA is about 2,790 miles; nearly two US continental landmasses could fit in West Africa alone) and keeps US embassy and military personnel safe in the event of a crisis, like the evacuation of the US Embassy in Khartoum in 2023.
2. The DoD should continue to retain and, if necessary, reform Section 333 assistance to Africa (and related DoD authorities), which allows for the provision of equipment and training in areas such as border security, counterterrorism, and counterdrug activities. With the precipitous loss of aid programs earlier this year and the implications of US tariffs still unresolved, it is imperative that US security tools be reliable and predictable so that partner countries in West Africa and across the continent can include them in their own defense planning processes. Again, these relatively low-cost programs can reduce the need for the United States to respond

32. "African Lion," U.S. Department of Defense, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/African-Lion/>.

33. "AFRICOM Commander Highlights Focus on Counter Terrorism, Partner Capacity Building During House Armed Services Committee Testimony," United States Africa Command, June 11, 2025, <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/35861/africom-commander-highlights-focus-on-counter-terrorism-partner-capacity-building-during-h>.

reactively to Chinese overtures on the continent when countries are able to manage their own responses and have a shared stake in supporting US priorities.

3. The DoD and the Department of State should seek to preserve International Military Education and Training (IMET), Foreign Military Finance (FMF) opportunities and enhanced grant access, Excess Defense Articles (EDA), and Foreign Military Sales (FMS) opportunities for West African countries, some of which struggle to find appropriate loan structures and harbor understandable concerns about long US delivery timelines and bureaucratic processes. Many have instead turned to cheaper and more readily available Chinese, Russian, Iranian, or Turkish equipment. Responsive and timely FMS and FMF programs benefit the United States by ensuring African countries can better take care of their own security—which is their preference in any case.
4. The administration could also consider refreshed ISR and targeted special operations cooperation approaches for West Africa, along with investments in better messaging and counter-disinformation capabilities. These are relatively low-cost but high-impact tools, none of which are new, but all of which are more critical than ever for threat identification and mitigation. ISR requires on-the-ground support and collaboration with a host partner, which has been a challenge for several years in West Africa but especially since the US military left Niger. The administration could look to cut deals that might ensure stable and partner-enabled ISR alternatives for AFRICOM.
5. The United States should continue to leverage allied relationships—such as with NATO's southern flank and Middle Eastern countries—to address terrorism, migration, and strategic competition issues. It is unclear whether or how the new NDS will speak to multilateral security cooperation mechanisms; the 2022 version put allies and partners as central to realizing US defense priorities. With China placing considerable priority on building its own multilateral security fora in Africa, Latin America, and other regions, the DoD must weigh whether and how to focus on multilateral cooperation mechanisms in addition to foundational bilateral relationships.
6. The administration should preserve the SPP in Africa. This program is managed by the National Guard Bureau and has grown to 20 unique partnership programs in Africa. It enables dozens of events a year and is an

effect multiplier on traditional bilateral defense relationships. One of the newest relationships is between Gabon and the West Virginia National Guard, which was established in 2024 and focuses on disaster response, civil engineering, and other bilateral military exchanges.

■ Being there

There is no question that China has brought a strong military game to West Africa and to the continent writ large. The United States cannot outdo the volume or breadth of China's military investments, but there are some smart, targeted opportunities that it should not miss. With cherished West African allies such as Ghana and Senegal (both of which receive a reported fifty percent of their arms from China) and burgeoning relationships with Angola and even Gabon, US defense partnerships in Africa are far more multifaceted and meaningful than simply worrying about China's next press release or flag officer visit.³⁴ Of course, the DoD's approach to West Africa must be nested within a full treatment of the African continent, which so often defies singular strategies. Most importantly, to connect with African countries, the United States cannot expect allies and partners to choose sides. Countries have options, and many in West Africa and across the continent are part of an expanding mosaic of international alignments, deals, and agreements that the United States must navigate with greater nuance than ever.

As the Pentagon's NDS seeks to ensure the safety of the US homeland and address China beyond the Indo-Pacific, it will need to weigh carefully the risks associated with strategic Chinese moves in Africa—moves that have significant long-term implications for the United States. This includes the possibility of China establishing a capable military base on the Atlantic coast or deploying other disruptive military capabilities from the continent. The combination of a reduced US footprint in West Africa and intensified Chinese engagement makes Atlantic coast basing a real possibility, though by no means a foregone conclusion.

For those drafting the next NDS, it is critical to remember that Africa is too vast and too complex to pursue defense diplomacy and military-to-military cooperation on the cheap, by proxy, or from afar. This principle holds true for effective counterterrorism efforts as well. Although "America First" is clearly the defining policy of the administration, the West Africa region offers critical defense opportunities that can also support the current administration's focus on economic priorities. Deploying fewer resources relative to the threats and opportunities Africa presents, while allocating insufficient tools to achieve military and nonmilitary objectives, would risk passing on a potential mo-

34. Nantulya, «China Widening Its Influence.»

ment of leadership and opportunity for the United States. With Africa poised to be home to one in four people on Earth within just twenty-five years, there is no substitute for sustained US security engagement and deep, on-the-ground understanding of the continent—something military strategists in Beijing seem to understand all too well.³⁵

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35. Declan Walsh, “Old World, Young Africa,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/10/28/world/africa/africa-youth-population.html>.