



## Limited Wars in the Periphery

### The Dilemma of American Military Assistance

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**Abstract:** The United States is struggling in an era of tripolar competition. After nearly two decades spent providing military assistance in the Middle East and Africa, the United States is now trying to pivot its military resources and personnel toward conventional warfare capabilities to counter China and Russia. However, these rebalancing efforts are difficult when waning American influence is filled by China and/or Russia. Despite shifting American aims in Africa and the Middle East, reducing engagement has strategic and contextual ramifications. To mitigate China and Russia, U.S. military assistance missions must be properly resourced and maintained.

**Keywords:** great power competition, tripolar era, security assistance, Africa, China, Middle East, Russia

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Three years into U.S. president Donald J. Trump's administration, the international community has struggled to predict and understand American foreign policy actions.<sup>1</sup> The 2019 decision to pull U.S. troops from Syria, abandoning an informal alliance created with Kurdish militias and ending the American military assistance mission there, surprised many in Congress and the U.S. military.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, American diplomats brokered a peace deal with the Taliban, absent the consent of Afghanistan's government, in February 2020. This 14-month deal to reduce the number of U.S. troops and end the American military presence in Afghanistan—ceasing the Train Advise Assist Command's (TAAC) mission with Afghan security forces—was made in exchange for a Taliban reduction of violence and little else.

The logic of such withdrawals is consistent with current U.S. national security interests, namely to redirect military resources and preparation for the necessary pivot to compete against China in the Pacific and Russia in Europe. However, the inertia of counterterrorism missions—as well as their political saliency in an era of great power competition—makes it highly unlikely that the United States can fully remove its large number of forces from the Middle East or Africa.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the need to maintain American access and influence in numerous countries, to include preventing the collapse of partner governments due to insurgency and terrorism, keeps the United States bound to the premise of providing *security force assistance*—defined as activities that “support the development of the capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions”—to conduct counterterrorism on behalf of American interests.<sup>4</sup> Otherwise, absent some U.S. presence, China and Russia can make new inroads with these governments, garnering special access and influence. This creates a dilemma for the United States as it reallocates forces to counter China and Russia conventionally while trying to retain some level of involvement with partners in Africa and the Middle East to demonstrate an enduring strategic resolve. This tension is already playing out in Washington, DC.

U.S. secretary of defense Mark T. Esper proposed in December 2019 the removal of substantial numbers of troops and bases from Africa.<sup>5</sup> His proposal received a rare bipartisan rebuke from congressional officials, with one joint letter to Esper calling it a “shortsighted action that both diminishes our overall national security posture and our ability to lead with American values and influence.”<sup>6</sup> Congressional outrage was justified given that when the Trump administration advertised its Africa strategy a year prior, it specifically detailed how the United States would increase economic and military actions to counter the growing influence of China on the continent.<sup>7</sup> Such tensions are illustrative of the second- and third-order effects involved with attempting a tactical removal of U.S. forces without realizing that China and Russia are near-peers able to exploit this new era of tripolar competition.

To many, the Trump administration’s bold advertisement of “America First” provides a narrative of the United States operating with an explicitly self-serving mentality, translating into many perceived interactions with the United States as being under *quid pro quo* arrangements.<sup>8</sup> This approach, whether true or not, hinders attempts at engagement and cooperation in coordinating against China and Russia in an era of great power competition. Engagement and cooperation with allies and nonaligned countries alike was the hallmark of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, precisely because it was meant to establish American presence and access at the expense of the Soviet Union. Moreover, U.S. engagement with those countries provided socialization opportunities that exposed foreigners to American values, norms, and institutions.<sup>9</sup> To what ends do the expression of “America First” and *realpolitik*—defined as “politics based on practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical objectives”—translate into American application of power, both directly and indirectly, toward accomplishing national interests in an increasingly congested geopolitical stage?<sup>10</sup> Moreover, how can the United States play the strategic long game with near-peer adversaries who attempt to fill power vacuums in regions that the United States once occupied?

To answer these questions, this article will identify current trends, describe an increasingly competitive tripolar era, and analyze the future of American global commitments. In particular, the role of U.S. security force assistance in limited conflicts throughout the world will be considered. Many weak states are recipients of security force assistance, through which the United States seeks to support the host nation's government in conducting counterterrorism operations—and yet paradoxically, there is a dilemma in how drawdowns can undermine progress.<sup>11</sup> As this article will demonstrate, there are great-power implications and externalities to the United States reducing its global military assistance commitments, giving near-peers such as China and Russia an opportunity to gain more influence and assert their power.

### **Mission Creep with No Payoff?**

Aid and assistance to developing nations comprised a relatively small share of American spending during the Cold War. For many recipients, this element of engagement typified the standard international politics of the time as the United States and the Soviet Union competed for access and influence.<sup>12</sup> For many of these states, regime control became dependent on such assistance for patronage purposes in maintaining control.<sup>13</sup> After the end of the Cold War, many states collapsed because their weak institutional rule was no longer subsidized by Western and Eastern powers, leading to civil war and state collapse in many regions.<sup>14</sup> Only in the context of transnational terrorism and organized crime has the problem of weak and failing states been viewed as a threat to American national interests. During the last two decades, the United States and the international community has injected hundreds of billions of dollars of economic aid and security assistance into weak and collapsing governments across Africa and the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> This has included a Western focus on developing certain elite counterterrorism units in some countries, such as the Rapid Intervention Battalion (*Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide*) in Cameroon and the American-backed *Danab* (Lightning Brigade) and Turkish-supported *Gorgon* (Eagle) commando battalions in Somalia.<sup>16</sup>

Some recipients of security force assistance have failed to create legitimate authority structures, and their security forces have been militarily ineffective, albeit effective in repressing their citizenry.<sup>17</sup> One exception is the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, who have been a reliable proxy built through Western security force assistance and were militarily effective against the Islamic State. However, capacity building gains with Kurdish forces have been put at risk due to the withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops from Syria.<sup>18</sup> Not only that, American assistance to the Kurds has been at cross-purposes with a bona fide ally, Turkey, that labels all armed Kurdish groups as terrorists. This tactical alliance with the Kurds, while useful in combatting the Islamic State, has strained strategic relations with Turkey.

On the other side of the spectrum is U.S. economic and military aid to the Philippines. Though American assistance has ebbed and flowed since 1898, the Philippines continues to depend on the United States to prop up its security forces against insurgencies.<sup>19</sup> The challenge of building capable foreign armies in fragile states that can act as reliable proxies for conducting regional counterterrorism missions without enduring long-term Western support highlights absorption issues. It also calls into question whether such assistance can be institutionalized by host-nation forces without creating long-term dependencies.<sup>20</sup>

Critics of these quasi-international state-building operations possess an endless supply of after action reports and evidence citing the failures of the U.S. military and international community to conduct crisis management and conflict resolution.<sup>21</sup> With the persistence of fragile states throughout Africa and Middle East and geopolitical hotspots such as Ukraine, Syria, and the South China Sea, there is only so much the United States and the rest of the international community can do to address these problems. At the same time, there are tremendous moral hazards and dilemmas associated with displaying unwavering support for a weak state unwilling to make necessary reforms. Success at this level sometimes rests on the ability to convince warlords in fragile states to

become “peacelords,” laying down arms and mobilizing supporters at the ballot box.<sup>22</sup>

With open-ended commitments to countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia, the problem of *mission creep*—defined as “the gradual broadening of the original objectives of a mission or organization”—sets in where the American provision of foreign internal defense and/or security force assistance prepares troops for the task of nation- and state-building.<sup>23</sup> However, the conduct of such stability operations is an incredibly difficult endeavor, given that an intervening army, such as that of the United States, tries to engage in some level of institution-building in a country that does not possess a supportive political context. In pursuit of creating the desired security architecture in a fragile state, more actions outside the scope of training and warfare are undertaken in hopes that a more capable security sector will translate into a more effective state, and vice versa.<sup>24</sup> A whole-of-government approach might even be advocated in pursuit of safety, security, and stability, but this struggles as well, since the military mission often becomes the bulk of the strategy and developmental agencies become underresourced and/or dependent on the military.<sup>25</sup>

Mission creep sets in further with the harsh realization that reforming a fragmented security sector does not help the state establish some modicum of monopoly over violence. Limited progress with such efforts leads to military advisors engaging in nonmilitary tasks and duties in hopes that the host-nation government will take them over.<sup>26</sup> Such activities, no matter how well-intentioned, merely subsidize host-nation inefficiencies, enable corruption, and delegitimize the government in the eyes of the public. The only benefit of such mission creep is that it creates a short-term victory for security force assistance providers by generating a veneer of state effectiveness, but it is a hollow achievement in that it is dependent on foreign military trainers to maintain a presence and make ad hoc agreements with powerful informal security actors such as warlords.<sup>27</sup>

“Babysitting” a host-nation’s government and army establishes somewhat of a stable equilibrium and order, but only because the interloping military acts as a third-part mediator in ensuring that rival factions are cooperating.<sup>28</sup> The

current presence of U.S. and international military advisors in Somalia is reflective of such a babysitting attempt to balance competing clan politics, which provides a modicum of stability but ultimately undermines long-term Somalian development and conflict resolution.<sup>29</sup> This brings to light the numerous challenges of the United States and its allies in attempting to achieve a “virtuous cycle” of institution-building within a fragile state well after military advisors and peacekeepers depart.<sup>30</sup>

### **Contextual American Strategy with Shifts in Military Assistance**

During the last two decades, American political leadership has grappled with how to address the rise of a strategic competitor, namely China, while deploying hundreds of thousands of troops in support of military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>31</sup> The 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* directly called attention to competing with near-peer adversaries like Russia and China.<sup>32</sup> By the wayside went state-building operations under the guise of counterterrorism, foreign internal defense, and security force assistance, which are increasingly becoming afterthoughts in terms of resources and strategic outlays. Such a shift away from these activities is warranted on the surface, for they have been costly distractions from maintaining military readiness and have reduced budgets for the research and development of future weapon systems.<sup>33</sup> During this time, China and Russia have reformed their militaries and developed new tactics and weapon systems, all while increasing influence and power in their respective regions.<sup>34</sup> Worse, belligerent state and nonstate actors have sought out various methods and means to undermine democracy and liberal institutions in the West.<sup>35</sup>

The Trump administration has followed through on its national security strategy, cutting the number of military personnel on the African continent, defunding many peacekeeper training programs, slashing foreign-language training for U.S. military personnel, and rebalancing military forces in the Middle East.<sup>36</sup> Looking ahead to an era of great power competition within a new world order, there are externalities involved with a national security strategy focused

on retrenchment that maximizes conventional American military power to combat emerging near-peer threats.<sup>37</sup> The operational burdens and strain of security force assistance activities on both special operation forces and conventional forces to create and train numerous military units in Afghanistan and Iraq has undermined most of their training requirements and readiness metrics for being able to perform combined-arms operations.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the U.S. Army recently developed and established six Security Force Assistance Brigades that focus on deploying to weak states to strengthen the host-nation's military capacity, and the British followed suit by developing four similar Specialised Infantry Battalions.<sup>39</sup> The creation of such specialized security force assistance units is a stopgap measure that frees up more resources for conventional warfare, allowing the rest of the U.S. military to focus on combined-arms training and equipping for conflict and competition with China and Russia.

With only six U.S. Army units dedicated to the mission of working with foreign militaries—and the most recent Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report identified Security Force Assistance Brigades failing at the TAAC mission in Afghanistan due to logistical and personnel struggles—this shift is already reducing the effectiveness of security force assistance efforts, as more prominence is given to conventional military abilities.<sup>40</sup> Security Force Assistance Brigade units began deploying to Africa in 2020, suggesting a willingness to move away from using special operations forces for security force assistance duties altogether.<sup>41</sup>

This shift misses the reality that Security Force Assistance Brigades will likely continue to be underresourced and unable to meet commitments in Africa, much as they are in Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> As a result, new power vacuums created by an American absence will be filled by states possessing regional interests that undermine grand U.S. strategic aims of national security and global stability. Already, despite American and European efforts at strengthening the G5 Sahel, a multinational fighting force composed of troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, there are signs that China is making inroads throughout the Sahel, possibly compromising the G5 alliance.<sup>43</sup> While there is a growing



prospect of conflict in Eastern Europe, especially with hostile Russian political-information operations against its neighbors, Russia is impacting the African continent through private military contractors operating in the Central African Republic, Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, China established a base and port in Djibouti in 2017, and it possesses a much larger economic footprint, more commercial interests, and larger trade deals in place on the continent than the United States.<sup>45</sup>

### **A World Bent on Opposing American Power?**

In a 2018 speech, U.S. vice president Michael R. “Mike” Pence slammed China for its numerous human rights violations and incursions against U.S. allies. He commented that unless China ceases its provocative behavior, both countries are on the brink of a second Cold War.<sup>46</sup> According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, China is expected to have a greater gross domestic product (GDP) than the United States by 2030, and despite a declining Russian economy, Moscow’s leaders believe that Russia deserves to be treated like a world power because of its 6,000 nuclear weapons.<sup>47</sup> These two near-peer adversaries present the United States with the possibility of a tripolar era of competition. For the first time since World War II, the United States will face tremendous challenges in Europe and Asia—but conventional military power alone cannot solve the threats posed by China and Russia.<sup>48</sup>

Worse, globalization and technological advancements have effectively removed the “protective American moats” that the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans have historically served.<sup>49</sup> The global coronavirus pandemic has further heightened this issue of worldwide connectivity as well as the perils of great power competition with China and Russia, both of whom are seemingly more focused on conducting information-political warfare against the United States and its allies than fighting their own domestic viral outbreaks. Of course, their long-term strategy of undermining liberal democracies and the United States-led global order will pay more dividends.

The United States' abandonment of the Syrian Kurds and the perception that the Trump administration is seeking disengagement from Africa and the Middle East has foreshadowed the implications of American vacillation on commitments to its partners. Already, growing evidence indicates that more countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East increasingly view Russia as a more enduring and reliable partner, given how Russia followed through on its defense of the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>50</sup> In addition, despite China's "debt-trap diplomacy," many developing nations are turning to China for support, precisely because they can receive aid and assistance without being shamed for human rights abuses. Worse, even with the current American pivot to Asia, China appears to have "flipped" the Philippines, with the Rodrigo Duterte regime appearing poised to end all agreements and military cooperation with the United States by the end of 2020.<sup>51</sup> This would be a tremendous blow to American access to the region, making it more difficult to defend the commons in the Pacific. Such shifts increasingly show the problems of the United States not matching commitments or following through on policies that display resolve.

### **Security Force Assistance and the Joint Approach**

How can limited American wars facilitate the overall strategic situation in an emerging tripolar world order? A *realpolitik* approach to small wars in the periphery will provide short-term victories, but disengagement undermines the established U.S. liberal hegemonic order. American engagement with its allies and other strategically important countries requires continued assessment of identities, ideologies, relationships, and capabilities to support U.S. interests and global stability.<sup>52</sup> Throughout Africa and the Middle East, the United States has generally provided massive aid packages since the 1970s, the first of which went to Egypt and Israel. Military training programs to the region have been around even longer, such as the U.S. equipping and training Saudi Arabia's military since 1953. Many of these American actions were conducted to gain influence and access as well as to box out the Soviets during the Cold War. However, even with billions of dollars injected into foreign militaries, they can collapse on the

battlefield and flee, as did the Iraqi Army before the Islamic State in June 2014. If the United States continues down the path of creating “Fabergé egg armies,” expensively built but easily cracked, the last two decades in the Middle East will continue to reinforce such repeated failures.<sup>53</sup>

While numerous American military aid and assistance missions have been conducted through state-building efforts in the last 30 years, the Cold War-era successes of Greece, South Korea, and Turkey repelling communist threats have been difficult to replicate elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> U.S. military operations in the twenty-first century have shifted toward establishing democratic governments in foreign nations. Efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq were pursued despite a lack of understanding of the formal and informal institutions in which these societies operated. Despite the U.S. Army defining its security force assistance mission and fielding Security Force Assistance Brigades, this approach has ignored the soft power of American influence and presence in many countries that are seeing higher levels of Chinese and Russian involvement in the economic and military realms.

While American policymakers must buy into the vitality of neocontainment based on the current geopolitical situation, U.S. leaders must return to American diplomat Henry A. Kissinger’s ideas of *realpolitik*: What do these wars in faraway weak states mean for the United States and its allies? Do they contribute to American security and economic vitality, or do they simply drain resources and detract from the real power players of China and Russia? Current American strategic frustration is derived from a divergence in national interests and the objectives of nation-building, as well as whether assisting foreign militaries in these limited wars is actually providing strategic influence. Hence, American efforts at developing allies with some modicum of military power can be simplified into two mission sets.

### **The Payoff of American Engagement Abroad**

The first category of military-backed assistance programs is aimed at developed nations that have the political willpower and capacity to absorb aid packages.

Foreign assistance from the United States bolsters the economic power and military capability of the recipient state in a way that reshapes the balance of power in relation to regional adversaries. This form of aid is more akin to security and defense cooperation, where recipient nations such as Taiwan, Poland, and Japan have specifically tailored plans to maximize their military effectiveness against regional threats while improving interoperability with U.S. military personnel.<sup>55</sup> These developed nations have similarly aligned political and strategic goals as the United States. With continued aid, they not only defend themselves but also act as proxy rivals to China and Russia. If nations like Taiwan and Japan can successfully broaden their spheres of military and economic influence to challenge the aggressive expansion of China, the United States will be able to balance power in the Pacific. Likewise, developing the capabilities of European allies can help accomplish the same strategic objective in balancing against Russian hostility. The U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency directs these foreign military missions, which include weapons sales, defense institution-building, and the strengthening of defensive and offensive military capacities, while also establishing security partnerships. Such American efforts counter China and Russia, especially as a tripolar era of competition becomes increasingly likely.

The second and more critical mission set of military training programs is aimed at weak states, whereby U.S. military personnel are tasked with developing basic military institutions and warfighting abilities. Such underdeveloped states lack the ability to effectively govern, and their security forces are generally fragmented and underresourced. However, trying to overcome the pathology of weak and divided states lies in the ability of the United States to shape the state-building process, which ironically can undermine the legitimacy of the new host-nation government.<sup>56</sup> An ad hoc military strategy may prove to be successful in the short term, but it provides no long-term solutions with either government institutions or their security forces.

Policy makers are often unaware and unprepared to endure the risk that security force assistance demands, as seen with the ambush and death of four

Green Berets in Niger in 2017.<sup>57</sup> It is critical that U.S. efforts be built on the growth and functionality of the state-building process, and that the train-and-equip mantra via security force assistance is actualized and institutionalized. Successful military assistance missions must be sought in pursuit of the long-term strengthening of a host-nation that spans the entire spectrum of society, including government and military institutions. Without developing a way to overcome civil-military-relation challenges in the recipient state, American security assistance will not help develop a reliable and capable partner in the long term. Specifically, the problem of political context is rarely adjusted in the delivery of security force assistance, as technical aspects of military assistance are unable to shape necessary political reforms in civil-military relations.<sup>58</sup>

Given the demanding and critical nature of the joint warfighting mission, strengthening partner capacity while simultaneously developing institutional responsibility is no easy task. In many host-nations receiving U.S. military aid, coup-proofing activities by political leadership discourage joint warfighting and can make the absorption of security force assistance more of a patronage activity rather than an attempt at increasing military effectiveness.<sup>59</sup> Overcoming the pathologies of civil-military relations demands a whole-of-government approach by the United States that links soft and hard power to maximize effectiveness in the delivery of security force assistance. These principles should take primacy in determining when and where resources are allocated in pursuit of achieving American national interests. At the same time, there still exists the dilemma of deciding if the United States should continue such economic and military assistance engagements, made on the basis of whether a country is enough of a vital national security interest that it is worth continuing investment only by virtue of excluding China and Russia.

## **Conclusion**

A new world order is forming around the narrative of a weakened United States, with a growing perception of America's "exit from hegemony" both internally and externally.<sup>60</sup> The hyper-hegemonic position of power that the United States

possessed after the Cold War is waning, while China and Russia have taken bold and aggressive actions in a way that has minimized hard-power responses from U.S. policy makers and strategists. While the Trump administration appears to support a strategy of retrenchment in global security force assistance operations, the tripolar era is being defined by China and Russia moving to fill areas lacking American investment and interest, establishing conditions for a renewed Cold War. Chinese and Russian engagement with much of the developing world is filling a void that the United States had traditionally occupied but now neglects.<sup>61</sup>

A new form of containment is required to keep the revisionist agendas of China and Russia in check, propelling the importance of limited wars and U.S. troops acting as advisors. American expertise and capabilities in this genre of warfighting, specifically drawn from the U.S. Joint Force, will be a primary way in which the United States maintains its ascendancy in the ever-changing geopolitical stage. The United States must continue working with partner militaries and militias to defend against Chinese and Russian influence and ensure that these partners become capable of standing up for themselves.

As best put by a military officer from an African country, “All Africans want democracy [and] want to be like the United States. We need help with roads and infrastructure, but our governments cannot work with USAID and the World Bank. Who can the people get help from? If not China, who?”<sup>62</sup> The United States cannot afford a lackadaisical approach to Africa or the Middle East. Continued apathy toward either region only undermines American national interests in the long term. Instead, the United States should continue engaging in low-level security assistance missions to box out Russia and China at low cost.

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## Notes

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