# Competing through Cooperation
## Leveraging Security Cooperation to Counter Chinese and Russian Influence in Africa

Captain Daniel De Wit, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

**Abstract:** The *National Defense Strategy* and U.S. strategy for Africa have reprioritized great power competition over the threat of terrorism and other nonstate actors.[1] However, U.S. security cooperation initiatives in Africa have yet to adjust to this change and continue to focus on developing partner forces capable of defeating terrorist groups and other destabilizing nonstate threats. To leverage security cooperation initiatives to counter Chinese and Russian influence activities, planners at U.S. Africa Command must design them primarily for the message they will send, rather than the capability to be imparted to the partner force. Minor changes to security cooperation programs, including a revised and expanded Ministry of Defense Advisors (MODA) program, increased leveraging of psychological operations capabilities, and engaging more directly with African societies will support this effort.

**Keywords:** Africa, influence, security cooperation, great power competition, China, Russia, U.S. Africa Command, AFRICOM

The Department of Defense (DOD) will need to reframe the way it conceives and designs security cooperation efforts with local partners if it is to compete effectively with China and Russia in Africa. The emerging great power competition between the United States, China, and Russia is as central to U.S. interest in this region as it is in Eastern Europe or the Western

Daniel De Wit is an operations support officer with the Defense Intelligence Agency and a PhD candidate in the War Studies Department at King's College London. The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Marine Corps, or the Department of Defense.

Pacific, and while the new U.S. Africa strategy recognizes this reality, the change is not yet reflected in DOD programs and activities there.[2]

Since a conventional war with Russia or China would be excruciatingly costly for all involved, competition remains below the threshold for armed conflict and primarily takes the form of a contest for influence with key regional actors. In this environment, the capabilities imparted to partner forces through security cooperation programs are less important than the message that cooperative efforts send to observers in the region. The primary objective must be to build trust and lasting influence with key regional governments and militaries, rather than to enhance their capacity for combat operations, which has been the thrust of U.S. security cooperation initiatives to date.[3] Security cooperation efforts should focus on promoting a narrative about U.S. strategic resilience and the benefits of working with the United States over Russia or China, and de-emphasize small-unit tactical training—the overwhelming focus of such programs since 9/11—except in those cases where such training programs will improve American influence with the recipient governments.

## Competing for Influence in the New Global Order

Great power competition is returning to the international arena at a time when technological and societal trends make major war costlier and less decisive, which in turn drives states to compete below the level of armed conflict.[4] The increasing cost of weapons systems, decreasing societal tolerance for casualties, and the likelihood that any military activity will be broadcast worldwide via the internet collectively result in increased political risk for any head of state who might seek to use conventional military force.[5] Furthermore, Russia and China have taken note of America's dominance in conventional military capabilities. Instead of attempting to compete directly against this conventional strength, they have developed techniques to advance their strategic aims, often at the expense of the American strategic position, in ways designed to avoid triggering a conventional military response.[6] These competitive techniques are often called "gray zone" activities by the U.S. military, but are also known as "hybrid warfare" or "completion below the level of armed conflict."[7] They center on the use of limited force, supported by political or information warfare operations, to undermine adversaries and secure strategic objectives in ways such that responding with conventional force would be ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst.[8] Russian actions in Ukraine and Chinese efforts to secure its claims in the South China Sea are the most often-cited examples of gray zone competition, but Russian support for the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela and China's efforts to influence politics in Australia and New Zealand indicate that the United States is facing these tactics on a global scale.[9]

Because gray zone activities are designed to render American advantages in

conventional force irrelevant or even counterproductive, it is imperative that the United States compete by advancing its own influence efforts around the world. Maintaining superior military capabilities is important, but it will be America's ability to market itself as the partner of choice to strategically important countries that will prove decisive in this contest.[10] These partnerships will provide the United States with the means to anticipate and disrupt threatening Russian or Chinese advances, ideally without requiring the application of military force. In many cases, it may be as simple as a partner nation choosing a non-Chinese firm for major development contracts or to purchase arms from the United States or France rather than Russia. In every case, the objective should be to prevent America's adversaries from deepening their ability to exert influence over partner nations.

Security cooperation programs will have an important role to play in this effort. While efforts to advance American influence are principally matters for the diplomatic, informational, and economic arms of statecraft, U.S. military programs should be designed so as to support those nonmilitary tools.[11] Furthermore, inasmuch as every military activity sends a message (intentionally or not), security cooperation efforts must be crafted such that they advance U.S. strategic influence rather than undermining it.[12]

## China and Russia in Africa

China's economic presence in Africa, marked by financing for numerous infrastructure projects and tens of billions of dollars in direct investment, is widespread and highly visible.[13] This carries significant strategic implications. As Chinese investment money becomes increasingly critical to the development of numerous African nations, those nations will find themselves less able to resist Chinese efforts to dictate policy decisions. This dynamic is already evident in places such as Malaysia and Sri Lanka, where sovereign states are finding that their debts to Chinese investors hold them hostage to Chinese political maneuvers.[14] Furthermore, the means by which China selects recipients for its investments and local firms with which to partner is opaque, giving rise to serious concerns about fraud and corruption. This in turn suggests that only an elite few will stand to benefit from engaging with China, whereas whole populations stand to lose through corruption and environmental degradation.[15]

While China's military presence in Africa is far less robust than its economic footprint, it is following a similar upward trajectory. In his first speech to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2015, Chinese president Xi Jinping promised to deliver $100 million in free military assistance to the African Union.[16] Indeed, Chinese arms sales to African nations grew by 55 percent from 2008 to 2017.[17] In 2017, China also opened the only overseas military base in Djibouti, which will eventually allow the Chinese People's Liberation

Army (PLA) to project force throughout the Horn of Africa.[18] Finally, in 2018, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense hosted the inaugural China-Africa Defense and Security Forum, a two-week defense summit in Beijing. Attendees included participants from 50 African nations—out of a total of 54—and the African Union.[19] These developments suggest that China sees Africa as a vital strategic region and that it is looking to deepen its influence with African militaries to advance both economic and strategic interests.

It is important to view China's increasing economic and military presence in Africa as two halves of a comprehensive engagement strategy. Investments in infrastructure and even human resource development generate greater capacity for partner nations to solve problems and a greater sense within those nations that China is a strong and committed partner. Simultaneously, military engagement and training leads to more professional host-nation forces that are more willing and able to work closely with Chinese security cooperation initiatives.[20] Collectively, these initiatives deepen Chinese influence and increase the degree to which they become viewed as the "partner of choice" for many African nations.[21] In this context, it is immaterial that the U.S. presence in Africa is more robust by orders of magnitude, or that U.S. foreign direct investment in Africa exceeds that of China by some $17 billion.[22] The widespread perception in Africa is that the U.S. commitment to its partners there is waning and lacks a cohesive strategy, while China is perceived as the more active and engaged outside power.[23] This perception has the potential to be self-manifesting: as China is increasingly seen as the partner of choice for African states, African states will increasingly turn to it first, leaving less room for the United States to engage before decisions are made in China's favor. China is becoming the partner of choice by default due to the fact that African leaders see it as a consistent and engaged actor, rather than one that struggles to maintain a coherent focus on African affairs.

This might ultimately mean that the United States could face greater difficulty partnering with African nations on a host of economic or strategic issues. Should U.S. relations with China deteriorate (e.g., over China's efforts to secure its claims on the South China Sea or to forcibly reunify with Taiwan), China could use its increasing influence in Africa as a means to impose costs on the United States without risking escalation in the region under dispute—a technique known as *horizontal escalation*.[24] Avoiding this outcome will require more proactive American engagement to maintain and expand its own influence in Africa.

Russia's presence in Africa is far smaller in size and narrower in focus than China's, but it is also far more pernicious. Whereas China is principally an investor in African development and only secondarily engaged with African militaries, Russia is posturing itself as a provider of military and security ser-

vices to resource-rich African states as well as private firms engaged in resource-extraction operations.[25] Among the most active Russian actors on the continent is the Wagner Group, a private military company famous for engaging in a major firefight with U.S. forces in Syria and that is now reportedly in 10 countries across Africa.[26] In exchange for these goods and services, Russia often gains concessions for oil or mineral extraction, as well as an armed contingent on the continent that it can leverage to advance its own aims.

Russian military contractors directly supported Russia's gray zone activities in Ukraine and Syria, where they serve to give the Kremlin an ability to influence military developments on the ground while decreasing both the domestic and international political risk inherent in deploying members of the Russian armed forces.[27] The presence of these companies in Africa gives Russia an ideal spoiler force, which it can use to disrupt U.S. and allied security initiatives in Africa by arming and training militias or other substate forces hostile to U.S. partners. Reports that the Wagner Group may be active in Libya—where most of the country is under the control of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, a former Libyan general friendly to Russia—suggest that this may already be happening.[28]

It is noteworthy that the differences in how Russia and China are pursuing their aims in Africa match trends in how they are competing with the United States worldwide. Russia is primarily a disruptive force, using limited aggressive actions to undermine the United States and its allies and generally decrease their ability to respond to security issues around the world. Its tactics are aggressive but not particularly effective at achieving positive aims beyond disrupting U.S.-led international initiatives—witness both Ukraine and Syria, where Russia has prevented the destruction of friendly regimes but only by exhausting their opponents and forcing stalemates. This likely does not trouble Russian president Vladimir Putin, as his primary objective is to disrupt the U.S.-led international order and open space for Russia to play a larger role in the international arena.[29] Russia's paramilitary forces in Africa are perfectly postured to advance this agenda, as they are strong enough to threaten U.S. and allied interests on the continent, but small enough and far enough removed from the Russian government to leave some ambiguity as to whether they are operating at the Kremlin's direction or for their own economic gain.[30]

China's activities are far subtler and are designed to achieve more positive strategic aims. Through the slow and steady deployment of billions of dollars in direct investment and infrastructure development, China is effectively buying the loyalty of its partners. Chinese military engagements in Africa are designed to protect these investments and the Chinese citizens working to advance them in the field. These activities appear more legitimate and beneficial, and in many cases may not be designed with political influence as the primary intended

outcome. However, Chinese actions to develop a naval base in Cambodia and to secure access to port facilities in Sri Lanka and the Maldives demonstrate how China can leverage infrastructure investments to expand its global military presence and advance its strategic aims.[31]

These differences in method notwithstanding, China and Russia share an emphasis on undermining the American strategic position in Africa through influence rather than by force of arms. Effectively countering these tactics will require the United States to remain actively engaged with African countries to demonstrate that it is a more effective partner and that it has the staying power to deliver on its promises over the long term. This work is primarily diplomatic in nature, but American security cooperation efforts will have an invaluable role to play due to the universal acknowledgment that for all of China's funds or Russia's willingness to offer up security services to the highest bidder, neither state can individually match the United States in the realm of military capabilities.

## Competing through Cooperation

The United States maintains a robust portfolio of security cooperation programs in Africa, including major regional exercises and task forces supporting regional counterterrorism operations.[32] However, these programs suffer from a policy-strategy disconnect: while U.S. policy clearly prioritizes the threat posed by great power competition in Africa, security cooperation programs on the ground continue to focus excessively on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.[33] For the past decade, the overarching intent of U.S. security cooperation programming was to create capable partner forces who could defeat terrorist groups and other destabilizing nonstate actors in the region so that U.S. forces would not have to intervene directly.[34] Thus, U.S. security cooperation initiatives have focused on developing military and police forces capable of defeating terrorist attacks, serving in regional peacekeeping missions, and protecting territorial waters and maritime exclusive economic zones from piracy, illegal fishing, and illicit trafficking. Engagements and joint exercises in support of this effort have focused on small-unit tactics and similar core competencies and given comparatively little thought to how these initiatives could be used to counter influence efforts from other outside powers. This was a logical approach to countering globally dispersed terrorist groups without deploying excessive numbers of U.S. troops, but it falls short when the DOD must also engage in a battle for influence with China and Russia. Since both the *National Defense Strategy* and U.S. Africa strategy prioritize the threat posed by Russian and Chinese influence activities, security cooperation initiatives should likewise emphasize activities that advance U.S. influence in the region.

This means that every engagement that involves partnering of American

and African forces should be designed principally to advance the narrative that the United States is the partner of choice for African militaries; the actual capabilities that security cooperation engagements seek to impart are of secondary importance. Joint exercises and combined training events should be seen as a venue in which the competition with Russia or China is taking place, regardless of the fact that neither of those countries may be participating in the event itself. While African nations will doubtless continue to seek counterterrorism training and assistance from U.S. forces, United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) should see these programs as a means to demonstrate that the United States maintains superior counterterrorism capabilities to Russia or China and that African partners will stand the best chance of developing their own capable forces by working with the U.S. military.

In some cases, this may mean making the hard choice to provide training or equipment to a partner nation that does not actually require it or that the partner nation may not be able to maintain. Normally, security cooperation officers try to avoid this eventuality at all costs; they make rigorous assessments as to partner force requirements and what capabilities that force can sustain in the long term.[35] However, security cooperation officers must also recognize that in an era of great power competition, the capabilities of partner forces are themselves less important than how partner forces are engaging with America's adversaries. Thus, security cooperation officers must be willing to consider requests for capabilities that a partner nation wants but that it might not need, recognizing that a failure to do so may mean the nation in question turns to Russia or China for what it wants instead.[36]

In addition to this change in mind-set, AFRICOM should emphasize several structural changes to its security cooperation programs to best position itself to win the fight for influence:

- Revising and expanding the Ministry of Defense Advisors (MODA) program to place field- and flag-rank officers directly into partner ministries of defense, where they can advise foreign military leaders at the uppermost echelons;
- Integrate psychological operations personnel in the security cooperation offices (SCOs) within U.S. embassies in select partner countries;
- Schedule training events that engage whole societies rather than just militaries by, for example, preparing first responders and community organizations to respond to natural disasters.

## Revising the MODA Program

The MODA program places U.S. advisors directly into the ministries of defense of partner governments, advancing U.S. influence through direct, person-

al contact with senior host-nation military personnel. Senior military officers should staff this program, rather than contractors as is the current practice, because their presence will better convey the importance that the DOD places on relations with its African counterparts.[37] While the use of contractors allows the Defense Security Cooperation Agency to hire regional experts who possess the requisite language skills and can remain in their posts for longer periods than a usual two to three year military tour allows, it also prevents the United States from capitalizing on the image of an engaged U.S. military that is willing to commit a key resource—qualified senior officers who might otherwise be commanding units or serving critical staff functions—to advance U.S. engagement with the partner military. This perception is the key aspect of such a shift; while contracted MODA personnel undoubtedly bring longevity and cultural familiarity to the table, these are less important to the competition for influence with Russia and China than the perception of U.S. strength and willingness to remain engaged in Africa, which would follow the placement of a uniformed senior officer empowered to represent the DOD directly in the host-nation ministry of defense. The MODA would coordinate their actions with the U.S. ambassador and security cooperation office at the embassy, but they should also be considered as the principal element for engagement with the host-nation defense establishment and empowered with the requisite authorities to act as such.

It is noteworthy that there is ample precedent for the deployment of senior officers in such a capacity. The French Army has maintained a longstanding practice of embedding cooperants within the militaries of its partner countries.[38] *Cooperants* are soldiers that train and mentor new senior leaders, build professionalism, and ensure interoperability, all in support of French interests. The French Army has reaped benefits from this arrangement in terms of close relations with partner militaries and freedom of movement for its own forces in the region. There is no reason that the United States cannot expect similar results.

## Psychological Operations from the Security Cooperation Office

The DOD should consider stationing psychological operations (psyops) personnel to the Office of Security Cooperation (OSC) at embassies in key countries overseas. Psyops troops are specifically trained to craft information campaigns and narratives to advance U.S. objectives.[39] They also are trained to understand how U.S. actions may be perceived by various audiences and to advise unit commanders on how to take these perceptions into account when planning any military action. Placing them in the OSCs will enable the development of security cooperation programs that are purpose built to advance U.S. influence among target audiences overseas.

The OSC is intended to be the primary interface for planning, coordinat-

ing, and overseeing security cooperation efforts between the United States and partner nations.[40] As such, they are staffed with U.S. military foreign area officers (FAOs), who are tasked with overseeing foreign military sales, combined training programs, and other joint engagements.[41] This is very much in keeping with the current U.S. approach toward security cooperation, improving the host nation's ability to manage security problems so that the United States does not need to intervene directly. However, these officers are generally not trained to think about their mission as an aspect of a competition for influence with Russia and China. To balance the focus on specific security cooperation cases with an understanding of the broader strategic competition, embassy OSCs in key locations should host psyops personnel, who can help craft and message security cooperation programs so as to maximize the resulting influence for the United States. Alternatively, DOD may consider adding some psychological operations training to FAO training programs so that all personnel assigned to the OSC have at least a minimal level of knowledge about how to craft security cooperation initiatives to maximize U.S. influence.

Psyops troops are unique in the U.S. military in that they alone are trained to influence foreign populations by developing narratives and delivering them through a variety of media. When properly employed, psyops personnel can sow division within an enemy force, disrupting its cohesion and ultimately sapping its ability to resist. This was most recently evident in the U.S. effort to defeat Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in central Africa. A handful of pysops specialists used targeted messaging to cause mass defections from the LRA, ultimately neutralizing it as a serious threat even though Kony himself was never captured.[42]

While psyops personnel assigned to the OSC will be able to draft and disseminate tailored messages to audiences in the host nation (assuming interagency concurrence), their real utility will be in understanding how routine security cooperation initiatives will be perceived by a variety of audiences, and then planning those initiatives to maximize perceptions in accordance with U.S. interests. If security cooperation planners are to proceed from the understanding that cooperative engagement programs are themselves a means to advance American influence, it follows that personnel trained in strategic messaging should have a hand in crafting these programs. This understanding, when paired with the cultural and linguistic expertise found in foreign area officers, will allow security cooperation initiatives to go beyond enhancing the capabilities of select units and instead advance the narrative that the United States' presence in Africa is a superior alternative to the predatory and transactional relationships that Russia and China have to offer.

## The Whole-of-Society Approach

The current approach to security cooperation in Africa is heavily weighted toward engagements with military and police units from partner nations. This is natural given the DOD's mission and focus on building local capabilities to counter substate threats. However, it neglects a potential source of competitive advantage that the United States enjoys over Russia or China: positive popular views of the United States in comparison to its competitors.[43] While China maintains a robust presence, the transactional nature of its business dealings raise concerns about corruption and the benefits of Chinese engagement going to a tiny elite.[44] Similarly, Russia's mercenary-led engagement on the continent cannot provide benefits to whole populations. The United States should take advantage of this by engaging directly with African people who have no military or government affiliation, particularly during the course of security cooperation engagements with African security forces. The aim should be to advance the narrative that the U.S. presence in Africa can benefit whole populations and that the U.S. military in particular can offer beneficial humanitarian resources that Russia and China simply cannot match.

The U.S. Navy's response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami resulted in an unprecedented increase in goodwill for the United States among a previously skeptical Indonesian population, which in turn resulted in increased counterterrorism cooperation with the Indonesian armed forces.[45] The U.S. response to the 2014–16 West Africa Ebola outbreak, which eventually totaled more than $5 billion in U.S. assistance and hundreds of U.S. military and civilian personnel on the ground, similarly demonstrated American determination to remain engaged in the region as well as the superior resources it can contribute to humanitarian aid or deal with societal problems.[46]

U.S. security cooperation initiatives should seek to proactively achieve a similar effect by engaging directly with local governments and civic groups to provide training in response to natural disasters and other humanitarian crises. U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance regularly trains foreign partners to prepare for natural disasters, but, at least in Africa, these efforts are generally not connected to DOD exercises, which focus on regional security and peacekeeping.[47] Closing this gap could pay significant dividends for American influence in the region. U.S. forces training in the region could, for example, spend time training first responders and hospital staff in triage and care procedures for high-casualty events. Such engagements would showcase the U.S. military presence in the region as a positive force for regular civilians and not just governments or militaries. This is a distinct image from the transactional methods pursued by Russia and China that primarily benefit the elites and would help ensure a strong basis of popular support for U.S. engagement in Africa.

## Conclusion

The most crucial shift necessary for the United States to compete in Africa is one of mind-set: American military leaders engaged on the continent must understand that every action they take contributes in some form to the growing competition with Russia and China. As a result, U.S. security cooperation initiatives must prioritize this competition and seek first and foremost to advance a strategic narrative about U.S. strength and resiliency in the region. The substance of these programs themselves, while important, must be viewed as secondary to the message that implementing them will send to local governments and populations. This may mean, for example, that U.S. tax dollars go toward financing a weapons or equipment purchase for an African military that does not truly need the systems in question if the alternative is that the African military will later purchase it from China or Russia. While any security cooperation officer would normally try to dissuade the partner force from such a purchase, a competitive mind-set might instead mean supporting and even expediting the sale if that is what is necessary to prevent U.S. adversaries advancing their own influence through arms sales instead. While the OSC's explicit mission is to manage arms sales and other security cooperation initiatives as expediently as possible, these activities are normally viewed explicitly in terms of how the receiving nation will benefit from the sale and how its increased capabilities will in turn advance U.S. strategic objectives. Competition with other great powers —especially ones outside the region that do not pose a direct threat to the receiving country—often do not factor into security cooperation plans. This must change, in Africa if not elsewhere, if the United States is to stay ahead of China and Russia's strategic advances.

The other measures recommended here—placing advisors in ministries of defense, deploying psyops personnel to embassy security cooperation offices, and engaging directly with societies instead of only friendly militaries—will all serve as force multipliers, allowing U.S. leaders to shape the environment through security cooperation functions such that it is more amenable to U.S. policy aims and less so to its adversaries. But they can only function in this way if the people sent to fill these roles understand that security cooperation must no longer be purely about making partner nations more capable. It must instead be geared toward advancing U.S. strategic goals vis-à-vis China and Russia or not undertaken at all.

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