

STRATEGIC COMPETITION FOR OVERSEAS BASING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Executive summary

Compared to other regions, sub-Saharan Africa is not a high strategic priority for China, Russia, or the United States. Most of the vital interests of these powers are in Asia, Europe, the Western Hemisphere, and the Middle East. That said, in recent years, U.S. concerns about Chinese and Russian basing in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have grown, largely owing to the two countries' increased desire to project power and influence globally.

But each country has different interests and capacities in sub-Saharan Africa, and U.S. strategy in the region should account for what drives these powers' basing behavior. China seeks to secure and maintain access to resources and markets and safeguard its citizens and businesses abroad. Russia, with more limited economic and political stakes in the region, is more opportunistic. It tends to pursue its interests in an ad hoc fashion, often through undertaking profit-seeking and destabilizing activities. The United States primarily seeks to maintain strategic access

to the continent, counter threats to U.S. persons, facilities, and interests from violent extremist organizations or other maligned actors and to prevent and respond to humanitarian and other crises.

In terms of capacity, China has only one base, located in Djibouti. However, the U.S. government suspects it is pursuing other bases in multiple countries, including Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Namibia, the Seychelles, and Tanzania. Russia is planning for a base in Sudan, as publicly reported in 2020, and is likely seeking base access in several other SSA locations, including Eritrea and Somaliland. In addition, Russia now uses mercenaries of the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organization, to support regimes in countries such as the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan. The United States maintains a permanent base in Djibouti, an Air Force facility in Niger, and troops in Kenya and Somalia, and it has authorized special operations forces to support counterterrorism missions in other SSA countries. It also provides logistical support to French counterterrorism operations in Mali.

Although China and Russia's growing attention to sub-Saharan Africa is evident and may be concerning, expanded Chinese basing and increased Russian aggression in other, more vital regions are much more significant threats to the interests of the United States and its allies and partners. Preventing Chinese and Russian basing in sub-Saharan Africa should be a lower priority.

Of course, the United States can and must adjust its strategy in response to the evolving security dynamics. Within the region, the U.S. government should focus on preventing basing on the west coast of Africa that could provide China naval access to the Atlantic and basing in East Africa that could significantly impact sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and provide China with more power projection capability in the Indian Ocean. Other potential Chinese basing locations in the region should be less of a concern. Because Moscow has limited security interests in sub-Saharan Africa and it is now distracted by the war in Ukraine, its basing activities should not be a major concern for the U.S.

The United States should not just focus on basing, however, but also consider how other military agreements, cooperation, and port access amplify China's ability to project power and threaten the SLOCs.

Washington should also seek opportunities for cooperation with China in the region, based on their numerous shared security interests there. Due to its aggressive behavior in Ukraine and disruptive behavior in sub-Saharan Africa, cooperation between the US and Russia is unlikely.

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is a vast region encompassing 49 countries.¹ It is strategically located on the Indian and Atlantic Oceans with close proximity to a number of key SLOCs. At 9.4 million square miles, this resource-rich region contains almost three times the land mass of the United States. With 1.2 billion people and relatively high population growth rates, it provides substantial current and future market opportunities for goods and services.

Historically, sub-Saharan Africa suffered through colonization and was a battlefield for competition between China, Russia, and the United States during the Cold War. During the post-Cold War era, competition faded into the background and great power attention to the region tended to focus on non-traditional security concerns, including terrorism and piracy, and the resolution of civil wars and interstate conflicts that threatened the stability of the region and civilian populations. Non-security issues such as economic development, human rights, disease prevention, and humanitarian response were also often emphasized.

Today, this region is once again emerging as an arena of strategic competition between the United States, China, and Russia. As this competitive dynamic develops, Washington is starting to view current and future Chinese and Russian military activity in the region as a threat. One particularly important element of that behavior is basing.

The rising power of China

China's current, and likely future, basing interests in sub-Saharan Africa include securing and maintaining access to resources and markets and safeguarding its citizens and businesses abroad.² Its military footprint in the region is limited: It primarily consists of a base in Djibouti, participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations and multilateral antipiracy missions, and relatively low volumes of conventional arms sales over time compared to those of other great powers.³

Before establishing its base in 2017, China pursued a policy of no foreign basing.⁴ The base in Djibouti is China's first, and to date only, declared overseas base.⁵ In November 2015, China signed a 10-year contract with the Djibouti government and announced it was establishing an installation in Djibouti to resupply Chinese navy ships participating in Gulf of Aden antipiracy missions.⁶

China's military personnel first deployed to the Djibouti base in July 2017 and conducted their first live-fire exercise later that year.⁷ China's base will reportedly host thousands of troops, but as of 2022, only 400 marines were stationed there.⁸ The base has an operational pier likely able to accommodate aircraft carriers, other large combat ships, and submarines.⁹ It has a heliport but does not yet have a dedicated runway for other aircraft.¹⁰

Beijing established this base in Djibouti for several reasons. The location enhances China's ability to protect the SLOCs in the Middle East and Africa and supports the navy's participation in anti-piracy activities. According to the Chinese Ministry of Defense, the location also ensures that China can contribute to regional peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance.¹¹ For several years before establishing this base, the United States and other countries encouraged China to stop free riding and contribute more global public goods. Arguably, China positioned itself to protect the region's SLOCs to potentially provide these public goods, especially if the United States were to cease its protection of these SLOCs or other powers were to threaten China's access to them.

The location also enables China to better protect its citizens and businesses in sub-Saharan Africa. Several Chinese white papers, other government statements, and China's 2015 National Security Law (clauses 28 and 30) call for protecting its citizens abroad.¹² Based on its experience evacuating over 35,000 citizens from Libya in 2011 and over 600 from Yemen in 2015, China determined it needed a more permanent presence to facilitate future civilian evacuations from conflict zones in the Middle East and Africa.¹³ Beijing explicitly refers to these experiences as a reason for establishing the base in Djibouti.¹⁴

In some ways, in choosing the location, China may have been attempting to demonstrate that it is a responsible power. Several other countries already had bases there, so Beijing could have perceived this as a nonthreatening location for a base, especially given China's experience with conducting multilateral anti-piracy activities with those same countries. (The United States, France, Italy, and Japan have bases

in Djibouti. The U.S. base, Camp Lemonnier, is the headquarters of the U.S. Africa Command Joint Task Force for the Horn of Africa and houses more than 4,000 U.S. and allied personnel. France's base, Aérienne 188, is home to French as well as Spanish and German forces.)¹⁵

It can also be argued that China at the time chose Djibouti because Iran would not positively perceive a Chinese base in an Arab country and, similarly, other Arab countries would see a base in Iran as threatening.¹⁶ Establishing the base in Djibouti gave China the benefits of proximity to the Middle East without having to choose sides; in other words, it allowed China to maintain its delicate balancing act with all the region's powers and not infringe on the U.S. sphere of influence. Geographically, China's Djibouti base is in sub-Saharan Africa, but its existence can only be understood in the broader context of Beijing's interests in both the Middle East and Africa.

China has yet to announce any further plans for basing in sub-Saharan Africa, but speculation about the potential for basing activity is growing. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) recently stated that China is "likely already considering and planning for additional military logistics facilities to support naval, air, and ground projection."¹⁷ It asserts that in Africa, Beijing is likely considering military logistics facilities in Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, the Seychelles, and Tanzania; is making overtures to Namibia; and is most interested in military access along the SLOCs from China to Africa.

The disruptive power of Russia

By comparison, Russia's economic and political interests in sub-Saharan Africa are limited, and its behavior tends to be opportunistic, ad hoc, profit-seeking, and destabilizing.¹⁸ Russia's military activities mostly include serving as the region's top supplier of conventional arms; deploying Wagner Group mercenaries – who have close ties to Russia's military intelligence agency – to the Central African

Republic, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan to protect regimes in power there;¹⁹ and pursuing a formal base in Sudan.²⁰

In 2020, it was made public that Russia was entering into an agreement with Sudan for a military base that would host up to 300 personnel and four naval vessels. If the base moves forward, it will be Russia's first in sub-Saharan Africa since the fall of the Soviet Union, and its purpose will be to maintain Russian ships, support anti-piracy missions in the Red Sea, and provide potential control over the SLOCs passing through the Red Sea.²¹ Since the 2021 coup in Sudan, the base agreement reportedly has been on hold,²² but neither the Russian government nor the Sudanese government has confirmed a pause in planning.²³

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there was speculation that Moscow would pursue naval facilities in Somaliland and Eritrea.²⁴ It is also reported that Russia attempted to negotiate with the Djibouti government for a base and those talks stalled.²⁵ These efforts and the plan for base in Sudan indicate that Russia may want to project force along the strategic maritime chokehold of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait from Djibouti to Yemen.²⁶

The enduring power of the United States

The United States' primary security interests in sub-Saharan Africa are seeking political solutions to conflicts in the region through African-led efforts, combatting terrorism that threatens U.S. citizens and businesses in the region, mitigating humanitarian crises, and investing in local and regional peace building and peace keeping to prevent future conflicts.²⁷ The United States is also increasingly emphasizing Africa's importance for competing with China and Russia and preventing the power projection of both countries. According to the U.S. Africa Command's (AFRICOM) 2022 posture statement to Congress, the U.S. military is working toward three primary objectives: maintaining strategic access

and influence on the continent; countering threats to U.S. persons, facilities, and interests from violent extremist organizations or other maligned actors; and preventing and responding to humanitarian and other crises.²⁸

Compared to China and Russia, the United States has maintained a more substantial, but still limited, security footprint in sub-Saharan Africa. As of 2020, it had approximately 5,000 service members and 1,000 civilians and contractors on the continent.²⁹ As noted earlier, the United States has a permanent base in Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti with more than 4,000 U.S. and allied personnel. It also has troops deployed in Kenya, Somalia, and West Africa (mainly in Niger), focused on counterterrorism operations. Personnel in Niger conduct a wide range of activities, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance flights from a U.S. Air Force facility.³⁰ The United States also provides logistical support to French counterterrorism operations in Mali.³¹ In addition, Congress has authorized the DOD to deploy U.S. special operation forces in support of "foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or facilitating ongoing military operations" to combat terrorism. The DOD does not generally disclose the scope or location of those authorized activities.³²

Risks and challenges

The primary risk to the United States from China's base in Djibouti and other potential bases in sub-Saharan Africa is that they would enable Beijing to project power in a conflict and to potentially control key SLOCs around the region. China's base provides potential leverage over the SLOCs transiting the Red Sea and enhances Beijing's ability to project power in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. Two geographical locations are particularly concerning for future Chinese bases: the Atlantic coast of West Africa and the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa.

DOD statements from General Stephen Townsend of AFRICOM note particular worries about potential basing on the west coast of Africa, especially

Equatorial Guinea.³³ A possible Chinese naval facility on the Atlantic coast of West Africa is identified as the most significant Chinese security threat for the United States in the region because of its proximity to the US and it would provide China the capability to rearm and repair naval vessels during a U.S.-China armed conflict.³⁴ Townsend states, “A permanent Chinese naval presence in West Africa would almost certainly require the Department to consider shifts to U.S. naval force posture and pose increased risk to freedom of navigation and U.S. ability to act.”³⁵ In February 2022, senior U.S. diplomatic officials traveled to Equatorial Guinea to convince the country not to sign a basing agreement with China.³⁶

Beyond Equatorial Guinea, China may be pursuing a base in Kenya, Madagascar, the Seychelles, or Tanzania. Any of those locations could endanger access to key SLOCs along the East Coast of Africa, enhance China’s power projection in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific region more broadly, and intensify competition between China and India.³⁷

Although it appears Russia has paused its basing activity in sub-Saharan Africa for now, its planned facility in Sudan and other potential bases on the Horn of Africa, including in Eritrea and Somaliland, could threaten U.S. longer-term interests by providing Russia the opportunity to project power in key SLOCs transiting the Red Sea.

Policy recommendations

Additional Chinese basing in sub-Saharan Africa is a legitimate concern. But in many ways, Chinese and U.S. security interests in the region overlap and are complementary. And this offers significant opportunities for cooperation between the United States and China in an era of strategic competition.

Russia’s basing aspirations should be less of a concern. Moscow has a smaller set of security interests in sub-Saharan Africa and is currently distracted by the war in Ukraine. Because of this reality and the

unlikelihood of any cooperation between the United States and Russia in the region (given Moscow’s aggressive, destabilizing behavior), the following policy recommendations focus on the United States’ primary strategic competitor in sub-Saharan Africa, China.

- **Prioritize basing concerns.** Chinese basing in Asia, Europe, the Western Hemisphere, and the Middle East is a much more significant threat to the United States and its allies and partners than Chinese basing in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the U.S. government should prevent China from establishing bases in sub-Saharan Africa that could provide Chinese ships and submarines access to the Atlantic (for example, bases in Equatorial Guinea and its neighboring countries on the west coast of Africa) and that could significantly impact access to SLOCs in the Indian Ocean (such as bases in Kenya, Madagascar, the Seychelles, or Tanzania in East Africa). Other potential basing locations, such as Angola and Namibia or other countries in Southern or Central Africa, should be less of a concern.
- **Do not just focus on basing.** Although basing is important, policymakers should consider the broader range of military capability China can gain in sub-Saharan Africa through other types of military agreements, cooperation, and port access. Beijing does not necessarily need bases to project power and threaten SLOCs in the future.³⁸ For example, joint exercises with countries in the region, military aspects of strategic partnerships, the potential military use of commercial ports, and security cooperation in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and with the Africa Union should all be examined.³⁹
- **Pursue opportunities for cooperation.** The United States and China’s shared interests in sub-Saharan Africa include maintaining access to SLOCs around the continent, combatting terrorism, fighting piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, ensuring stability in and between countries throughout the region, and providing humanitarian assistance. These interests drive them

both to maintain a basing presence in the region. Where possible, the United States should pursue opportunities for cooperation with China to minimize the potential for competition and conflict between these two great powers in this region. Of all the regions in the world, sub-Saharan Africa may provide some of the most significant oppor-

tunities for security cooperation. Leveraging these opportunities could not only help address common security challenges on the continent but also help build trust between the United States and China and help manage the overall relationship.

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Acknowledgements

The author thanks Isaac Kardon for his valuable comments on earlier drafts, as well as participants in the “Great Power Competition and Overseas Basing” workshop hosted by the Brookings Institution for their insights. Gratitude also goes to Lori Merritt for editing and Rachel Slattery for layout.

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