Out of Africa: The Strategic Mistake of US Disengagement from Somalia

Description

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In December 1992, as an infantry platoon commander, I was among the first Marines to land in Mogadishu at the onset of Operation Restore Hope. It was a mission that made sense to me and my fellow Marines at the time: to keep the warring factions in check and enable the delivery of relief supplies to the long-suffering population. Ten months later, after the death of nineteen US servicemen and hundreds of Somalis in the Battle of Mogadishu, that mission seemed much less clear. It dissolved altogether with the withdrawal of US forces in March 1994 and the subsequent collapse of the UN mission less than a year later. Somalia, as prevailing wisdom had it, was an irredeemable disaster, a place destined to wallow in its own misery, where the benefits of intervention were unlikely to be worth the price.

In 2019 and 2020, I returned to Mogadishu, this time as a civilian helping to train officers of the Danab Advanced Infantry Brigade. It was clear to me then why General Stephen Townsend, the commander of US Africa Command (AFRICOM), was able to cite Somalia as a place where the command was seeing real progress. But last December, despite this progress, US troops were withdrawn.

In June of this year, I visited Mogadishu again. Conditions were worse in every respect and the war against al-Shabaab was not going well. Two of the seventeen Somali army officers I had helped train the previous year were dead, and several others seriously wounded. Mogadishu had the feeling of a city under siege.

There are compelling reasons for the United States to reengage in Somaliaâ??an important front in the fight against global extremist networks. Learning from recent mistakes, the United States now has the opportunity to implement a coherent policy to counter this threat and protect its limited but real interests in the region.

Why Somalia?

For the last few months Afghanistan has dominated the headlines, but in East Africa another threat gathers momentum. Since the withdrawal of US forces in December, the al-Qaedaâ??affiliated

organization al-Shabaab has resurged to a position of dominance in Somaliaâ??recapturing lost territory and launching repeated attacks in the capital, Mogadishu. The organization is regarded by AFRICOM as being the most imminent threat to US interests in the region and has recently evinced intent to strike at the homeland. This threat is unlikely to have diminished with the Talibanâ??s recent victory.

President Joe Biden should reverse his predecessorâ??s decision to withdraw troops from Somalia, or face increasing regional instability and the not unlikely prospect of al-Shabaab conducting a transnational mass-casualty attack from its Somali sanctuary. Although Biden, like President Donald Trump before him, has pledged to end the â??forever wars,â• the hesitancy to reengage in Somalia reflects a misunderstanding of the very real threat posed by Salafi-jihadist groups, such as al-Shabaab, once they consolidate their positions locally. It represents a misplaced conviction that what happens on the other side of the world cannot harm US interests, a belief that sadly has been disproven time and again. And it conveys the false perception that the only alternative to getting involved in â??forever warsâ?• is a policy of isolationismâ??rather than a mature strategy of engagement with clear objectives.

In February, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced a global posture review, but the outcome of this review has not been announced, and the president has yet to come to a decision on his plans for the region. One hopes that the review will result in a strategy for Somalia that combines security, political, economic, and diplomatic efforts in a campaign supported by the same light military footprint that was previously having some success. Such an approach offers infinitely better prospects in terms of cost and risk than abrupt disengagement.

What Success Looks Like: A Niche Capability

Until last December, the fight against al-Shabaab was showing progress. A US special operations task force (SOTF), numbering some seven hundred personnel, was achieving results out of proportion to its size. Partnering with a specialized Somali forceâ??the Danab Advanced Infantry Brigadeâ??the SOTFâ??s mission was to advise its counterparts in operations against al-Shabaab. Although barely the size of a US battalion, the Danab is by far the most capable element of the Somali National Army (SNA), and the only unit involved in offensive operations. It was a partnership that exemplified one of the US militaryâ??s â??niche capabilitiesâ?•â??a term used by Gen. Townsend in his posture statement to Congress.

The plan was to win back key terrain outside Mogadishu by focusing on the road networks connecting the capital to provincial cities. It was a version of the inkblot strategy, made famous by the French in Vietnam, and widely adoptedâ??at least in theoryâ??by other Western nations since. In this case, the

inkblots were the various towns along each route, won back and strong-pointed by the SNA with some support from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), whose troops man a handful of bases in the lower Shabelle valley. Lacking heavy weapons, medics, and organic fire support, the Danab soldiers were largely dependent on their US counterparts. The most substantial support came from a fleet of US Special Operations Command U-28 aircraft, which launched from local airfields to deliver devastatingly accurate fires in support of the Danab. And little by little, despite circumstances that weighed on the side of al-Shabaab, it was happening.

It was an example of how partnering should work: a relationship based on trust, forged by shared goals against an imminent threat. And, for US policymakers, a demonstration of how small units, comprising the right people with responsive air support, can have strategic effect at little cost.

A Policy of Withdrawal leads to Greater Risk

The US SOTF faced obstacles aplenty, perhaps the most stringent of which were self-imposed. Restricted by increasingly limited permissions to accompany their partners, a policy intended to reduce risk, SOTF personnel were, by mid-2019, largely confined to their forward operating bases. Ironically, it may have been this policy that emboldened al-Shabaab into direct attacks. The principle here is a fundamental rule of counterinsurgencyâ??indeed of basic infantry tacticsâ??which is that static units, sitting behind the wire without pushing out into the surrounding area, cede ground and initiative to an aggressive opponent. On the other hand, it could simply be coincidence that, as US forces hunkered down, AFRICOMâ??s director of intelligence reported â??a definitive shiftâ?• in al-Shabaabâ??s plans to attack US interests in the region.

This trend began in September 2019, with an attack on the US base at Baledogle in Somalia followed four months later by an assault on a US forward operating base in Manda Bay, Kenya, in which three Americans were killed.

In a statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee shortly after the Manda Bay attack, Gen. Townsend described al-Shabaab as â??the largest and most kinetically active al-Qaâ??ida network in the world,â?• and â??the most dangerous to U.S. interests today.â?• A few months later, President Trump made the decision to withdraw US troopsâ??apparently ignoring AFRICOMâ??s warning and the hard-learned lessons of the previous year. The move was also a rebuttal to Townsendâ??s advice to Congress, that â??a secure and stable Africa is an enduring American interest.â?•

The withdrawal, completed by mid-January 2021, couldnâ??t have happened at a worse time. Al-Shabaab retook much of the country, recapturing the road networks that are the countryâ??s lifelines, and launching frequent attacks against the capital.

Remote Counterterrorism Doesnâ??t Work

In late July, the United States resumed drone strikes against al-Shabaab after a seven-month hiatus â??but these â??decapitationâ?• strikes differ in terms of purpose and effect from the use of close air support for a partner-nation force. In any case, the recent flurry of strikes is not likely to be repeated anytime soon due to policy concerns about using deadly force for collective self-defense.

â??Weâ??ve developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to . . . act quickly and decisively if needed,â?• President Biden said this month. If only this were true. The idea of being able to destroy our enemies and restore stability from a distance, without risk, is naturally an appealing prospect for any administration, but remains, in reality, a tantalizing chimera. Remote terrorism does not work without an effective force on the ground, especially against insurgent groups with popular support. Somalia fails this test on both counts.

A strategy based on drone strikes reflects a misunderstanding about the nature of the threat. Al-Shabaab is a product of civil war in Somaliaâ??which in turn is caused by a range of social and environmental issues that, until resolved, will be a continual source of instability in the region. In rural areas, young Somalis flock to join al-Shabaab, induced by the remorseless effects of climate change, extreme poverty, and a perception that the Islamists offered terms under a social contract that were more reliable than those of the government. No counterterrorism strategy, however lethal, that fails to address these issues will affect al-Shabaabâ??s ability to draw on popular support.

The United States Doesnâ??t Need to Go It Alone

The international coalition whose mission it is to stabilize Somalia includes an African Union force, a United Nations mission, and training missions from the European Union, the UK, and Turkey. One of the ramifications of the US troop withdrawal and subsequent lack of policy direction has been to sap the effectiveness of these potential partners. Concerned about security, UN personnel are confined to their lodgings at Mogadishuâ??s airport. And though some AMISOM units had previously been willing to venture out on operations with the Danab and their US advisors, they now seldom do so. For our partners, even a light US footprint confers a heavy moral weight.

The British have plans to reinforce their small commitment in Somalia by deploying their newly formed Ranger Regiment. In a recent visit to Fort Bragg, UK Minister of Defense Ben Wallace seemed to be under the impression that in doing so, the British Rangers would be serving alongside US Special Forces. If this turns out not to be the case, itâ??s unclear how this will affect the decision to deploy the unit to Somalia.

All of this highlights two important points. First, whether the United States wants to acknowledge its position as a global leader, other countries still have that expectation. And second, Washington has the opportunity to reengage in Somalia as part of a coalition effort.

Accordingly, the United States should take the lead in overall coordinationâ??failure to do so would likely result in the same disjointed patchwork of national efforts that caused such confusion in Afghanistan. But each sub-effortâ??economic assistance, governmental support, development, security, and building partner capacityâ??should be assigned to a framework, or lead nation.

A Coherent Strategy

Success in Somalia doesnâ??t mean winning on the battlefield. It means undermining the causes that have led to civil war in the country for the last three decades. It means leading with a coherent strategy that combines political, economic, diplomatic, and security efforts with a light military footprint. It means driving toward a negotiated solution between the government and the federal states and the most powerful clans whose frequent clashes are in themselves a significant source of instability. And it means inducing the Somali government to negotiate with al-Shabaabâ??providing a political offramp from conflict.

Like the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Houthis in Yemen, al-Shabaab is embedded into the social and political fabric in Somalia, intertwined with the mosaic of clans that form the backbone of Somali society, and at least some of its leaders have shown themselves willing to be part of the political process. And however much effort the United States puts into defeating al-Shabaab militarily, it is unlikely to happenâ??the group has proven to be remarkably resilient. US airstrikes, which rose significantly under the Trump administration, had little to no effect on al-Shabaabâ??s ability to conduct offensive operations.

Al-Shabaab has no reason to negotiate unless reduced to a position of disadvantage. Organizations like al-Shabaabâ??or the Taliban for that matterâ??derive their popular support not from ideology but from their ability to close the gap between local needs and the local governmentâ??s ability or willingness to meet those needs, and herein lies an opportunity to undermine that support.

It may be that the EU or a nation with experience in conducting overseas relief operations, might be induced to lead this effort in Somalia. With Washington contributing financially, and the US and UK militaries advising SNA units in the field, someone else could lead the drive to enable local and federal administrations to provide basic services andâ??with the support of NGOsâ??focus on mitigating the conditions that provide support for al-Shabaab.

A coalitionâ??led by the United States in this regardâ??will need to tie economic support to political incentives for the federal government to do the right things. Failure to do so was one of the US governmentâ??s fundamental mistakes in Afghanistan.

AFRICOM has already demonstrated that it is possible to provide effective US military assistance with a light footprint. To sustain the long-term relationships essential for this mission, advisors should deploy in rotation from the same pool of specialized units. They will require responsive air support from the type of low-cost, expeditionary platform that US Special Operations Command plans to field. And the mission must entail advising, but not leading our partners. This is an all-important distinction: the former method, under the right conditions, tends to work; the latter is more likely to fail.

While a small US special operations task force supports our partners in the fight, the coalition military mission will focus on capacity building. Here the UK, with its newly formed Ranger Regiment and experience of leading a similar project in Sierra Leone, would be a good candidate to take the lead. There is an opportunity here to avoid the mistakes of the past, by targeting corruption among senior SNA officers and using biometrics and other assessment methods to verify and track recruitment and training. The same lead-nation approach should be taken with the various nations involved in developing Somaliaâ??s police and law enforcement services.

The Missing Piece

For Washington to implement such a plan abroad requires a functioning foreign policy establishment at home, with unity of effort among all departments and agencies. The outcome of Secretary Austinâ??s global policy review will be flawed unless it reflects input from stakeholders across government, and a proposal to establish a policy process that relies on close collaborationâ??from genesis to implementation. This was a fundamental flaw with US policy in Afghanistan: an absence of clear objectives, and a readiness to rely instead on a behemoth but futile military effort.

The precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan should remind us that Washington needs to take stock before labeling every foreign policy commitment as a â??forever warâ?• or â??nation building,â?• thus implying intolerable cost. The United States lost fewer than one hundred soldiers over the last five years in Afghanistanâ??roughly the same number of Americans who die from COVID every two hours. A better approach would be to regard these types of commitment as an insurance policy. If the premiums are affordable and seem like a fair trade when balanced against the worst-case scenarios of not being covered, then the policy makes sense. Afghanistan, arguably, was just such a case, and Somalia undoubtedly so. Perhaps the most consequential deficit in US foreign policy is strategic patience.

As US involvement in Afghanistan ends in tragedy and a welter of recrimination, now is the time to avoid making the same mistakes in the Horn of Africa. We have learned that the deceptive panaceas of troop surges and counterinsurgency by saturation do not work, but neither does remote counterterrorism or influence from a distance. The plan to reengage in the Horn of Africa doesnâ??t have to be an all-or-nothing decision unless the United States chooses to make it one.

This administration should instead implement a cross-government and multinational plan, supported by a light military footprint. This plan should define objectives, cost, and acceptable levels of risk. Far better to do so upfront, than experience again the irreversible damage that our nation has sustained this past month.

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Main Image: Somali National Army combat vehicle in the operation area in Burjada Caynta out of Beledweyne, Hiran region Somalia on 27th November. (AMISOM Public Information)

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