

State of foreign military presence in Africa

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Tomorrow (14 August) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will hold a session to assess the state of foreign military presence in Africa and its implications on the implementation of African Common Defense and Security Policy.

The AU Peace and Security Department is expected to brief the Council. The Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa (CISSA) is also best placed to provide further inputs.

In recent years increasing concerns have been expressed over the surge in the establishment of foreign military presence in various parts of the continent. In its communique of its 776th session held in May 2018, the PSC expressed deep concern 'over the potential negative effects of the presence of foreign military bases in some volatile parts of the continent to the future security and stability of Africa'.

The 19th meeting of the Panel of the Wise in November 2018 went further. It not only reiterated the concern about the 'increasing militarization of parts of the continent, in particular the Sahel and the Horn of Africa regions' but importantly 'the increase in uncoordinated external interventions which undermines the efficacy of African-led solutions to violent conflicts on the continent.' In this respect, the Panel underscored that considerable attention should be devoted to understanding the dynamics of external involvement on the continent's security landscape.

The trend in the militarization of parts of the continent is backed by data. Over the past three decades, the

continent has witnessed the heavy military presence of multiple regional and international security actors. Particularly in the Horn of Africa region, the number of actors with military presence from Europe, the United States, the Middle East, the Gulf, and Asia has increased exponentially. Moreover, the increased volatility and complex security challenges in the Sahel and West Africa regions have also led to the expanded role of foreign security actors.

France has had a military presence in Djibouti since the late 1800. After Djibouti achieved independence in 1977, France retained several military facilities. In recent decades, in the Horn region, foreign military presence was first established for purposes of countering violent extremism and terrorism following the terrorist attacks in the United States in 11 September 2001. Since 2001, the Government of Djibouti leased Camp Lemonnier to the USA and ever since the US has made continuous investment to transform it into a permanent facility. Similarly, the US has also established presence in other countries in the Horn for its operation against al-Shabab. Surveillance sites in South Sudan, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo have also been established aiming, among others, at capturing Joseph Kony.

China's first major security step in relation to military presence in Africa came in 2008 when it launched an anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden. China has since maintained a permanent naval anti-piracy presence in the Horn of Africa region and recently it launched its 32nd convoy fleet to the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters. In a landmark development, China established a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) base in Djibouti in August 2017. While presented as a logistics support base and aiming at supporting China's peacekeeping operations in Africa and its participation in the fight of

international piracy off the coast of Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden, the facility has been instrumental in the protection of China's growing overseas assets and represents China's plan to project power.

The UK similarly has deployed a number of military personnel at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, for a closer cooperation with the US forces in the region.

Increased presence from emerging actors particularly the Gulf States has witnessed sharp increase starting from 2015-2016. Saudi Arabia has significantly increased its presence in the region, particularly following the civil war in Yemen and has maintained a significant naval presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. After strained relationship with Djibouti, the UAE has directed its ties to Eritrea, Somalia and Somaliland.

The UAE has also targeted Somaliland by working on the military base in Berbera to strengthen its military capacity in the conflict in Yemen while also providing security for Somaliland's coastal waters and coastline. Turkey has also opened a military training centre in Mogadishu in 2017 to train recruits for the Somali National Army.

Russia has become the latest power to emerge on the African security scene. In 2018, it has established presence in the Central African Republic (CAR) to equip and advise the CAR military. In apparent indication of long-term presence, Bangui and Moscow signed a military cooperation pact.

The rivalry and competition among foreign powers has worsened already volatile security situation in the continent. In addition to the GCC crisis, the perceived rivalry between the US and China has further intensified the military presence. The US Africa Strategy has openly stated its intention of countering China and

Russia's influence in the continent.

These competing military engagements particularly among global powers will have a number of implications for the implementation of the African Common Defense and Security Policy.

One of the principal objectives of the policy is 'to ensure collective responses to both internal and external threats to Africa... in conformity with the principles enshrined in the Constitutive Act'. The current security landscape and involvement of foreign power complicate the establishment of any collective security response by African states.

While there is recognition that individual member states have the sovereign prerogative for allowing their territories to be used by foreign militaries, there remain concerns about the extent to which such military presence is channeled for enhancing the collective security of the continent. Some of the bilateral engagements of member states are seen as being not fully coherent with existing continental commitments and mechanisms established by the AU. Rather there is seems to be fragmentation and ad-hoc engagement with foreign powers, leading to fragmentation of the engagement of AU member states. Moreover, there is also a tendency of building closer ties with foreign power than with neighboring states in the security front. It is feared that this tends to fuel tension among neighboring countries.

IGAD during its 46th ministerial meeting cognizant of the changing geopolitics in the region, adopted 'a collective approach to challenges in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden by strengthening regional cooperation, and establish a regional platform for IGAD Member States with a view to promote dialogue' and agreed 'to harmonize and develop a common position to protect the security and economic

interests of the region'.

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. The PSC may take note of the increased level of unregulated presence of foreign militaries in Africa and destabilizing effects of antagonism and rivalry among powers on the peace and security of the continent. The PSC may urge member state for their immediate action in considering the continental and regional standards, particularly the Common African Defense and Security Policy, when engaging foreign security actors. The PSC may call on member states to work towards common security and intensify regional cooperation to effectively respond to any threat emanating from foreign power competition. As part of the effort to limit the pitfalls of foreign military presence, the PSC may task the AU Commission to present to it a report on the scope of foreign military presence, its adverse impacts and ways and means by which member states may coordinate with the AU on the role of foreign militaries in their territories.