Raad Peace Research Institute

RAAD POLICY BRIEF 301:2022

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The New US Strategies: What They Mean for The Horn of Africa

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Summary

The Biden Administration recently released three important strategies: the Strategy toward sub-Saharan Africa (STSA), the National Security Strategy (NSS), and the National Defense Strategy (NDS).This policy brief explores these strategies, what they mean, and their potential impact in the Horn of Africa. We argue that these strategy papers aside from the STSA, both the NSS and NDS largely ignore Africa. The shift in focus of these new US strategies is rather dramatic, and it is away from Africa, the US-Africa summit notwithstanding. Yet they indicate that we should expect the United States to engage more in mitigating climate change in the Horn of Africa, and that its strategies are to a certain degree aligned with Kenyan foreign policy goals in the region. Further, the strategy papers indicate a continued and more robust US engagement with Somalia and to a lesser extent with Uganda, and an ad-hoc cooperation with Ethiopia and the Sudan. Furthermore, these strategy papers suggest also that the US will have a problematic relationship with Eritrea in the next few years.

Background

The United States has been plagued by internal tension, rivalries with China and the Ukrainian war, but nevertheless remains the globe's most important actor, strongest both in military and in economic terms, as well as with a considerable cultural influence globally. Over 2022 the Biden administration has attempted to systematize its strategic approach to deal with the most important issues facing United States in the next few years. Therefore, it has produced three important strategy papers. In August 2022 the United States released its **Strategy toward sub-Saharan Africa (STSA),** articulating the administration's vision for a 21st Century U.S.-African Partnership. Secondly, on October 12, 2022, the Biden administration released its **National Security Strategy (NSS)**, representing the Executive's strategic vision to Congress, foreign constituencies and domestic audiences, and a tool to create internal consensus within the Executive. Last, the United States Department of Defense published the **National Defense Strategy** (NDS). The NDS translated and refined the previously mentioned National Security Strategy (NSS) into broad military guidance for military planning, military strategy, force posturing, force constructs, and force modernization.

These three strategies set the focus for American foreign policy in the future. Importantly, the major points of the three strategy papers are bipartisan, as is the view that China is the primary strategic rival of the United States, while Russia is a smaller, but more latent rival, as well as the downward prioritization of the war on terror. The vision points outlined by these papers will likely remain stable over time. There are, however, apparent differences between the political parties in the United States, over for example climate change efforts, and they should be noted. Yet, we should also be careful of not overestimating the internal problems and stability of the United States. As the United States remains the largest economy in the world, as well as the most powerful military power, the above are strategies of global importance. We also see an increasing tendency on behalf of the Executive branch in the United States to employ presidential decrees, strengthening the importance of the strategies of the executive.

Priorities of the United States

The NSS and NDS set general goals of American foreign policies, also targeting the Horn of Africa. The NSS clearly stipulates that global free-trade, and the openness of trade routes and freedom of navigation, is of paramount importance to United States, and that priority number one for the US is the security of the homeland as well as continued economic growth. The NSS also places great stress on multilateralism and promotion of democracy and human rights as a differentiating strength of the US and its allies (against China). However,both strategies confirm the drastic turn in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) — the first one under the Trump's administration. The National Security Strategy released in late 2017 by the White House, as well as the DoD's 2018 NDS, singled out China, together with Russia, as the main threat to United States. Gone are the days where Al Qaeda, the Islamic state and its local affiliates in Horn of Africa, the Harakat Al Shabab, and the Islamic State in central Africa were the highest priority of the United States. The United States focuses on both its **geopolitical threats** (rivalries with China and Russia, and to a much less extent Iran and North Korea), and **transnational threats** (**terrorism**, **crime,** and **climate change/ energy transition**), but the geopolitical threat receives the most focus. Priorities of the new strategies are clear: China receives **more attention** than Russia, the challenge from organizations like Al Qaeda and Islamic State receives an **equal amount of attention** as the challenge coming from climate change. The aim of United States is "Out-Competing China and Constraining Russia". The United States stresses the possibility of cooperation with China on threats and challenges facing them both. The USA also continues to support the "one China" policy, and is thus against Taiwanese independence, but at the same time it also clearly states that it will hold China responsible for "genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, human rights violations in Tibet, and the dismantling of Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms". The strategy also claims that China is hostile to transparency and openness, and as a challenger to the international rule-based order, while Russia is seen as deploying parastatals and private military companies, often fomenting instability for strategic and financial benefit, and using its economic benefits to influence African stances on Ukraine. In that in the new strategy papers China receives more attention than Russia, the challenge from organizations like Al Qaeda and Islamic State receives. There is also a clear geographic priority, with the Indo Pacific then Europe as the strongest priorities, and Africa as a whole is left lower on the priority list.

It is worth emphasizing that

the three recent strategy papers *there exists* gap between the NSS/Defense documents and the STSA and the objectives laid out for the US Africa summit. Aside from the section dedicated to regional priorities (where the US strategy towards SSA document is essentially summarized), the NSS *and NDS* hardly mentions Africa. The entire Africa continent gets a two-sentence treatment *as compared to the Artic region* gets 3 (p. 16). In the Missile Defense review section, it discusses strategic alliances in other regions of the world but not Africa (p. 10-11 Missile Defense Review); it notes the threat of NSA "in the Middle East and Africa" (p3 Missile Defense review) in a single sentence. *This is in contrast to* the 2002 NSS after 9/11, when the document securitized weak states and global poverty by arguing that "The events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their border". The 2002 apparently put great emphasis in the wider war on terror and strengthening fragile states in Africa. The recent US strategies shift *in* focus is dramatic, and it is away from Africa, the US-Africa summit notwithstanding.

Beyond strategic competition with China: an increased emphasis on bilateralism and multilateralism

The 2022 strategies emphasize partnerships with other countries more than the Trump administration did. In order to counter Chinese influence, but also threats from Russia, transnational crime, and climate change, the role of partnerships, also in Africa, is stressed in these strategy papers. However, partners should support what the US defines as a 'rule based' international order. While the STSA strategy paper points to this conclusion. The other two strategies, namely the NDS and NSS don't. Thus based on STSA, document, it seems that Africa is seen as a battleground to fight weaponized corruption, information manipulation operations, political interference, and attacks on the rule of law, including in elections, as well as to combat criminal organizations (TCOs) involved in activities such as the trafficking of drugs and other illicit goods, money laundering, theft, human smuggling and trafficking, cybercrime, fraud, corruption, and illegal fishing and mining. Transnational crime is thus still given priority amongst the challenges facing the United States, but these points also have to be seen in relation to Russian hybrid strategies, as for example the use of Russian troll factories in support of former president Omar Al Bashir in Sudan.[1] The United States also explicitly stresses that it will invest in Africa's largest states, such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. The absence of Ethiopia in this listing and inclusion of Kenya are notable, indicating a growing importance of Kenya relative to other states in the region or tensions with Ethiopia over human rights abuses in Tigray region so reflecting preference for partners sharing commitments to Human Rights and democracy.

Although the documents talk of American values, they also indicate pragmatism, and a will to cooperate with partners without democratic governance systems. The STSA highlights those open societies and democracy, creating security dividends, as well as advancing pandemic recovery and economic opportunity, conservation and climate adaptation, and energy transition are the most important goals of the United States in Africa. Somalia is mentioned as a terrorist sanctuary, together with Yemen and Syria, and that groups in these countries still have the intention to carry out or inspire others to attack the United States, although these groups' capabilities have been constrained by alliances between the respective countries and United States and other likeminded partners, but this threat gets far less attention in the NSS and Defense strategy than does China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

The main strategy to facilitate African military resilience is both direct support and also to engage the U.S. defense private sector via Prosper Africa to support sustainable technology and energy solutions for African militaries. We see a change from a "U.S.-led, partner-enabled" strategy to one that is "partner-led, U.S.-enabled", with a larger role for local partners, in line with the Biden administration's increased emphasis on bilateralism and multilateralism compared with the Trump administration. It should be mentioned here the recent call by President Biden to have the AU join the G-20. In order to achieve partner-led cooperation, the new US strategies focus on strengthening partners' law enforcement and judicial systems, improving threat information sharing, enhancing border security, and countering terrorist financing - in many ways traditional

state-focused capacity and institution building strategies. Some of the points might however also include civil society organizations, for terrorist prevention and extremist disengagement programming, and preventing online and offline terrorist recruitment and mobilization to violence. With regards to terrorism, we see a dedication to address the root causes of radicalization, including the lack of effective governance, stabilization, economic conflicts, and local conflicts. Development, capacity building and intelligence sharing thus remain important for the US when countering the threat of terrorism, but is, all in all, down prioritized in favor of a focus on China

However, there is a tension in the three strategies, as they focus on partnerships and indicate some pragmatism with regards to the potential partners. Yet, support for partners is mentioned in relation to sharing American values and an interest in a 'rule based global system', also with regards to Russia and China. In this sense it seems that the US is ready for partnerships but expects something in return.

The STSA also studies the convergence of armed conflict and terrorism; climate change; food insecurity; and COVID-19 pandemic-induced health and economic problems, and highlights climate change and energy transition as major challenges. The strategy highlights investigative journalism, combating digital authoritarianism, and enshrining laws, reforms, and practices that promote shared democratic norms, and will seek to improve fiscal transparency, expose corruption, and support reforms, and support judiciaries. As per these strategies it also claims that they will work to integrate African states in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific forums, as well as deepen coastal state cooperation in the Atlantic.

Biden's strategy papers elevate cooperation in the quest to isolate both China and Russia, and clearly stipulate a focus on the green transition, and retained foci on containing (not eradicating) terrorism and global crime, as well as maritime governance. Those fields are of drastically lower priority than in the pre-2018 period, however, save perhaps **climate change**. The strategies also highlight two countries in the Horn of Africa: Kenya as vital hub for regional diplomacy, aid, and business" and Somalia as an area where threats against the USA might emerge and where there is a need for a more robust and continually enhanced partnership in the future. specially, in the light of the fact that Somalia, remans the state with the longest coast in Africa, and once stable it is likely to receive substantial engagement and partnership including policy and business cooperation with the US.

Current trends in the Horn of Africa: What the new US strategies mean for the region

We have a Horn of Africa that currently is influenced by the Ukrainian war creating higher grain prices. Its traditionally largest military power, Ethiopia, which had the best growth rates until 2020has been seriously weakened by a large-scale civil war, but nevertheless is gradually managing to rebuild its army despite the catastrophic continuation of the conflict in the country. We also have relatively stable Kenya, which again managed to avoid the much-feared election violence in 2022 and is showing a stronger interest in global governance through its military deployment to Congo and role in the African Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council. We have Eritrea, with a relatively unclear role within the Ethiopian civil war, with its soldiers still in Ethiopia, and a Somalia that is recovering and transitioning into a more peaceful, maturing democracy as it has managed for the last three election cycles a peaceful transfer of power. Further, we see because of these traits, its strong and large diaspora in the West and across the globe, and the ongoing offensive and uprising against Al Shabaab, Somalia is positioned to become an economic hub in the East and Horn and to reassert itself in the coming few years. We see a re-assertive Sudan, a relatively stable Uganda, and South Sudan facing local discord. The strategies imply that Kenya for now has an advantage in its relations with United States, compared to the other countries in the Horn of Africa, in part since it has committed itself to military deployments in Somalia and Congo, as well as peace negotiation in Ethiopia, and made a vocal protest in the United Nations against the Russian invasion in Ukraine. It has a democratic system that allows meaningful competition during elections, has the most stable and independent court system in the Horn. Kenyan foreign debt is limited, and Kenya's cooperation with Russia, both in the military sphere and economic sphere has been limited; further, less Kenyan debt is held by China, compared to other countries. At the same time, Kenya has the best growth rate in the Horn, and the largest GNP per capita and in total.[2] In this sense, the new

[2] Regional Economic Outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa, October 2022 (imf.org); Ethiopia was scheduled to overtake Kenya,

strategies seem to enable a closer co-operation between Kenya and the US, although Kenya will possibly be a reluctant partner, as it traditionally has been rather passive in foreign relations, a strategy that served Kenya well in the past, and kept it out of a costly war.

Somalia is recovering and has many positive developments at play. The US is deploying drones and special forces to Somalia in its current offensive. Somalia will be a major point of interest for the United States, both due to Al Shabaab but also due to Somalia's maritime economic zone, now properly declared, which means that Somalia is crucial also to keep international shipping lines open, and to protect the maritime environment from large scale illegal fishing and illegal pollution, also mentioned as points of interest for the United States. However, it should be understood that some of the most important actors in the illegal fishing industry are situated in the north, and in some cases hails from United States allies, such as Taiwan and Spain. Somalia has the longest coast in Africa and huge potential to develop its blue economy and has already begun to revive the maritime and naval capacity of its coast guard. These issues, put together with the oil deposits and other investment ventures, and its strategic location in the context of an ever-increasing geopolitical competition between the US and the West on one hand and China and Russia on the other, may facilitate more bilateral Somalia-US partnership in the near future.

On the other end of the scale is Eritrea, one of the few countries that voted in support of the Russian efforts in Ukraine in the UN General Assembly, and which is possibly the least democratic country in the Horn of Africa. Eritrea has, together with Sudan, been a popular target of Russian overtures to establish naval bases. The strategies increase the impression, corroborated with American actions with regards to Russian attempts to establish naval bases in Sudan and Djibouti, that the United States will leverage its partnerships based on the will of the partners to support its strategic competition with China and Russia. Ethiopia is perhaps a more confusing case. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has played an advanced diplomatic game with Russia, China, and the United States, signing a military cooperation agreement with Russia in the summer of 2021, drawing actively on Emirati and Turkish support. At the same time the research community in the United States has been divided on its advice to the US State Department, contributing to a relatively confused policy from the United States, although the US distanced itself from the atrocities committed by government forces in Tigray. Ethiopia also has the second largest foreign debt to China in Africa.[3] There have been widespread allegations of human rights violations and crimes against humanity in Tigray by Ethiopian forces during the Ethiopian civil war, transgressions that will not be externally investigated according to the resent peace agreement.[4] Prime Minster Abiy Ahmed also seemingly follows the Russian election model where supposedly free elections always result in the governing party winning. Yet Abiy has shown considerable independence from both China and Russia, has attempted to work to lower the foreign debt to China, and has grown closer to Turkey and the Emirates militarily rather than depending on Russian military aid.

He will remain a rather ambiguous partner for the United States: not a preferred partner, but a partner that might have some value in dealing with ad-hoc challenges. Uganda and Djibouti are not fully democratic. However, they have clear strategic value to United States. The base facility in Djibouti is highly valuable for United States, while Uganda remains important for the struggle against the Islamic State in Congo and the Harakat Al Shabaab in Somalia.

The nature of the Chinese footprint on the ground in the Horn, namely being financial in nature, and seldom using Chinese power to pressure the Horn countries in any way relevant to the global balance of power, will limit US direct action. Yet, Chinese investment in critical infrastructure close to US bases, will probably trigger US diplomatic action. Establishment of bases, both Russian and Chinese, would probably trigger Americans to deploy both financial and other pressure to block these attempts.

The US will still focus on curtailing Al Shabaab and the Islamic State

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but the civil war hindered this see also https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/MES/Insights/MES-Insights-Vol-12-Iss-3-June-2021-FINAL.pdf?ver=jWni4v2ffE7EiPpPS_3XXQ%3D%3D&timestamp=1625157747786 and https://unum.nsin.us/kcic/customObject/viewCustomObject/effdcd4f6979

[3] https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/despite-high-stakes-ethiopia-china-sits-sidelines-peace-efforts

[4] https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/ethiopia/

in central Africa, supplying both Somalia and Uganda as well as Congo with strategic intelligence.

The strategies also warn against the impact of climate change and seek cooperation in order to mitigate its consequences already felt in the Horn especially in Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti, and some parts of Kenya. The general mitigation of these climate effects means that the United States will have to engage with most of the countries in the region. At the same time, these countries are asking for the creation of a climate fund, and the Biden administration pledge to support the Adaptation Fund for up to $100 million. Further, announcing over $150 million in new support to accelerate the President's Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE) efforts across Africa, which is an indication that strategies have already manifested themselves in action.

Conclusion

The new set of strategies confirms many of the changes that the strategies of the Trump administration made in the American focus. The main focus for American foreign policy is no longer on Al Qaeda and the Islamic state, but rather a strategic rivalry with China and an effort to contain Russia. Yet, there are several notable changes, with the role of partnerships stressed more, and the United States acknowledging the importance of local partnerships. It is highlighted that the US is willing to cooperate with all states, even China, where there are common interests. However, perhaps contradictorily, the strategy papers also stress the importance of human rights and democracy. We also see an increased focus on mitigating climate change in the strategy paper, and indications that this will be a larger part of US foreign policy in the Horn of Africa, and across the globe for the next two years of the Biden administration, a fact that the Horn of Africa countries can take advantage of, as climate change challenges livelihoods in Somalia, Ethiopia, parts of Kenya, and the Sudan that are severely hit. We also see a reduced, but ongoing focus on limiting the capacity of Al Shabab and the Islamic State in Central Africa to attack the United States. The new three US strategies show a potential for enhanced Kenyan and American cooperation, as the two countries seem to have many common interests, and to a lesser extent with an emerging Somalia. We will also see a continued engagement with Djibouti and Uganda, due to the role these countries have in combating Al Shabaab and the Islamic State, and American strategic positioning in Djibouti. The strategies also stipulate a continuous, highly conflictual relationship with Eritrea, over both human rights and the latter's support for Russia. For the Sudan and Ethiopia, the U.S. relationship will be of a more ad-hoc and pragmatic nature.

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