

ABSTRACT ETUDE 36

U.S. strategy in Africa

Under the supervision of:

Maya Kandel, head of the US programme at IRSEM and research associate at Université Paris III - Sorbonne Nouvelle (CREW/CRAN)

This study presents an analysis of American strategy in Africa. Based on contributions from academics, experts and military practitioners, it studies the **actors, processes and modalities of American military presence in Africa**. It focusses in particular on the characteristics and costs of the **indirect approach** the US tends to adopt. The African continent is the **experimental site** for a determining aspect of the new strategic direction taken by President Barack Obama, by way of the **“light footprint”** concept. More recently, this concept was even declared a **model for the fight against terrorism** and a source of inspiration for other regions, namely the Middle East. Lastly, closer and unprecedented **Franco-American cooperation** in certain regions of Africa also warrants the study of American strategy in Africa, its recent developments, its implementation and the assessment that we can draw from them.

The **dogma of American strategy** in Africa has remained unchanged since the beginning of the century, and even the 1990s:

- Africa is not a strategic priority;
- American presence must bear a minimal footprint (this explains the role of the special forces);
- No direct engagement for American soldiers, or at least none that is publicly displayed;
- Behind-the-scenes leadership and intervention through partners;
- Even in the aforementioned situation, the United States must not appear as a cobelligerent;
- In the long term, the key phrase is “African solutions to African problems”.

America’s priorities are, quite logically, the protection of American personnel and interests on the ground, and in decreasing order in regional terms, Eastern Africa followed by the North Africa and the Sahel, and lastly the remainder of the continent and coastal areas.

The main conclusions of the study highlight the **risks stemming from the light footprint concept**, particularly in terms of addressing symptoms rather than causes by prioritising short-term effectiveness over long-term objectives, even though threat analysis by the American military has made considerable progress, drawing from the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the fundamental questions that this study addresses is the **dilemma** – indeed, it is not a uniquely American one – between the **short-term** advantages of counterterrorism operations and the **long-term** objectives, i.e. resolving the causes of terrorism.

Several articles take a look at **African reactions to American policy**: using case studies (Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Djibouti in particular), these analyses reveal the “hidden costs” of combat by proxy, in particular the risk of exploitation by local powers with different agendas, and the possibility of negative, even counter-productive, consequences in the long term. They also illustrate, in some cases, the evolving attitude of certain African leaders in recent years, from their reluctance to cooperate with the United States to their enthusiasm and even a positive desire for closer cooperation. Lastly, the study also explores another aspect of the “light footprint” concept, through **partnerships**, and attempts to open new options for cooperation.