

The University of Chicago

# **Strategic Significance of Africa in the Context of the American Grand Strategy**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I study the strategic significance of Africa by trying to understand what American interests in Africa are worth dedicating financial and military resources to protect against various threats. I present three criteria that make each region strategically significant, and I analyze each criteria apart. Then, I study the impact of having other great powers in the continent that are active like China and Russia, and whether that should be of a particular concern to the United States. I argue that Egypt is strategically significant in Africa to counter nuclear proliferation, eastern and western Africa are strategically significant for counterterrorism purposes, and all maritime African countries are strategically significant to ensure free U.S. access to trade and open water. I also argue that the Chinese and Russian presence in Africa make the continent strategically significant because of the threats they pose to American interests by having naval bases near strategic locations and by establishing Chinese-African regional institutions without any American influence.

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## **Introduction**

In this paper, I intend to study the strategic significance of the African continent in the context of the American grand strategy. By strategic significance, I mean the interests that Americans are worth dedicating financial and military resources to protect. The political and academic debate about what parts or regions of the world need to be included in the American grand strategy between policy makers and scholars started after the second world war and has lasted till today, especially since great power competition is back on the table. At the end of the Cold War, scholars Steven David and Stephen Walt discussed broadly the importance of what they called “the Third World” more generally than just focusing on one particular region. Steven M. Walt argued at the end of the Cold War that the United States should focus its attention on the “key centers of industrial power<sup>1</sup>”, while Steven David argues at the end of the Cold War and even after it ended that instability and threats coming from the “Third World” matter a lot to the United States<sup>2</sup>.

To answer that question, I rely on two frameworks. The first framework presents and analyzes a set of criteria that make any region strategically significant for a global power like the United States, and identifies if Africa meets any or all of the criteria to be a strategically

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538764>.

<sup>2</sup> 1. Steven R. David, “Why the Third World Matters,” *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538765>; 1. Steven R. David, “Why the Third World Still Matters,” *International Security* 17, no. 3 (1992): 127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539132>.

significant region. While the first framework looks at Africa only from a pure American perspective without taking into account the global geopolitical tension between the great powers like the United States, China and Russia, the second framework studies the implications of the active Chinese and to some extent the Russian presence in Africa and if that should be a concern for the United States or not.

In what follows, I will present the academic and policy debate related to the strategic significance of different regions in the world. I will then provide my argument, give a historical background about how the idea of grand strategy has evolved since the second world war, and present my research methodology. I will proceed by providing the criteria that would make a region strategically significant, and I will provide facts and my own analysis about whether that criteria is met in Africa or not. Last not least, I will analyze whether China and Russia's presence in Africa is important to the United States or not, and lastly I will give my conclusion.

### **Literature Review**

The debate of the importance of the “Third World” or the African continent in particular to the United States is as old as the Cold War era. For the sake of this paper, I will focus on the debate concerning this topic that started at the end of the Cold War and has lasted till today. The way that scholars see the importance of Africa in particular or the “Third World” in general varies a lot relative to how they define and perceive “security” and “threats”.

In “Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn't: American Grand Strategy After the Cold War”, Stephen Van Evera's article asks two main questions whether the United States should remain engaged militarily in Europe, and if so, to what extent and what are the reasons behind that engagement. Second, whether the United States should continue its campaign against Soviet-backed movements in the “Third World”. Stephen Van Evera argues that the United States

has vested interests in Europe that it must protect whereas it has nothing similar in the “Third World”. He backs his argument up in four parts. In the second and third parts, Van Evera presents the case of American interests in Europe during the Cold War, and after the Cold War era ended. In the fourth part, he provides ways to preserve American interests in Europe, and lastly he discusses why he is against American interventionist policies in the “Third World”<sup>3</sup>.

In “Why the Third World Matters” by Steven R. David, he argues at the end of the Cold War right before it ended that the United States has a vested interest to be actively engaged in the “Third World” to counter the different kinds of threats that could hit America and its allies that range from nuclear proliferation to direct confrontation between American and Soviet forces. David starts his paper by examining what the “hyper-realists” argue for in terms of American engagement in the “Third World”. “Hyper-realists” might disagree about some details here and there, but they agree on a fundamental aspect which is that the “Third World” does not pose any significant threat to U.S. interests, and if it does it is due to self-inflicted damage by the policies of the United States itself. David breaks down his argument into three parts. In the first part, he breaks down the interests of the United States into three categories: “American strategic-military interests”, “American economic interests”, and “American political-ideological interests” where he discusses the view of “hyper-realists” concerning each one of the three categories just mentioned. In the second part, David weakens the assumptions that underlie the arguments/claims made by “hyper-realists”, and explains why they are wrong. He then explains why the United States must be engaged in shaping events in the “Third World” according to the three categories of interests mentioned above. In the third part, David provides his own view of

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<sup>3</sup> 1. Stephen Van Evera, “Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn’t: American Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 1990): 1–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399008437408>.

what he thinks is a realistic policy that the United States should adopt in dealing with “Third World” matters<sup>4</sup>.

In “Why the Third World Still Matters”, Steven R. David argues that even after the Cold War ended, the “Third World” remains of great importance to the United States because that is where threats could undermine American interests. David provides first an overview of the arguments made by proponents of American disengagement from the “Third World”, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He then proceeds to back up his argument in five parts. In the first part, David explains that the United States has become freer to act in the “Third World” after the Cold War ended without having to worry about any antagonization of the Soviet Union. In the second part, David discusses factors that have led to peace in West Europe, but could still be a cause of instability in the “Third World” like nationalism, militarization, etc. In the third part, he examines the tools that “Third World” countries possess to endanger America economically and militarily through its reliance on foreign oil from “Third World” countries and due to the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction and other conventional weapons by hostile “Third World” countries, and in the fourth part he shows different ways the increased capabilities of “Third World” countries could be used against the United States. In the fifth part, David proceeds by offering his own approach about how American policy should look like<sup>5</sup>.

In “Why Africa Matters to US National Security” published by the Atlantic Council and written by Grant T. Harris in 2017, the author takes a comprehensive approach in identifying threats against the United States. It is very similar to the approach taken by Steven R. David in both papers above, but it is more updated to include the kind of threats that exist in the 21st

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<sup>4</sup> 1. Steven R. David, “Why the Third World Matters,” *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538765>.

<sup>5</sup> 1. Steven R. David, “Why the Third World Still Matters,” *International Security* 17, no. 3 (1992): 127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539132>.

century. Harris sees three reasons why Africa is important for the United States. First, Harris sees “transnational threats” as a major concern for the United States, and his definition of transnational threats encompass terrorism and nuclear proliferation to include trafficking, climate change, cybersecurity, and even threats to America’s allies in Europe. Second, he thinks Africa is of significant importance due to economic reasons that include having access to African markets and natural resources. Lastly, Africa is important because it is a place to show American leadership. Harris makes his claims and analysis based on open-source information whether that is government documents, forecasts from international institutions, and newspapers<sup>6</sup>.

In “The Case for Finite Containment Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy”, Stephen M. Walt provides a new framework to analyze the American grand strategy, and she shows the superiority of “finite containment” relative to alternative grand strategies that could be pursued. Walt starts his paper by introducing and defining four alternative strategies to “finite containment”. The first one is “world order idealists” which see the threat to American interests from transnational problems. The second one is “neo-isolationism” which favors less defense spending and less commitment to alliances. It also sees very few threats to American interests abroad that are not that significant. The third one is “disengagement” which favors more burden-sharing from U.S. allies and a reduced role in Europe, but not a total withdrawal. The fourth one is “rollback” which is driven by ideological concerns rather than concrete economic and security interests. It aims to eradicate communism globally. In the rest of the paper, Walt raises four key questions to determine the “key areas of vital interest”, to assess whether conquering or defending is easier, to understand the “Soviet intentions” based on 40 years of evidence, and finally to determine the “causes of alignment”. After using these four questions to compare and contrast between “finite

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<sup>6</sup> 1. Grant T. Harris, rep., *WHY AFRICA MATTERS TO US NATIONAL SECURITY* (Washington , D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2017).

containment” and the four alternative strategies, Walt concludes that “finite containment” has the advantage to be adopted over all the other four alternative strategies<sup>7</sup>.

In “Why Africa Matters to the US” published by Africa Growth Initiative at Brookings, the authors present five reasons that are not purely national-security related that make Africa important to the United States. Instead, these five reasons take a more transnational approach about problems that face Africa, but they can still negatively impact American interests. Food insecurity and the fragility and vulnerability of the health care system in Africa make Africa a major concern for the United States. These two problems have been exacerbated by recent global developments. Their effects are global and can negatively impact the interests of any country and not only those of the United States. Food insecurity leads to inflation in food prices which in turn lead to conflicts over scarce resources. A vulnerable health care system can have devastating effects on the growth and development of the global economy since a huge pandemic like Covid-19 can easily disrupt Africa and other continents alike. In addition, the needs for an improved infrastructure, weak trade and investment ties with America, and the lack of exchanging emerging technologies with Africa are major steps that the U.S. need to address. This will be a win-win strategy for both Africa and the United States. In this report, the authors base and prove their claims based on forecasts and news reports about the promising outlook in Africa in different sectors and industries<sup>8</sup>.

Even after the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, there is an old and new debate going on about where the United States should center its resources and attention with the rise of China. Elbrige Colby, previous Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and

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<sup>7</sup> 1. Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538764>.

<sup>8</sup> 1. Belinda Archibong et al., rep., *WHY AFRICA MATTERS TO THE US* (Washington , DC: Brookings, 2022).

Force Development under the Trump Administration, argues for the prioritization of China and the Indo-Pacific region as the most important region in the world for the United States in order to prevent China from dominating Asia<sup>9</sup>.

My paper focuses on one particular region of the developing world, which is the African continent, instead of looking comprehensively at what David and Walt call the “Third World”. In addition, in his paper, Stephen M. Walt focuses specifically on the distribution of global power as a metric of deciding what region is important or not. Using such a framework is indirectly tied to how Walt defines “security” and how he defines threats. I disagree with this approach, and I provide a set of criteria that determine what region is strategically significant or not. While I acknowledge the importance of the distribution of global power, and that is a pretty important metric that should be in favor of the United States and its allies, it is important to remember that some threats that we see today are invisible and transnational that have the potential to cause significant damage if not addressed properly.

### **Africa & Subregions**

For the sake of this paper, I rely on the classification of the African Union to characterize what sub-region of the continent each of the fifty five African countries belongs to. The 5 subregions that make up the African continent are: Northern Africa, Central Africa, Eastern Africa, Western Africa, and Southern Africa. The distribution is as follows below:

*Northern Africa:* Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sahrawi Republic, and Tunisia<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> 1. Elbridge A. Colby, “How We Can Help Ukraine While Genuinely Prioritizing Asia,” Time, July 14, 2023, <https://time.com/6294670/us-strategy-ukraine-prioritizing-asia/>.

<sup>10</sup> 1. “Member States,” Member States | African Union, accessed February 10, 2024, [https://au.int/en/member\\_states/countryprofiles2](https://au.int/en/member_states/countryprofiles2).

*Central Africa:* Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo Republic, DR Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sao Tome and Principe<sup>11</sup>.

*Eastern Africa:* Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda<sup>12</sup>.

*Western Africa:* Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo<sup>13</sup>.

*Southern Africa:* Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe<sup>14</sup>.

## **Argument**

I argue that some parts of Africa are strategically significant and that are worth dedicating financial and military resources to protect American interests there. In particular, I argue that Egypt is strategically significant when it comes to nuclear proliferation because it is the most likely country to be impacted by a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. From a counterterrorism perspective, the eastern and western parts of Africa are strategically significant because that is where the wealthiest and most sophisticated terrorist groups exist. From a freedom of navigation perspective, all African maritime countries are strategically significant because they sit near strategic straits, sea lines of communication and critical oceans. In addition, the presence of other great powers in Africa like China and Russia could shape the calculation of the United States and make Africa strategically significant because of the threats posed by China and Russia to have access to critical naval bases and to create regional institutions without American influence.

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<sup>11</sup> 1. "Member States," Member States | African Union, accessed February 10, 2024, [https://au.int/en/member\\_states/countryprofiles2](https://au.int/en/member_states/countryprofiles2).

<sup>12</sup> 1. "Member States," Member States | African Union, accessed February 10, 2024, [https://au.int/en/member\\_states/countryprofiles2](https://au.int/en/member_states/countryprofiles2).

<sup>13</sup> 1. "Member States," Member States | African Union, accessed February 10, 2024, [https://au.int/en/member\\_states/countryprofiles2](https://au.int/en/member_states/countryprofiles2).

<sup>14</sup> 1. "Member States," Member States | African Union, accessed February 10, 2024, [https://au.int/en/member\\_states/countryprofiles2](https://au.int/en/member_states/countryprofiles2).

I back my argument by relying on government documents published by the United States Africa Command and the U.S. Congress, Chinese government institutions, academic papers published by scholars, newspapers like CNN, and congressional hearings.

### **Historical Background**

“Grand strategy is the highest level of national statecraft that establishes how states, or other political units, prioritize and mobilize which military, diplomatic, political, economic, and other sources of power to ensure what they perceive as their interests<sup>15</sup>”. A successful grand strategy is one that protects a country’s interests as they are perceived by its political leaders to deliver security and economic prosperity, and to protect the way of life of its people. During the Second World War, the United States fought alongside its allies Canada, the UK, and France to prevent Germany under Hitler from dominating Europe and Japan from dominating North East Asia. Both regions, in addition to the Western Hemisphere, were of enormous importance in the American grand strategy and the global power distribution. During the Cold War, that goal remained the same, but the enemy changed, and it was the Soviet Union.

The main objective of the American grand strategy was to prevent territorial expansion by the Soviet Union to prevent it from dominating Western Europe, northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf by adopting various means. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as the only superpower with a vast power concentrated in one country. Unipolarity lasted roughly for 27 years, from 1990 to 2017, due to a large extent to the policy of engagement adopted by the United States in particular and the West in general to make China rich and to turn it into a democracy. China has kept liberal ideas at the gate. At the same time, it has benefited

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<sup>15</sup> 1. Paul Van Hooft, “Grand Strategy,” Oxford Bibliographies, June 3, 2019, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0218.xml>.

tremendously from American investments and technology to the point where it is considered today a peer competitor to the United States.

In a recent senate hearing in the US Congress, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said that the post-Cold War era has ended<sup>16</sup>. In an interview with POLITICO, the US ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, says, “I think this comparison that people have made between the old Cold War and our present great power rivalry [with China] can be helpful at times to think about the comparisons, but they’re not exact”<sup>17</sup>. He goes on to say “the power of the People’s Republic of China is infinitely stronger than the Soviet Union ever was. It’s based on the extraordinary strength of the Chinese economy — its science and technology research base, its innovative capacity, and its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific to be the dominant power in the future. I do think the challenge from China is more complex and more deeply rooted and a greater test for us going forward”<sup>18</sup>. With that being said, should Africa be considered a strategic area for the United States and be included in its grand strategy?

### **Criteria that make a region strategically significant**

- “To deal effectively with threats to the security of the United States and its citizens short of armed conflict, including the threat of international terrorism”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 1. *Secretary Of State Antony Blinken: “The Post-Cold War Era Is Over,” YouTube* (YouTube, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RypYL0KFKQY>.

<sup>17</sup> 1. Phelim Kine, “China ‘Is Infinitely Stronger than the Soviet Union Ever Was,’” POLITICO, April 28, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/global-insider/2023/04/28/china-is-infinitely-stronger-than-the-soviet-union-ever-was-00094266>.

<sup>18</sup> 1. Phelim Kine, “China ‘Is Infinitely Stronger than the Soviet Union Ever Was,’” POLITICO, April 28, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/global-insider/2023/04/28/china-is-infinitely-stronger-than-the-soviet-union-ever-was-00094266>.

<sup>19</sup> 1. National Security Strategy of the United States, January 1987, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1987.pdf?ver=FUZbPLY3ZDfa4UTDpMkNzw%3d%3d>.

- “To prevent the spread of nuclear weapons”<sup>20</sup>
- “To assure unimpeded U.S. access to the oceans and trade”<sup>21</sup>

### **Research Methodology**

To answer the research question about whether the African continent is strategically significant or not, I pick the three (or four) cases mentioned above under the section “criteria that make a region strategically significant” for two reasons. First, these cases represent an essential part of the ongoing debate between scholars and between policymakers about what the policy of the United States toward Africa should look like. Second, I pick these cases because the scope of the damage that these cases can have on American security and economic interests has been historically very severe.

In analyzing the strategic significance of each case, I look at the threats facing American interests in each case and ask the following two questions: first, can the impact of the threat(s) facing American interests in Africa be mitigated or fully denied? If feasible alternative options exist at a reasonable cost, then the answer is yes, and therefore that case or criteria is not of a strategic importance. But, if the impact can't be mitigated or fully denied due to the lack of alternative options and the scope of the damage on U.S. security and economic interests is huge, then it is worth it to dedicate financial and military resources to protect that interest(s) as long as the benefits outweigh the costs. Second, even if some alternative options exist, it is important to consider how America's foe, China, will benefit from it because it is crucial for the United States to remain more powerful in relative terms compared to China.

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<sup>20</sup> 1. National Security Strategy of the United States, January 1987, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1987.pdf?ver=FUZbPLY3ZDfa4UTDpMkNzw%3d%3d>.

<sup>21</sup> 1. National Security Strategy of the United States, January 1987, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1987.pdf?ver=FUZbPLY3ZDfa4UTDpMkNzw%3d%3d>.

In the first case I discuss in this paper which is about the prevention of nuclear proliferation, I don't find any middle ground for countries to partially acquire nuclear weapons. From my perspective, a country either has or doesn't have nuclear weapons. As I analyze below, it is crucial for a country to be fully denied access to nuclear weapons for the reasons I lay out below. But, what does that mean for China? At this point, it does not matter whether China benefits or loses from having a nuclear Egypt because what matters the most is keeping the continent and the world safe from an over spread of nuclear weapons.

### **United States Policy Toward Africa**

**National Security Strategy (Trump Administration):** In the first time since the end of the Cold War, the Trump Administration announces the return of great power competition in its national security strategy in 2017. It puts China, Russia, Iran and North Korea as the main state actors trying to undermine the United States' interests with various capabilities. It also highlights another threat coming from non-state actors, in particular radical jihadists groups like ISIS and cross-border criminal organizations aiming to harm and kill Americans. To counter these threats and undermine them, the Trump Administration identifies four vital national interests centered around putting "America First" and they are the following: "protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life", "promote American prosperity", "preserve peace through strength", and "advance American influence"<sup>22</sup>.

So, what does having an "America First" national security strategy mean for Africa in a regional context? The strategy recognizes the opportunities and challenges that exist in Africa. Despite having a couple of relatively stable countries in Africa, the continent is still deeply disturbed by civil wars, poor governance, and terrorist activities. In order to protect the four

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<sup>22</sup> 1. National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

American national interests mentioned above, the administration aims to support reforms that lead to a more efficient governance in Africa, to expand business ties between Africa and the United States, and to continue investing in their security partners to counter terrorist groups, and human and arms trafficking<sup>23</sup>.

**National Security Strategy (Biden Administration):** While the Biden Administration agrees with the previous administration about the threats from China and Russia that aim to undermine the United States' interests, it defines "security" in a more comprehensive sense because it expands the threats facing the United States not only from state actors, but to also include transnational threats that faces America's foes and friends alike. The Biden Administration sees two major and equally important threats facing the United States. One from geopolitical competition between great powers and the second from transnational threats that affect America's friends and foes alike, and they are numerous<sup>24</sup>. For that reason, its national security strategy sees an opportunity to cooperate to face shared challenges with countries like China despite the geopolitical competition between the two countries.

The Biden Administration defines in its national security strategy the American national interests in the following way: "to protect the security of the American people"; "to expand economic prosperity and opportunity"; and "to realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life"<sup>25</sup>.

So, what does this national security strategy mean for Africa in a regional context? The Biden Administration's national security strategy sees in Africa a place where it can counter

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<sup>23</sup> 1. National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> 1. National Security Strategy, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> 1. National Security Strategy, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

transnational threats by using American statecraft tools to make the lives of Africans better, such as by investing in clean energy. And it also sees Africa as a place of importance to counter security threats like terrorism that threaten the United States homeland and the African countries alike<sup>26</sup>

1st Criteria: “To prevent the spread of nuclear weapons”

**Facts about nuclear weapons in Africa:** Thanks to the “Pelindaba Treaty” or otherwise known as The African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, the African continent is today free of nuclear weapons. This treaty is signed by 51 African states. Article 3 of the “Pelindaba Treaty” states that each party agrees “not to conduct research on, develop, manufacture, stockpile or otherwise acquire, possess or have control over any nuclear explosive device by any means anywhere”; “not to seek or receive any assistance in the research on, development, manufacture, stockpiling or acquisition, or possession of any nuclear explosive device”; “not to take any action to assist or encourage the research on, development, manufacture, stockpiling or acquisition, or possession of any nuclear explosive device”<sup>27</sup>. But this treaty also gives African countries the opportunity to benefit from nuclear technology. Article 8 of the “Pelindaba Treaty” states that “nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as to prevent the use of nuclear sciences and technology for peaceful purposes”<sup>28</sup>.

So, theoretically speaking, why do countries acquire nuclear weapons? In his paper “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons,” Scott Sagan challenges the “conventional wisdom” about why states acquire nuclear weapons, and goes a step further to explain that nuclear proliferation

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<sup>26</sup> 1. National Security Strategy, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> 1. “African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Pelindaba),” Office for Disarmament Affairs, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://treaties.unoda.org/t/pelindaba>.

<sup>28</sup> 1. “African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Pelindaba),” Office for Disarmament Affairs, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://treaties.unoda.org/t/pelindaba>.

happens for other hidden reasons other than trying to counter external military threats by hostile states. He acknowledges that the “The Security Model” explains many past and present proliferation cases, but in his opinion, that one model does not capture the entire picture, so he proposes two other “models”, which they are “The Domestic Politics Model” and “The Norms Model”, respectively, as alternative explanations of nuclear proliferation<sup>29</sup>.

“The Domestic Politics Model”: Sagan argues that three kinds of actors, the state’s nuclear energy establishment, influential units within the military establishment and politicians whose political parties and constituents favor the idea of acquiring a nuclear weapon, within a state put their interests above the state’s interests by forming a coalition to influence the decision-making process of a state<sup>30</sup>. “The Norms Model”: “state behavior is determined not by leaders’ cold calculations about national security interests or their parochial bureaucratic interests, but rather by deeper norms and shared beliefs about what actions are legitimate and appropriate in international relations”<sup>31</sup>

But, it is important to remember that prior to the “Pelindaba Treaty”, South Africa could acquire six nuclear bombs during the Cold War<sup>32</sup>. So, under what conditions did South Africa decide to acquire nuclear weapons, and are the same conditions still existent today in Africa to motivate another African state to acquire nuclear weapons? And can “The Domestic Politics Model” or “The Norms Model” presented by Sagan predict whether nuclear proliferation will happen again in Africa or not?

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<sup>29</sup> 1. 1. Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (January 1997): 54–86, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.3.54>.

<sup>30</sup> 1. Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (January 1997): 54–86, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.3.54>.

<sup>31</sup> 1. Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (January 1997): 54–86, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.3.54>.

<sup>32</sup> 1. J. W. Villiers, Roger Jardine, and Mitchell Reiss, “Why South Africa Gave up the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (1993): 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045817>.

In the southern part of Africa, and as a result of the Soviet expansionism in Africa which was perceived as a threat by South Africa, Zimbabwe's independence from an apartheid regime, growing international isolationism on the international stage and fear of not receiving any external military support by Western countries in case attacked by the Soviet Union, South Africa decided to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent against all these external threats<sup>33</sup>. The fears that led South Africa to seek a nuclear deterrent started to mitigate, which convinced South Africa that keeping its nuclear weapons program became unnecessary, and in fact it became a burden. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave South Africa a breath of fresh air<sup>34</sup>.

However, the northern part of Africa is not isolated from the rest of the world, and in particular from the Middle East given the geographic and geopolitical connectivity between Arab countries in North Africa, like in Egypt, and other Arab countries in the Gulf like Saudi Arabia. Here comes the role of Iran's nuclear program that has shaped the geostrategic calculation of Arab countries and in particular that of Saudi Arabia. Iran's nuclear program dates back to the 1950s when it was still under the governorship of the Shah, but it was placed on hold after the Shah was toppled by the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and resumed in the 1980s after during the Iran-Iraq war. Since then, the United States and Iran have been engaged in a "cat and mouse game" where the U.S. has been sanctioning Iran very harshly to stop its nuclear enrichment<sup>35</sup>. The two countries could finally reach an agreement that would limit Iran's nuclear enrichment to 3.67 percent of Uranium-235 in 2015<sup>36</sup> until Donald Trump came to power in the U.S. and

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<sup>33</sup> 1. J. W. Villiers, Roger Jardine, and Mitchell Reiss, "Why South Africa Gave up the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (1993): 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045817>.

<sup>34</sup> 1. J. W. Villiers, Roger Jardine, and Mitchell Reiss, "Why South Africa Gave up the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (1993): 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045817>.

<sup>35</sup> 1. Sina Azodi, "Iran's Nuclear Program Has a Long History of Advances, Setbacks and Diplomatic Pauses," Stimson Center, January 28, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/irans-nuclear-program-has-a-long-history-of-advances-setbacks-and-diplomatic-pauses/>.

<sup>36</sup> 1. "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," Arms Control Association, accessed January 5, 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

withdrew from it in 2018<sup>37</sup>. As a result of that, Iran has accelerated its Uranium-235 enrichment to a 60 percent level<sup>38</sup>. In its turn, Iran's enrichment of Uranium-235 beyond the 3.67 percent, which is used for civilian and peaceful purposes, has alarmed Saudi Arabia, a long-time foe to Iran. In a recent interview with Fox News, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohamad Bin Salman, said "If they get one, we have to get one"<sup>39</sup>. By that, he means that if Iran goes nuclear and acquires a nuclear bomb, then Saudi Arabia will for sure acquire a nuclear bomb as well.

So, what does Egypt, a North African country, have to do with the potential nuclear arm race that might be going on between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

"The Security Model" that explains why South Africa acquired nuclear weapons during the Cold War, can be a good predictor of whether Egypt will go forward and acquire one if Iran does get one. But before that, is Iran a threat to Egypt that Egypt feels the need to balance against any threat from it? At the previous United Nations Summit in September of last year, the Iranian President showed willingness and openness to reach a good relationship with Egypt despite not being in a good shape in the last few decades<sup>40</sup>. But things can always turn upside down in the Middle East and nothing is stable. I argue that Egypt will likely balance against a nuclear threat from Iran rather than bandwagoning by acquiring a nuclear weapon. If Iran, a Shia theocracy, develops its own nuclear weapon, then the rest of the Arab Sunni countries will most likely feel threatened, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt. That way, Egypt can either bandwagon with Iran

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<sup>37</sup> 1. CATHERINE LUCEY and JOSH LEDERMAN, "Trump Declares Us Leaving 'horrible' Iran Nuclear Accord," AP News, May 1, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/north-america-donald-trump-ap-top-news-politics-iran-cead755353a1455bbef08ef289448994>.

<sup>38</sup> 1. Kelsey Davenport, "https://www.Armscontrol.Org/Act/2024-01/News/Iran-Accelerates-Highly-Enriched-Uranium-Production," Arms Control Association, 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-01/news/iran-accelerates-highly-enriched-uranium-production>.

<sup>39</sup> 1. "BAD MOVE": Saudi Crown Prince Warns of Iran Getting a Nuclear Weapon, YouTube (YouTube, 2023), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CX1t2ZlpJ\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CX1t2ZlpJ_k).

<sup>40</sup> 1. "Iran's Raisi Sees No Obstacle to Restoring Ties with Egypt," Reuters, September 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-raisi-sees-no-obstacle-restoring-ties-with-egypt-2023-09-21/>.

and seek Iran's protection, or it can balance against such a threat from Iran. A few reasons explain my thoughts.

First, Egypt and, more broadly, the Arab world don't have solid and predictable relationships with Iran. Hence, it is almost impossible to overcome all the problems between each other and reach such a level of deep trust overnight. Egypt is a Sunni majority state, while Iran is a Shia majority state, so it is unlikely for their previously disturbing relationship to result suddenly in some form of bandwagoning. Second, if Iran does get a nuclear weapon, then it is almost impossible for Iran to obtain a second strike capability, therefore it won't have the ability to provide extended deterrence to protect Egypt. Third, Egypt does not have any real enemy in its neighborhood despite not having a stable relationship with Ethiopia over the water rights dispute. Fourth, Egypt is not likely to piss off the Gulf countries for various economic, religious and cultural reasons.

Unlike "The Security Model" which makes it very difficult to predict the path of the Iranian-Egyptian relationship, "The Norms Model" can be a better predictor of whether Egypt will seek its own nuclear weapon or not if Saudi Arabia gets one. I argue that if Saudi Arabia moves forward to acquire a nuclear weapon, then Egypt will follow the same path to show its modernity and protect its prestige as the biggest Muslim country in the Arab world unless they form together some sort of an agreement.

So, what about the rest of northern African countries? What is the likelihood of acquiring a nuclear weapon? Well, of the three models presented in this paper, it is very hard to rely on "The Domestic Politics Model" to predict whether any other northern African country will acquire or has the intention to acquire nuclear weapons because of the complexities of domestic politics in each country which is beyond my skill set. Each country can be a case study by itself.

Based on the two other models, “The Security Model” and “The Norms Model”, it is very unlikely to have a reasonable explanation of why they would acquire nuclear weapons. A tension always exists between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara, but none of them already faces an existential threat from the other to acquire nuclear weapons. The existing literature suggests that a war is more likely to happen between two countries that have a territorial dispute<sup>41</sup>, but it is very hard to predict how things will turn around later.

Beside Egypt, the other two wealthy countries in the African continent are Nigeria and South Africa with GDP above \$400 billion<sup>42</sup>. So, regardless of the scope of territorial dispute that exists between a few African countries in the other four subregions, it is very unlikely that any African country will succeed in acquiring nuclear weapons due to the high cost and sophistication in scientific and technical knowledge needed.

Consequently, nuclear proliferation in the northern part of Africa, and in particular in Egypt, is a very sensitive topic and must be of utter importance to the United States to prevent its reckless spread between countries. It must take all the measures to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear bomb, which would kick off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East with devastating consequences on regional stability and on international security overall for various reasons. Kenneth Waltz disagrees and provides an alternative explanation that the rapid spread of nuclear weapons will lead to peace because no country will dare to attack the other due to deterrence<sup>43</sup>. I disagree with this argument. First, allowing nuclear weapons to spread without any restraint will only exacerbate the risks of having more nuclear weapons and therefore a more dangerous

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<sup>41</sup> 1. Stephen A. Kocs, “Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945-1987,” *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 1 (February 1995): 159–75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2960275>.

<sup>42</sup> 1. “GDP: Africa,” GDP - Countries - List | Africa, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp?continent=africa>.

<sup>43</sup> 1. Zack Brown and Joe Cirincione, “Why Letting Our Allies Get Nuclear Weapons Is a Bad Idea,” *Responsible Statecraft*, May 20, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/05/20/why-letting-our-allies-get-nuclear-weapons-is-a-bad-idea/>.

world<sup>44</sup>. If Saudi Arabia and Egypt get a nuclear weapon, then there is no reason to believe that other countries won't get the nuclear secret. It is extremely difficult to predict when, where, how and why, but we could see the nuclear proliferation pattern in the past when the Soviets made their own after the U.S. hit Hiroshima. Then the Chinese, the French, the British, the Indians, the Pakistanis, and the North Koreans got it.

What is even riskier to allow for nuclear proliferation to happen, in particular in Africa, in countries like Egypt is the instability of political regimes. During the Arab Spring, many regimes were toppled by their people, and Egypt was one of them. In addition, these countries always struggle to keep terrorist groups and extremists under check. So, can someone imagine the outcomes of ISIS or Al-Qaeda having access to a nuclear bomb? I showed above their intention to develop a chemical weapon to use, so definitely nothing will restrain them from using a nuclear bomb.

The northern part of Africa is strategically significant for the United States to dedicate financial and even if necessary military resources to prevent nuclear proliferation because that threat can be dealt with by preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, which have the ability to spark a regional conflict and potentially a global nuclear conflict.

2nd Criteria: "To deal with the threats to the security of the United States and its citizens short of armed conflicts, including threat of international terrorism"

The threats to the security of the United States and its citizens in Africa come mainly from terrorist groups and not from African states. For that reason, the eastern and the western parts of Africa are strategically important for the United States because that is where the wealthiest and most sophisticated terrorist groups in the continent exist. It is worth dedicating

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<sup>44</sup> 1. Zack Brown and Joe Cirincione, "Why Letting Our Allies Get Nuclear Weapons Is a Bad Idea," Responsible Statecraft, May 20, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/05/20/why-letting-our-allies-get-nuclear-weapons-is-a-bad-idea/>.

enough financial and military resources to prevent them from acquiring and developing the weapons and systems needed to attack U.S. personnel, facilities, and even the U.S. homeland because the human cost will always outweigh the financial cost. So, regardless of how much financial and military resources the United States dedicates, it will still remain at a reasonable cost compared to the damage they can cause if something like 9/11 happens again.

The top threat coming from Africa with the intentions to harm U.S. interests and the U.S. homeland is from hostile terrorist groups operating in the continent and not from hostile African states<sup>45</sup>.

In the eastern part of Africa, Al-Shabab, the largest and wealthiest terrorist group based in Somalia, plans and executes terrorist attacks against both other African countries and American facilities. Despite the external military and financial support that the Somali government is receiving from international and western partners to counter Al-Shabab, the American support remains a bedrock for that endeavor that cannot be replaced. So, what does it mean if the United States cut its support and engagement in conducting counter-terrorism missions to protect its personal and interests across the continent that are aligned with the interests of other African nations like Somalia? According to General Stephen J. Townsend, the former Commander of the United States Africa Command, in a Senate hearing in March of 2022, “if left unchecked, al-Shabab will soon expand beyond Somalia’s borders and become an even greater threat to regional stability and American interests”<sup>46</sup>.

In western part Africa, the threat of terrorist groups is no less grave than in any other part of the continent. Groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda don’t waste any opportunity to kill innocent

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<sup>45</sup> 1. AFRICAN SECURITY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT, March 16, 2023,

<https://www.africom.mil/document/35173/africom-cleared-fy24-sasc-posture-hearing-16-mar-2023pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> 1. INVESTING IN AMERICA’S SECURITY IN AFRICA: A CONTINENT OF GROWING STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE, March 15, 2022,

<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20%20ISO%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Cleared.pdf>.

civilians and undermine American interests. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an Al-Qaeda affiliate, is gradually growing and spreading in Mali and Burkina Faso where they are not present in the Gulf of Guinea. This group's influence has been on the rise which has led to millions of Africans being displaced out of their homes and cities<sup>47</sup>.

In Central and Southern Africa, terrorist and extremist groups are merging and expanding cohesively at a fast pace in Mozambique, Tanzania, and Uganda where eight countries have come together in an effort to drive ISIS out of the region<sup>48</sup>.

The hostile intention of these terrorist groups is crystal clear toward the United States and its allies. They seek nothing less than to keep killing American personnel, launching terrorist attacks against U.S. facilities, even attacking the U.S. homeland in a similar manner to what happened on September 11th, 2001, and at best, they seek to establish a Caliphate the same way that ISIS did in Syria and Iraq back in 2013 and 2014 by driving American forces out of the region and expanding their influence. Well, since hostile intention is only one part of the game, what is even more important is having the offensive military capabilities to plan and implement their plans.

Taking a few examples to see what these various terrorist groups have been capable of doing should give us a clear picture of their strengths and limitations. According to General Michael E. Langley, the current Commander of the United States Africa Command, says during a Senate hearing in March of 2023 the following: "These VEOs are dynamic networks that hide in vast under-governed spaces and bustling population centers, creating immense challenges for

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<sup>47</sup> 1. AFRICAN SECURITY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT, March 16, 2023,

<https://www.africom.mil/document/35173/africom-cleared-fy24-sasc-posture-hearing-16-mar-2023pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> 1. INVESTING IN AMERICA'S SECURITY IN AFRICA: A CONTINENT OF GROWING STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE, March 15, 2022,

<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20%20ISO%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Cleared.pdf>.

surveillance and disruption”<sup>49</sup>. While their actions result in massive killings of civilians, they are still short of acquiring and operating advanced weapons and equipment like fighter jets and inter-continental ballistic missiles that can directly be used to hit the U.S. homeland, or even Europe. According to a report by the National Counterterrorism Center, ISIS in West Africa is still equipping its fighters with old traditional weapons, such as “small arms, light and heavy machine guns, vehicle-mounted weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, mines, rockets and improvised explosive devices”<sup>50</sup>. If ISIS, which is considered one of the most lethal terrorist groups in Africa and in the entire world, has such traditional weapons, then it is very unlikely for any of its peers to be any more powerful than that.

So, with all that being said, is that important for the United States to a point where it is worth dedicating financial and military resources to preserve certain interests? And if so, why? I argue that countering terrorism in Africa is strategically significant for the United States to prevent the wealthiest and most sophisticated terrorist groups in the eastern and western parts of the continent from expanding into other areas, and from acquiring the capabilities to attack the U.S. homeland and use weapons of mass destruction against civilians.

It is unwise to take it for granted that terrorist groups in Africa lack the capability to obtain, operate, and use weapons of mass destruction against civilian and/or military targets in Africa, Europe, the United States or elsewhere. The United States military and its regional and international partners must keep surveilling and taking preventive actions to disrupt them from developing and acquiring sophisticated weapons. For example, in January of 2015, ISIS used a chemical bomb for the first time in Iraq against Kurdish forces to take back lost territories. After

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<sup>49</sup> 1. AFRICAN SECURITY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT, March 16, 2023,

<https://www.africom.mil/document/35173/africom-cleared-fy24-sasc-posture-hearing-16-mar-2023pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> 1. Nctc, “National Counterterrorism Center:,” Foreign Terrorist Organizations, accessed January 2024, [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/isis\\_west\\_africa\\_fto.html#:~:text=ISIS–West%20Africa%20equips%20its,rockets%2C%20and%20improvised%20explosive%20devices](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/isis_west_africa_fto.html#:~:text=ISIS–West%20Africa%20equips%20its,rockets%2C%20and%20improvised%20explosive%20devices).

a thorough and secret investigation by analysts from the CIA and the Pentagon, and after U.S. special forces stopped and interrogated an ISIS-weapon maker in Mosul, Iraq, they could successfully understand the details of ISIS's plan to manufacture chemical weapons. They came up with a conclusion that despite having a mismanaged program, ISIS efforts from recruiting scientists to accessing chemical components needed in their ambitious plan would succeed if given enough time<sup>51</sup>.

If we compare the terrorist groups' presence and activities across the continent, it is more urgent and more strategically important to counter the groups in eastern and western Africa compared to the terrorist groups in central and southern Africa because they are wealthier and more sophisticated. If they are stopped from further expanding their infrastructure and plans into the rest of the continent, then they will have very little room to cause the scope of the damage they could cause now.

So, going forward, the best approach to mitigate the significance and magnitude of that threat is to take two parallel approaches. The first is a military approach that includes dedicating the resources and showing the willingness to take preventive military actions against these terrorist groups to prevent them from acquiring such dangerous weapons, supporting local government and security forces, and increasing the surveillance techniques and tools to keep them under check. I see no reason that would deter terrorist groups in Africa from trying to accomplish the same goal that ISIS was trying to accomplish in Iraq unless the United States is willing to send its troops to fight them. This military approach is successful, but a second complementary approach should include providing economic and financial opportunities to

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<sup>51</sup> 1. JOBY WARRICK, "How the Pentagon Got inside ISIS' Chemical Weapons Operation-and Ended It," POLITICO, February 27, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/27/red-line-book-excerpt-chemical-weapons-syria-471784>.

deprived African communities badly impacted by civil conflicts. That should keep happening at a bigger scale through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union, and the United Nations.

3rd Criteria: “To assure unimpeded U.S. access to the oceans and trade”

Only African countries from all five subregions that border the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea have strategic significance. The African countries that don’t border the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea don’t have any strategic significance because they have no impact on preventing American access to the oceans and trade.

Africa has a geostrategic importance that very few regions in the world have. It borders the Atlantic Ocean, and the Indian Ocean and allows access to South-East Asia. North Africa is right next to the southern flank of NATO where it faces Italy and Greece across the Mediterranean Sea. It also plays a very significant role in the flow of goods and services through the Red Sea, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Strait of Sicily, the Bab el Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel. The sea line of communication (SLOC) connects the East Coast of the United States to East Africa, the Middle East, India, and SouthEast Asia. These sea lines of communication (SLOC) are of great importance to global trade, and military operations in other theaters, like the Indo-Pacific Command of the United States. One-third of the shipping between North America and Asia, and one-third of global oil shipping pass through them<sup>52</sup>.

So, what is the significance of the Red Sea and Bab-El-Mandeb for the United States?

The United States and its European and Asian allies depend on the free and uninterrupted flow of

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<sup>52</sup> 1. STATEMENT OF GENERAL STEPHEN J. TOWNSEND, UNITED STATES ARMY COMMANDER UNITED STATES AFRICA COMMAND BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES, April 20, 2021, <https://www.africom.mil/document/33691/usafricom-statement-for-record-hasc-20-apr-2021-gen-townsend.pdf>.

energy from the Persian/Arabian Gulf through the Red Sea to fuel their economy. That includes providing the cheapest energy price possible to homes, factories, and other energy consumers<sup>53</sup>. If anything happens and interrupts the free flow of energy to industrialized countries including the United States, then it will be reflected in higher energy bills for consumers, and inflation at the national or even the global level. Another major American interest in the Red Sea and Bab-El-Mandeb is to support military operations in different theaters like in the Southwest Asia-Indian Ocean area<sup>54</sup>.

The geostrategic features of maritime African countries from all five subregions as stated above are enough to make only that part of Africa strategically significant for the United States to ensure access to open water and trade is free from any barrier. It is important to note that any unimpeded access of the United States to the open water can not be mitigated. It is extremely hard to have new maritime trade routes because that is very much time consuming and it takes a lot of effort and financial resources to re-orient maritime trade. By that time, enough financial damage would have been reflected in global inflation that hurt the economic power of industrialized and non-industrialized nations alike. That is an interest that the United States should be willing to dedicate financial and military resources for given America's geographical location in the Western Hemisphere separated from Europe, Asia and Africa by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It is important to note that even if the United States has relied recently less on foreign imported oil to run its economy, it is crucial to remain a dominant maritime power to ensure the access of cheap energy to its allies, and to still have some leverage over energy shipment from the Persian/Arabian Gulf to China.

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<sup>53</sup> 1. The Red Sea (Bab al-Mandeb to Suez Canal), accessed February 2024, <https://dg.dryadglobal.com/red-sea#:~:text=It%27s%20an%20essential%20channel%2C%20crucial,well%20as%20Europe%20and%20Asia.>

<sup>54</sup> 1. Richard B. Remnek, "The Strategic Importance of the Bab El-Mandeb and the Horn of Africa," *Naval War College Review* 43, no. 4 (1990): 6–30.

It is crucial for the United States Navy to maintain its strategic superiority over these sea-lines of communications because a serious disruption to the flow of oil or any other valuable commodity, or even the flow of goods and services could lead to increased prices globally. That in its turn can lead customers in the United States to pay higher prices and under very severe circumstances it can lead to inflation if no action is taken.

For example, many insurance companies are no longer willing to cover commercial ships with their insurance as a result of the reckless Houthi attacks on commercial ships due to the ongoing war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas<sup>55</sup>. That will lead to delay in delivering goods and commodities on time, higher costs and longer maritime trade routes as commercial vessels have to take a longer route than usual.

## **China**

In this section, I will explain China's strategy in general that is tied to its domestic political goals and its ability to survive in an international environment where the competition is on the rise with the United States, and what role Africa plays in China's global strategy to achieve its goals. I will then provide some facts about the nature of the China-Africa relationship, and provide my own analysis of whether that should be a concern for the United States to consider Africa as a strategically significant region of the world or not.

From a Chinese perspective, the partnerships that China makes globally are different in their core from the type of American-led "military alliance". Chinese officials see China expanding its global networks, especially with developing countries, based on principles and values derived from its "philosophical ideals", which are "respect for justice", "adherence to

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<sup>55</sup> 1. Matt Egan, "Insurers Shun Many Ships Carrying Goods through the Red Sea as Attacks Continue," CNN Business, January 17, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/17/business/red-sea-shipping-attacks/index.html>.

principles”, and “striving for win-win results”<sup>56</sup>. This harsh language of comparison between China and the United States aims to provide an alternative option in terms of global partnerships to present China as the force of good and the United States as the bully. He Yafei, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, draws that distinction by accusing the United States of using divisive and Cold-War era style language of “us” vs “them”. He goes on to say that the global partnerships that China builds are not sino-centric unlike the American-led regional and global partnerships<sup>57</sup>.

China’s National Defense in the New Era paper published in 2019 is nothing less than translating that harsh criticism of the United States into actions. In their assessment of the international security landscape, Chinese officials describe the United States as following: “The US has adjusted its national security and defense strategies, and adopted unilateral policies. It has provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability”. They go on to state that “the US is engaging in technological and institutional innovation in pursuit of absolute military superiority”<sup>58</sup>.

So, given the assessment made by Chinese officials seeing the competition with the United States on the rise, what role does Africa play in China’s strategy to preserve their interests and status against what they perceive as an American threat? The Chinese response is exemplified in He Yafei’s words to build a “multipolar world and democratic international

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<sup>56</sup> 1. He Yafei, China’s major-country diplomacy progresses on all fronts, March 6, 2016, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC\\_CPPCC\\_2016/2016-03/06/content\\_37950893.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2016/2016-03/06/content_37950893.htm).

<sup>57</sup> 1. He Yafei, China’s major-country diplomacy progresses on all fronts, March 6, 2016, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC\\_CPPCC\\_2016/2016-03/06/content\\_37950893.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2016/2016-03/06/content_37950893.htm).

<sup>58</sup> 1. “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” Full text: China’s National Defense in the new era, July 24, 2019, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content\\_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html).

relations”<sup>59</sup>. While building a “multipolar world and democratic international relations” is a means to an end, it is crucial to remember that China’s foreign behavior is directly tied to its domestic political goals and objectives. According to Michael D. Swaine, China’s objectives are the survival of the Chinese Communist Party as the sole ruling force in China, defending China’s territories and sovereignty, and ensuring China’s economic growth<sup>60</sup>.

China is pursuing that goal by deepening its relationship with the developing world in Africa, Latin America, and Asia by creating regional forums and groups to that align with its narrative and meet its goals, such as the China-Arab Cooperation Forum and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)<sup>61</sup>. In addition, China’s relationship with the African continent exceeds any bilateral or regional relationship to include cooperation at the international level at the United Nations. For example, the vast majority of African countries never condemn China’s human rights’ record at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which attracts many harsh criticisms from the West. In 2021, only Liberia and Eswatini voted against China’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang<sup>62</sup>.

According to the 2019 China Military Power report published by the U.S. Department of Defense, China’s growing interests abroad over the last decades needs to be accompanied by having a military capable of operating outside its immediate geographical borders to protect those interests. Its first overseas military base was established in Djibouti, Africa, in 2017 for

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<sup>59</sup> 1. He Yafei, China’s major-country diplomacy progresses on all fronts, March 6, 2016, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC\\_CPPCC\\_2016/2016-03/06/content\\_37950893.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2016/2016-03/06/content_37950893.htm).

<sup>60</sup> 1. Michael D. Swaine, “China’s Assertive Behavior—Part One: On ‘Core Interests,’” Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, November 15, 2010, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2010/11/15/china-s-assertive-behavior-part-one-on-core-interests-pub-41937>.

<sup>61</sup> 1. Joshua Eisenman and Eric Heginbotham, Building a More “Democratic” and “Multipolar” World: China’s Strategic Engagement with Developing Countries, November 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26838913?seq=1>.

<sup>62</sup> 1. Kate Bartlett, “Why African Nations Are Mostly Silent on China’s Rights Record,” Voice of America, September 24, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/why-african-nations-are-mostly-silent-on-china-s-rights-record-/6760590.html>

logistical purposes as China claims<sup>63</sup>. Well, there is no clear reason why we need to believe what China claims regarding its growing overseas presence. So, how well can we understand Beijing's intentions behind its growing military presence abroad? Elbridge Colby, a former Pentagon official from 2017 to 2018, believes that China's military buildup is not a coincidence, and it is not solely to take over Taiwan. The scope, magnitude, and the cost to build such a military shows that China's intention is to project military power far beyond that<sup>64</sup>.

Furthermore, to show that Beijing's intentions don't match its words, according to General Townsend, the Commander of United States Africa Command, "China significantly expanded the capabilities of its Doraleh Naval Base in Djibouti ... by adding a large and capable pier while advancing plans to establish a second location along West Africa's Atlantic Coast"<sup>65</sup>. In his opinion, it is very significant to establish a Chinese naval base in West Africa because it requires the Pentagon to adjust the "U.S. naval force posture" and it poses "increased risk to freedom of navigation and U.S. ability to act"<sup>66</sup>.

China's vested interests in Africa to have a military presence does not come from thin air. China's reliance on Africa to get access to food and natural resources and minerals is directly tied to satisfying the needs of its population and to keep achieving a high economic growth. As the world's largest manufacturing country, China relies heavily on imported crude oil. In 2022,

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<sup>63</sup> 1. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019, May 2, 2019, [https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> 1. Elbridge Colby, "China's Military Buildup Shows Its Ambitions Go Well beyond Taiwan," Nikkei Asia, April 7, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/China-s-military-buildup-shows-its-ambitions-go-well-beyond-Taiwan>.

<sup>65</sup> 1. INVESTING IN AMERICA'S SECURITY IN AFRICA: A CONTINENT OF GROWING STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE, March 15, 2022, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20%20ISO%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Cleared.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> 1. INVESTING IN AMERICA'S SECURITY IN AFRICA: A CONTINENT OF GROWING STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE, March 15, 2022, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20%20ISO%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Cleared.pdf>.

7.6% of China's imports of crude oil were imported from African countries, Angola and Congo. While this is not as significant as the amount imported from Saudi Arabia (17.8%) and Russia (16%)<sup>67</sup> it still plays a significant role in helping China to diversify its energy resources. In addition, according to a report published by the United Nations about Africa's mineral resources, it states that "Africa is home to some 30 percent of the world's mineral reserves, eight per cent of the world's natural Gas and 12 percent of the world's oil reserves. The continent has 40 percent of the world's gold and up to 90 percent of its chromium and platinum. The largest reserves of cobalt, diamonds, platinum and uranium in the world are in Africa"<sup>68</sup>.

So, is the active Chinese military and economic presence in Africa important for the United States, and why should the United States care? Establishing Chinese naval bases in the West Coast of Africa on the Atlantic Ocean, which is not very far from Central and Latin America, can help China to develop ties with America's foes like Nicaragua and Venezuela. The Chinese naval bases can only be the beginning of supporting logistically and militarily the establishment of other naval bases in the Western Hemisphere to distract and diverge America's military resources from focusing on the Indo-Pacific region. They can also be used for spying purposes because China has already the intention and the plan to spy on American electronic communications from Cuba<sup>69</sup>. This will force the United States to either split some military resources from the Indo-Pacific Command to the Southern Command to counter Chinese presence or to expand its defense budget to make more ships. In both cases, that will put a significant pressure on the U.S. fiscal budget to increase its defense spending which is already

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<sup>67</sup> 1. Daniel Workman, "Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China," World's Top Exports, accessed January 2024, <https://www.worldstopexports.com/top-15-crude-oil-suppliers-to-china/>.

<sup>68</sup> 1. "Our Work in Africa," UNEP, accessed January 2024, <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa#:~:text=Africa%20is%20home%20to%20some,of%20its%20chromium%20and%20platinum.>

<sup>69</sup> 1. Natasha Bertrand, "Cuba Gives China Permission to Build Spying Facility on Island, US Intel Says," CNN, June 9, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/08/politics/cuba-china-spying-facility/index.html>.

very high. According to General Michael E. Langley, those Chinese bases can be used against the United States and its allies in case of any armed conflict or they can be used to disrupt the freedom of navigation and the free flow of goods<sup>70</sup>.

Furthermore, the Chinese presence in Africa to control the supply chain of minerals should be of a moderate concern to the United States and its allies for the short term because discoveries of more reserves and minerals always happen. The current status quo is not permanent forever because any discovery of having much needed minerals for industrial purposes can be a game changing that makes China lose its leverage and control of critical supply chains. In addition, African countries that are rich in natural resources and minerals have way less incentives not to sell their commodities to the United States if they are in need of earning much needed revenue<sup>71</sup>. But what should be very concerning to the United States is the creation of regional groups and organizations between African countries and China that operate outside the influence of the United States. Every African country has the full right to choose its partners and destination, but the threat here comes from China because in case of any armed conflict against the United States over Taiwan, China would already have secured markets to obtain what it needs from energy and minerals, and to sell its products as well.

China's behavior in Africa must be a real concern for the United States. Aiming to secure military bases near strategic straits and on the Atlantic Ocean, controlling the supply chain of minerals produced in Africa, and creating regional organizations and institutions should all be of equal concern to the United States, but in my opinion, allowing China to control the supply chain of certain minerals in Africa is less strategically significant compared to the other two. The

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<sup>70</sup> 1. AFRICAN SECURITY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT, March 16, 2023, <https://www.africom.mil/document/35173/africom-cleared-fy24-sasc-posture-hearing-16-mar-2023pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> 1. Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538764>.

reason I say that is that alternative sources of minerals can always be found in friendly countries. But what is even more dangerous from an American perspective is to allow China to create an alternative world order that China and Africa can be part of without any American influence on it. That will allow China to keep accumulating economic power and resources during wartime and peacetime, which might tilt the global distribution of power to China's side instead of America's side.

What is even equally important is to keep China reliant on the U.S. Navy to ensure the freedom of navigation and the free flow of oil through the Indian Ocean from the Persian/Arabian Gulf. That is strategically significant because it gives America the upper hand in any military contingency against China.

Moving forward, the best way to counter that alternative world that China can rely on in times of crisis is to advocate for more western engagement with African countries. The United States should lead the effort to incentivize more like-minded countries with shared interests like the European Union, Canada, Japan, India and South Korea to take some of the role that China plays in Africa in a non-zero sum game.

## **Russia**

Russia's presence in Africa is multi-dimensional whether that is through the Wagner Group, through direct security cooperation with African countries, and through dis-information campaigns. I will start this section by identifying Russia's objectives in Africa. Then, I will examine the Wagner presence in Africa, dis-information campaigns by Russia, and the direct security cooperation between Russia and African countries.

Russia's presence in Africa dates back to the 20th century when the Soviet Union existed back then. Russia's presence in Africa started in 2020 supporting Khalifa Haftar in Libya by

sending Russian mercenaries. Russia's goals from being in Africa are "gaining revenues from oil fields in eastern Libya, naval access to deep-water ports in the eastern Mediterranean, and establishing itself as a powerbroker in a region bordering NATO's southern flank"<sup>72</sup>. Russia's tactic in Africa relies on asymmetric capabilities that don't require a significant amount of money. "Moscow is using financial and security inducements to buy a tenuous peace between an individual leader in the capital and local warlords in the resource-rich periphery, serving as the sole linchpin for stability and undermining multilateral peace and democratization efforts"<sup>73</sup>.

Wagner's presence in the northern part of Africa is limited only to Libya. The Wagner Group has been fighting alongside Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya since 2020. They are also operating air defenses and protecting oil fields for financial purposes. In the central part of Africa, the Wagner Group is mostly active in the Central African Republic. Its presence started back in 2018 after a civil war broke out to support the government. In exchange, the Wagner Group has received access to gold mines as a reward<sup>74</sup>. In the eastern part of Africa, the Wagner Group has a deep presence in Sudan. Its role was to protect President Al-Bashir after he was ousted by protestors. As everywhere else, the Wagner Group receives its rewards by having access to mineral resources and gold mines<sup>75</sup>. In the Western part of Africa, Mali is the hub of the Wagner Group. With that being said, Wagner is not active in the southern part of Africa, and even if it has some modest existence in any of the four subregions mentioned above, I have

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<sup>72</sup> 1. Joseph Siegle, "Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability," essay, in *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment* (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021), 80–90, <https://marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-books/russias-global-reach/chapter-10-russia-and-africa-expanding-influence-and-instability>.

<sup>73</sup> 1. Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa: Is The Cold War Returning?," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 155–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2019.1693105>.

<sup>74</sup> 1. "What Does the Wagner Group Do? Operations in Africa and the Rest ...," Reuters, June 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/wagners-global-operations-war-oil-gold-2023-06-29/>.

<sup>75</sup> 1. "Russian Mercenaries in Sudan: What Is the Wagner Group's Role?," Al Jazeera, April 17, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/17/what-is-the-wagner-groups-role-in-sudan>.

shown briefly its activities where it has the most active presence. The Wagner Group exacerbates civil strife in Africa, and plays an opportunistic role by being present where natural resources are free to exploit.

Russia's presence in Africa through the Wagner Group is one dimension of its engagement in the continent. Its security cooperation with other African countries is a second dimension of its presence. Russia has signed many agreements with numerous countries in the northern and eastern part of Africa, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan, to secure access to various ports and bases on the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Russia's increased activity in the African continent highlights its intentions to project power along Bab-El-Mandeb Strait (Djibouti-Yemen), the Suez Canal, and the eastern Mediterranean. Its professional military presence is very limited in Africa for military education purposes<sup>76</sup>.

The third dimension of Russia's presence in Africa is through its dis-information campaigns that seek to destabilize countries, and demonize western countries, in particular France and the United States. In an interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman, a research scholar at the Stanford Internet Observatory who worked with Facebook to identify and analyze Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Africa, explains Russia's strategy to spread disinformation in Africa. When asked about fake posts on Facebook and Instagram in countries like Libya or Mozambique, Dr. Grossman responds that they were all related to a firm tied to Prigozhin, former head of the Wagner Group whose air plane crashed this past August. When asked about

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<sup>76</sup> 1. Joseph Siegle, "Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability," essay, in *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment* (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021), 80–90, <https://marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-books/russias-global-reach/chapter-10-russia-and-africa-expanding-influence-and-instability>.

the impact of the 73 fake pages that were analyzed, Dr. Grossman responded by saying that they received 9.7 million interactions and they were liked by 1.7 million accounts<sup>77</sup>.

With all this being said, what does Russia's presence in Africa through the Wagner Group, its security cooperation with other African countries and through disinformation campaigns mean for the United States? If we compare the three dimensions of Russian existence in Africa, do we give them all the same degree of importance? They are all important to be countered in Africa, but the security cooperation between Russia and other African states in the eastern and northern parts of the continent must be given more attention and priority because the impact of having Russian bases near critical sea lines of communication and near strategic straits can be much more severe on American security and economic interests than dealing a private military company or Russian disinformation campaigns. So, does the United States have to worry about the Wagner Group exploiting natural resources in Africa? That alone is not enough to make the four subregions where the Wagner Group operates strategically significant. The cherry picking of Wagner's presence in Africa is very little in terms of economic power. In addition, its ability to cause any major military damage to the southern flank of NATO is not serious. Potential Russian naval bases in Libya and near strategic straits are strategic parts of Africa that are worth dedicating financial resources to convince these concerned African states not to go ahead and give Russia access to their ports.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, Egypt, eastern and western parts of Africa and the maritime African countries are strategically important for the United States that it must care about. It is worth dedicating

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<sup>77</sup> 1. "Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 18, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>.

financial and military resources to protect American interests that exist there, and it is worth engaging with African partners. The active presence of international terrorist groups like Al-Shabab, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda make Africa a place that needs constant American military involvement to disrupt them from gaining more influence and acquiring weapons of mass destruction or other sophisticated system that they can use against African civilians, U.S. personal and facilities, and even the U.S. homeland. The high probability of nuclear proliferation in Egypt is also another reason that makes that particular country in northern Africa strategically significant for the United States because Africa is not isolated from events that happen elsewhere and in particular in the Middle East. Any nuclear arms race between Saudi Arabia and Iran will trigger Egypt and maybe other countries to acquire their own. The risks associated with that are beyond imaginable on regional and global security. Sitting at strategic locations near important trade routes, sea lines of communications that connect the United States to other commands and oceans make Africa critical militarily and economically. It becomes a matter of life and death if a maritime nation like the United States is isolated between two giant oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific. Lastly, Russia and China's presence in Africa whether through establishing military bases near strategic locations or through creating regional institutions without any American influence on them make Africa strategically significant. But it is important to keep African states engaged and not let China only be their top partner because it can give China leverage against the United States in case of any armed conflict over Taiwan as it finds in Africa a large market to get the energy and minerals it needs, and to export its products as well.