

Dear Secretary Esper:

We write to express our concern regarding the potential for a major reduction of American forces in the African theater. While we understand your decision to review our force posture and to deploy our military as efficiently as possible, we are concerned that a narrow focus on confronting Russia and China in great power competition is a shortsighted action that both diminishes our overall national security posture and our ability to lead with American values and influence. The potential to substantially reduce our forces on the African continent runs counter to the National Security Strategy (NSS) developed by the administration and strongly supported by Members of Congress in a bipartisan fashion.

The execution of stability operations in Africa and meeting China and Russia in great power competition are not mutually exclusive. According to the NSS, “China, Russia, and other state and nonstate actors recognize that the United States often views the world in binary terms [instead of] an arena of continuous competition. Our adversaries will not fight us on our terms. China and Russia target their investments in the developing world to expand influence and gain competitive advantages against the United States.” Russia has acted on their strategy by signing more than 20 bilateral military cooperation agreements with African states since 2015. The NSS further notes that “China is expanding its economic and military presence in Africa, growing from a small investor in the continent two decades ago into Africa’s largest trading partner today.”

The security relationships with African countries can either support or undermine the United States’ partnerships in other sectors such as trade, good governance, health and education. For those of us who have traveled to Africa and visited Special Operations Command, have heard first hand from our commanders that counter violent extremism operations are part and parcel to our competition with Russia in China. General Thomas Waldhauser, former Commander of AFRICOM, testified to Congress that “U.S. Africa Command also plays a significant role in advancing the priorities outlined in the National Security and Defense Strategies, which emphasize the rise of China and Russia as key competitors.”

We can think of no clearer example of Russia’s and China’s ability to take advantage of a power vacuum than the recent withdrawal of American forces from Syria. Within weeks of the United States abandoning a military base near Aleppo, Russian forces assumed full control of the facility and began conducting operations from the American built infrastructure. Reports on the ongoing force posture deliberations indicate the potential to repeat this mistake by abandoning bases and other assets.

Simultaneously, we are concerned that the narrow focus on great power competition may create an environment in which the successes of our stability operations are lost. The NSS includes a secure Africa as an objective, stating “[w]e will continue to work with partners to improve the ability of their security services to counter terrorism, human trafficking, and the illegal trade in arms and natural resources.” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has confirmed the need for continued operations, recently stating “ISIS is outpacing the ability of regional governments and international partners to address that threat.” The loss of a servicemember and two other

American citizens in Kenya this past weekend highlights that our fight against terrorism is ongoing and that we must remain vigilant in all theaters.

We hope that the review results in a force posture that meets the combined stated objectives of the NSS to meet China and Russia in great power competition while simultaneously ensures that the United States continues to be a partner with Africa in security and economic development. Rather than retreat from African affairs, it is in the interest of the United States to continue to share democratic values and military expertise with developing nations across the continent. We request immediate notification if any decision is made to significantly affect our force posture in Africa and look forward to continuing to work together to advance the security of the United States and our allies.

Sincerely,

Congressman Anthony Brown (MD-04)
Congressman Jimmy Panetta (CA-20)
Congressman Austin Scott (GA-08)
Congressman Richard Hudson (NC-08)
Congresswoman Chrissy Houlahan (PA-06)
Congressman Gil Cisneros (CA-39)
Congressman Jason Crow (CO-06)
Congresswoman Veronica Escobar (TX-16)
Congresswoman Elaine Luria (VA-02)
Congresswoman Xochitl Torres Small (NM-02)
Congressman Michael Waltz (FL-06)

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