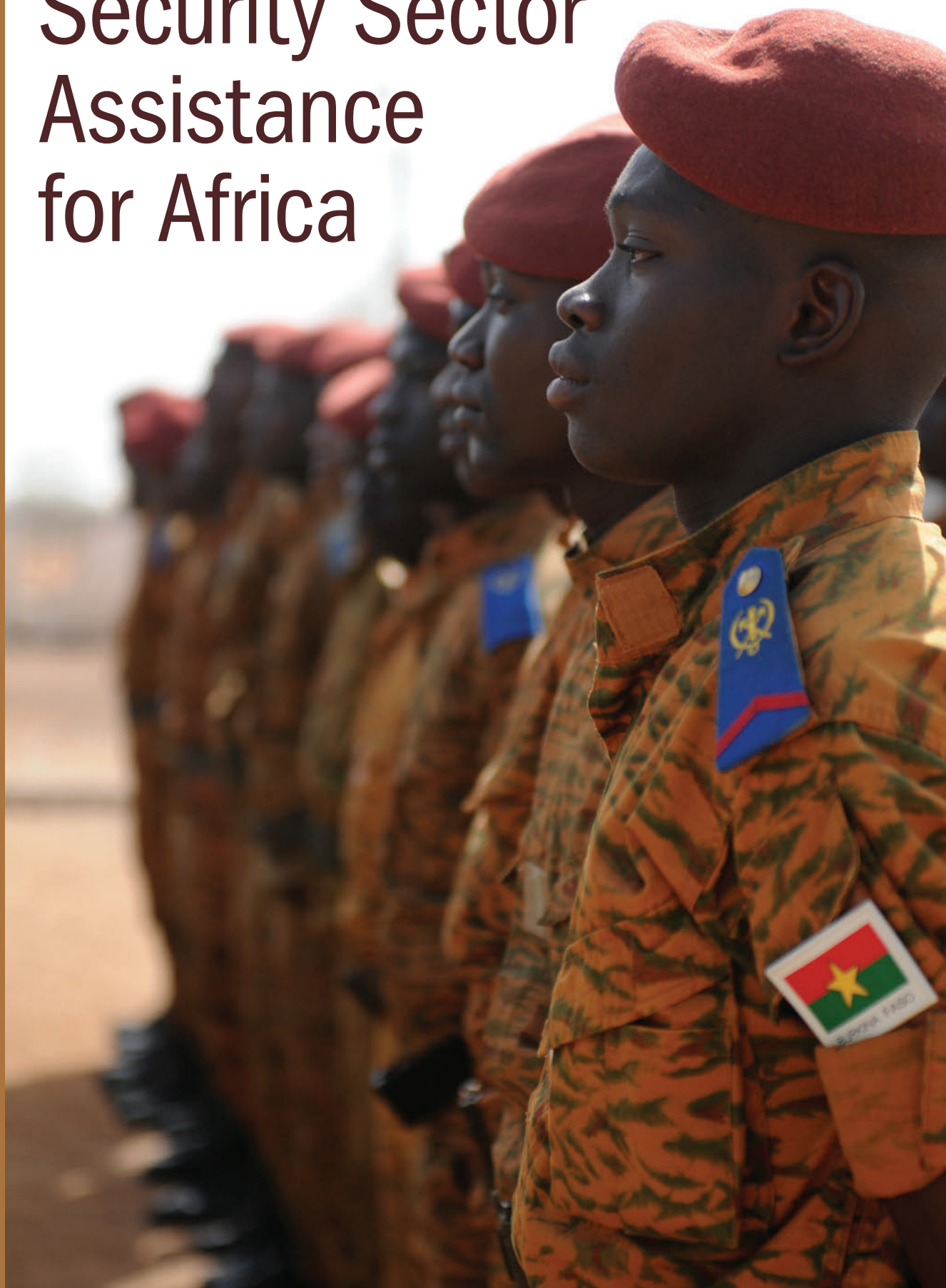# Reforming Security Sector Assistance for Africa

Key Findings

U.S. security sector assistance (SSA) has a mixed record in Africa:

- **In the Cold War, SSA appears to have increased the incidence of civil wars.**
- **In the post–Cold War era, SSA appears to have had little or no net effect on political violence.**
- **In peacekeeping contexts, however, SSA appears to have reduced the incidence of civil wars, terrorism, and state repression.**

Many of the practices associated with SSA in peacekeeping contexts might be adopted in other environments.

The United States has sought to

combat security threats in Africa—whether terrorism or, in a previous era, communism—principally by providing security sector assistance (SSA) to partner governments on the continent.[1] Proponents of such assistance claim that it is a cost-effective tool for advancing U.S. interests on the continent while being welcomed by the African partners. By strengthening partners' security capabilities, the United States can help partners deter challenges by militants and degrade and ultimately defeat those challengers that do arise. Moreover, by professionalizing and socializing partner security personnel, the United States can stabilize governments through improved civil–military relations and human-rights practices.[2] Critics, on the other hand, contend that SSA has been at best ineffective, leading to brief but unsustainable improvements in security, or at worst detrimental in undercutting precisely the goals the United States has tried to achieve by inflaming inter-communal tensions, undermining civil–military relations, or contributing to human-rights abuses.

RAND Corporation analysts have conducted research to evaluate these contending claims and recommend improvements in SSA practices. This research brief summarizes the results of two RAND studies: one sponsored by the Office of African Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and one sponsored by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). Together, these studies suggest that U.S.-provided SSA in Africa has largely failed to achieve its goals. For most of the past quarter-century, SSA has been highly inefficient, achieving no aggregate reduction in insurgencies or terrorism in the countries that received the SSA. During the Cold War, it appears to have even been counterproductive, increasing the incidence of conflict in recipient countries. But there is also evidence that, under the right conditions, SSA can reduce violence and human-rights abuses.

Security Sector Assistance's Mixed Record in Africa

Ideally, SSA allocations and practices would be guided by rigorous evaluations that would help to determine the conditions under which SSA is more or less effective. To date, nearly all evaluations of SSA's impact in Africa have been qualitative. Numerous case studies, after-action reports, lessons-learned exercises, and other efforts have yielded important insights. They have not, however, established a rigorous basis for determining overall trends.

Cross-national statistical analyses can look past individual success stories or dramatic failures to provide a broader perspective. These analyses have their own limitations—in particular, the limited data available on SSA allocations over large numbers of countries and extended periods of time. Statistical analyses are best seen as one tool for evaluation, to be used in conjunction with in-depth qualitative analyses of specific cases and, when feasible, more-rigorous quantitative tools, such as randomized control trials. But even with their limitations, the recent statistical analyses conducted by the RAND authors offer a revealing overview of SSA's effectiveness.

The OSD-sponsored RAND team assembled data on U.S. SSA allocations after 1945 to all countries in Africa since their independence. The team also assembled data on approximately two dozen contextual factors that might influence the effectiveness of SSA, such as the level of development of partner nations, their governance institutions, histories of violence, and civilian and military assistance from other countries. Finally, the team collected data on three types of violence that the United States has sought to reduce:

- civil wars and insurgencies
- terrorism
- state repression and violations of human rights.[3]

The team then used statistical analyses to determine whether the recipients of SSA experienced declines in any of these forms of violence in the years after SSA was delivered.[4] Ultimately, the researchers found that the effects of SSA vary greatly depending on the context.

U.S. Army soldiers are seen with Uganda People's Defence Force soldiers at the closing ceremony for operation ATLAS DROP 11, an annual joint aerial delivery exercise, in Soroti, about 400 kilometers east of Uganda's capital city Kampala. The United States is providing intelligence and training to fight militants across the continent, from Mauritania in the west along the Atlantic Ocean, to Somalia in the east along the Indian Ocean.

In the Cold War, Security Sector Assistance Appears to Have Increased the Incidence of Civil Wars and Insurgencies

During the Cold War, U.S. SSA appears to have had counterproductive effects: It was associated with an *increase* in the incidence of civil wars and insurgencies in the countries in which it was delivered. There are at least two possible reasons for this outcome. First, because the United States emphasized international alignment over domestic stability as the primary goal of its assistance policies, it might have implemented SSA in ways that exacerbated conflict. The United States was actually more likely to collaborate with authoritarian and corrupt governments than with better-governed ones, so long as they were not allies of the Soviet Union. Doing so might have prompted backlash among populations that were excluded from government. Second, at times, the Soviet Union countered U.S. assistance by providing aid to armed opposition movements, touching off proxy wars.

This finding is important not only for historical reasons: If international competition for influence in Africa again intensifies, the United States might again be tempted to deemphasize governance issues when it allocates SSA. The authors' analyses suggest that such an approach could provoke higher levels of conflict on the continent.

In the Post–Cold War Era, Security Sector Assistance Appears to Have Had Little Net Impact on Political Violence

The authors identified no robust statistical relationships between aggregate SSA and the incidence of political violence across all of Africa in the post–Cold War era. There are several possible explanations for this result:

- U.S. SSA might have no durable effects.
- Small-budget programs (such as International Military Education and Training) or recent programs (such as the Security Governance Initiative) might have enduring positive (or negative) effects, but those effects might be outstripped by the ineffectiveness of much more-expensive programs (such as equipment transfers).
- SSA might be having positive and negative effects in different countries at various times, depending on the context, in which case the divergent effects would result in no net impact.

Unfortunately, limitations in the data the United States has collected on its SSA expenditures prevented the authors from conducting program-specific evaluations. Some categories of SSA—especially relatively inexpensive ones and recent ones—might be successful, while other categories might be problematic. Despite these data limitations, the lack of an aggregate effect of SSA is an important finding. Whatever "success stories" might exist are relatively modest in their impacts on political violence, obscured by much larger amounts of inefficient spending or offset by counterproductive outcomes in other cases. Otherwise, the RAND authors' analyses should have detected some overall relationship between SSA and the incidence of political violence.

The finding that U.S.-provided SSA is not having any net impact on political violence in the post–Cold War era should not be altogether surprising. Previous analyses have found weaknesses in the ability of African partner nations to sustain much of the equipment the United States provides and to disseminate the skills gained in U.S.-sponsored training events through train-the-trainer approaches.[5] Even if African partners could sustain these gains, the partners often appear to have difficulties harnessing the capabilities

for effective political–military strategies. In some cases, U.S. partners might divert the capabilities toward corrupt ends or, in other cases, might use the capabilities to try to repress nonstate actors when cooptation would be more appropriate.[6]

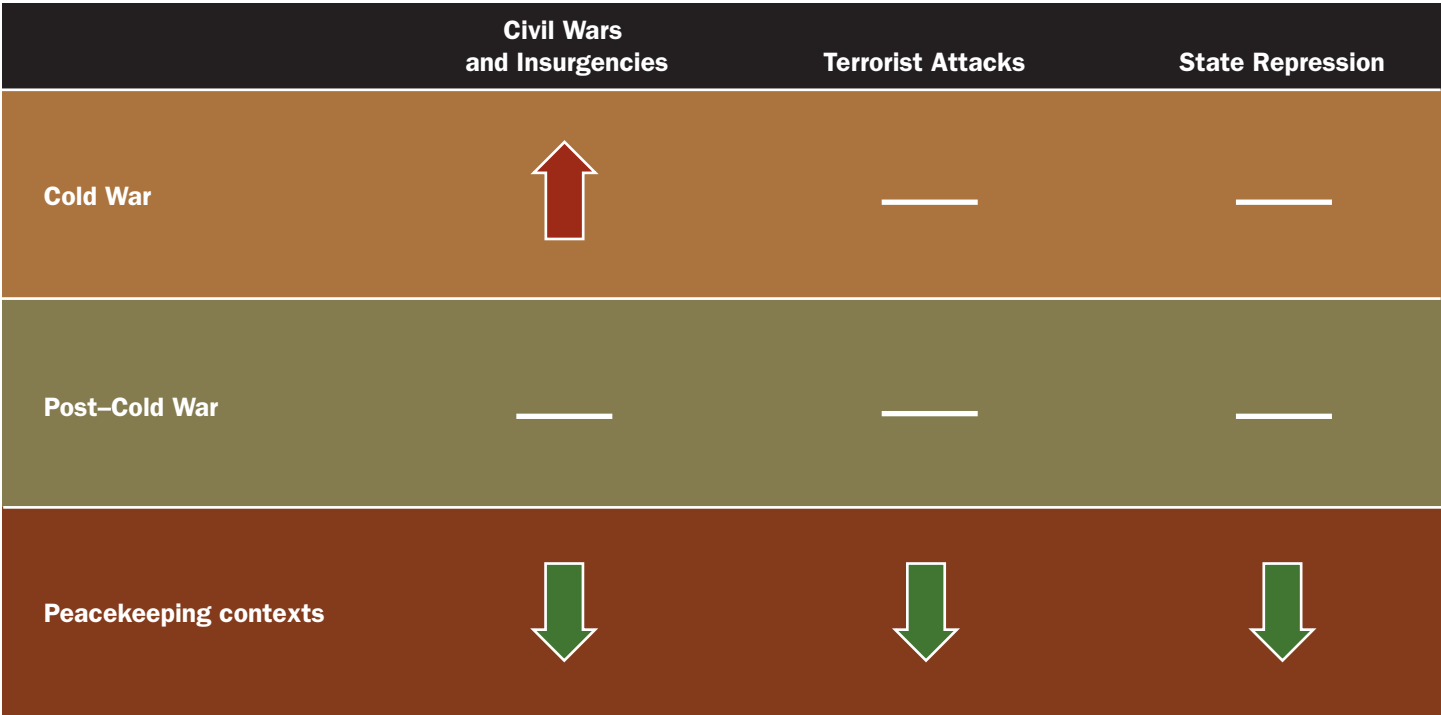### In Peacekeeping Contexts, Security Sector Assistance Has Had Significant, Positive Impacts

Although SSA has not had any identifiable net effect on political violence across most countries on the continent, SSA has had a significant impact on the incidence of political violence when conducted in conjunction with United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations. Even when they controlled for the favorable direct effects of "blue helmets," the authors found that SSA, when executed in the presence of UN peacekeepers, has statistically significant, additionally favorable effects on a range of outcomes. In fact, under these conditions, SSA *decreases* the likelihood of all three types of political violence of interest: renewed conflict, terrorist attacks, and government repression (see the figure). Because only a few countries have hosted peacekeeping operations, these findings are based on a small number of cases and so must be treated with some caution. They do, however, provide reason for hope.

A statistical analysis, such as the one the authors conducted, cannot uncover the precise reasons for these favorable effects, but they are entirely consistent with the security sector reform (SSR) literature. The SSR paradigm emphasizes that the capabilities of security forces should be built in conjunction with improvements to security governance. The presence of a UN peacekeeping operation typically provides many of the prerequisites for a successful approach to security governance: regular, intensive contact between international advisers and the partner nation's security personnel; a relatively long-term commitment; close oversight of the performance of security forces; and the integration of train-and-equip efforts into an overall political strategy. One of the criticisms of the SSR paradigm has been the relatively thin base of rigorous empirical support for its prescriptions. The statistical results of the RAND authors' analysis help to fill that gap.

One prominent example of this successful type of SSA is the U.S. support of UN peacekeeping efforts in Liberia following the end of that country's civil war in 2003. At the time, U.S. foreign policy was increasingly focused on fighting transnational terrorism, although Liberia was of little or no importance in this effort. Nevertheless, from 2003 to 2010, the United States undertook the task of completely rebuilding the Liberian armed forces and defense ministry in conjunction with the UN peacekeeping mission. U.S. decisions surrounding the size and

> If durable improvements in security typically occur only when the United States makes long-term commitments to a partner, constructs a comprehensive political–military strategy, invests in building security governance institutions, and provides personnel on the ground over long periods of time to offer advice and oversee implementation, it is little surprise that SSA, for much of its history, has had such a discouraging record in Africa.

Security Sector Assistance's Relationship to Political Violence in Africa

	Civil Wars and Insurgencies	Terrorist Attacks	State Repression
Cold War	↑	—	—
Post–Cold War	—	—	—
Peacekeeping contexts	↓	↓	↓

SOURCE: Stephen Watts, Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Sean Mann, Michael J. McNerney, and Andrew Brooks, *Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2447-OSD, 2018.
NOTE: A dash indicates no statistically significant change.

organization of the new army, as well as the vetting and training of recruits, were driven by conflict-prevention concerns. Recent research suggests that SSA was successful in Liberia precisely because it was conducted in conjunction with a peacekeeping operation.

If durable improvements in security typically occur only when the United States makes long-term commitments to a partner, constructs a comprehensive political–military strategy, invests in building security governance institutions, and provides personnel on the ground over long periods of time to offer advice and oversee implementation, it is little surprise that SSA, for much of its history, has had such a discouraging record in Africa. With some important exceptions, U.S. SSA programs and processes are typically not designed for such a committed approach. Although the U.S. officials whom the authors interviewed were clear about the challenges posed by many African partners, the U.S. officials were also often emphatic about the problems of the United States' own making: "The system," one former senior U.S. official declared, "is designed for failure." Another official echoed this judgment. Because of the U.S. focus on immediate operational objectives, he said, "The whole model is upside-down. We train and equip our partners first, then worry about institution-building."[7]

Recommendations

RAND research suggests that substantial changes are required if SSA is to have the impact the United States hopes. These changes need to be made in strategies, programs, and evaluations, as outlined in the following recommendations.

Strategic Recommendations

At the strategic level, the United States needs to be clear about its primary goals, and it needs to have realistic expectations about what can be achieved through SSA. The authors recommend the following changes in strategy:

- *Balance the goals of access and influence with the goals of governance.* In Africa, the United States uses SSA both to build partner capacity to combat irregular threats (such as terrorism) and to gain access to and influence with important partner nations. The Cold War record suggests that these two goals can be in conflict. In attempting to ensure that partners in Africa remained aligned with the United States rather than the Soviet Union, the United States might well have aggravated domestic political tensions and ultimately increased the incidence of civil wars on the continent. Looking forward, many observers anticipate increased international competition for influence in Africa.[8] The United

Sgt. Melvin Tolbert, right, of the Armed Forces of Liberia Training Command, was part of a delegation visiting Fort Benning, Georgia, in August 2009 to learn how to train Liberia's new army to take over security in the country upon completion of the UN Mission in Liberia, which was successfully concluded in March 2018.
PHOTO: KRISTIN MOLINARO, THE BAYONET

States might again be tempted to relegate governance issues to second-tier status in an effort to maintain its existing partnerships. Doing so, however, could come at a sizable cost if it again enflames domestic political rivalries. The United States should balance its efforts to maintain influence in Africa with efforts to stabilize partner nations.

- *Focus on fewer partners for longer periods of time.* SSA takes time to become effective. There appears to be a lag of at least a couple of years before any impact at all is observable. Even in the best of circumstances, the improvement visible in a single year is extremely small. Only by committing over long periods of time are larger changes possible—in the security sector as in other areas of state capacity.[9] The United States typically adopts exactly the opposite approach, surging large amounts of SSA funding to countries in response to a crisis, then moving its focus and resources to the next crisis when it arises. Such an approach has yielded few, if any, durable gains in security among U.S. partner nations.[10]

Programmatic Recommendations

At the programmatic level, the United States needs to invest in the capabilities necessary to produce durable improvements in its partners' internal security. The authors recommend the following changes in programming:

- *Better integrate SSA activities into an overarching political strategy.* SSA activities can be prioritized on the basis of threat, opportunity, or expected impact. Too often, SSA expenditures are directed at an immediate threat or at targets of opportunity, with little regard for how they might contribute to a long-term, comprehensive political strategy to build durable improvements. The U.S. government's Integrated Country Strategies were supposed to solve this problem, but, in practice, the strategies as written often serve as paperwork exercises to justify the SSA programs rather than as documents to guide the programs. Part of the problem lies in the short time frames associated with congressional appropriations and the short rotation cycles of U.S. personnel involved in SSA planning, both of which have the

primary effect of reprising prior years' efforts and perpetuating short-term objectives.

- *Invest in defense institution–building (DIB).* If security governance is critical to impact, DIB programs are critical to effective SSA. Most DIB programs have small budgets and limited scope in Africa. Additional resources for DIB are essential to SSA success.

- *Provide persistent presence and oversight.* Part of the reason SSA appears to be effective in peacekeeping contexts might be that the personnel associated with such operations create intensive interaction with partners and their oversight of SSA. If this is the case, the United States should invest in long-term advisory and education programs, as well as in the experienced personnel necessary for these positions. A handful of programs and funding sources currently support having such advisers, but the dedicated resources remain a tiny proportion of overall SSA expenditures.

Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Recommendations

The U.S. government has taken important steps toward improving its assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AME) of SSA. Perhaps the single greatest impetus was the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, which mandated that the U.S. Department of Defense improve its AME practices.[11] Even before the 2017 authorization, improvements were visible at both the Department of Defense and the Department of State. These new initiatives represent vital first steps, but considerable work remains to be done. The authors recommend the following changes in AME:

- *Sustain a commitment to improved AME.* When budgets come under pressure, AME is a tempting target. Recent improvements in AME need to be sustained and refined. Improved data collection on SSA expenditures and activities should be a priority; comprehensive data on expenditures and activities should be collected in ways that facilitate evaluations, as well as meet accounting and legal compliance requirements.

- *Adopt a dual-track approach to AME.* Durable capacity-building requires adaptation to local requirements. Consequently, part of AME should take the form of quick-turn, informal evaluations that allow for an iterative process of experimentation and rapid adjustments. At the same time, a second track of AME should focus on rigorous measurement of impacts over extended periods of time. Partners should not be penalized for failing to make progress in the short term; such an approach would stifle innovation and pose a risk to honest communication between U.S. personnel and their partners. On the other hand, if no impact can be demonstrated in longer time frames, the United States should reinvest in more-promising partners or lines of effort.

- *Conduct political risk assessments.* Part of the reason SSA demonstrated no net impact in Africa in the post–Cold War era might be that its positive and negative effects in different contexts offset each other. The United States should attempt to anticipate such counterproductive effects through political risk assessments—and then mitigate such effects. For years, the development community has used "conflict-sensitive" planning approaches that incorporate such risk assessments. Some of these planning tools could be adapted to SSA. But SSA also poses unique challenges, such as the risk of coups, the formation of effectively praetorian guards, and the difficulties of obtaining data in a field that is highly politically sensitive and often opaque to outsiders. These issues are not as well understood as those with which the development community is familiar. Additional research in these areas is necessary to help build better risk-assessment tools. ●

Endnotes

1 SSA is the official U.S. term for all forms of security aid and advice, including transfers of military materiel, tactical combat training, joint exercises, military education for foreign military officers, and defense institution–building (DIB). SSA encompasses programs led by the U.S. Department of State (normally referred to as *security assistance*), the U.S. Department of Defense (normally called *security cooperation* or *security force assistance*), and all other departments in the U.S. government. This terminology derives from Presidential Policy Directive 23, Security Sector Assistance. The contents of the directive are summarized in White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Sector Assistance Policy," press release on Presidential Policy Directive 23, April 5, 2013. As of April 5, 2018: https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=747214

2 This logic is evident in the U.S. government's recently released Stabilization Assistance Review, as well as in Africa-specific guidance, such as the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) theater campaign plan and 2017 AFRICOM posture statement. See Commander, AFRICOM, Theater Campaign Plan 2000–16, August 18, 2015, not available to the general public; and Thomas D. Waldhauser, "General Thomas D. Waldhauser, Commander, U.S. Africa Command: Prepared Opening Statement, U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee," March 9, 2017. As of August 13, 2017: http://www.africom.mil/media-room/document/28722/africom-commander-prepared-opening-comments-to-sasc

3 Multiple sources of official U.S. guidance have indicated that SSA is intended, at least in substantial part, to reduce these three types of violence. Three of the five goals for SSA in the AFRICOM campaign plan, for instance, relate to terrorism and insurgency: neutralizing al-Shabaab (a jihadist fundamentalist group based in east Africa), degrading violent extremist organizations in the Sahel region, and containing Boko Haram (another jihadist organization, based in northeastern Nigeria). A fifth goal focuses on building African partners' peacekeeping capacity.

4 This analysis could test for the effects of SSA in only the recipient countries. It could not, for instance, capture whether SSA improved the effectiveness of African peacekeeping forces deployed beyond the borders of the troop-contributing country that had received U.S. SSA.

5 See, for instance, Inspector General, U.S. Department of Defense, *Evaluation of Department of Defense Efforts to Build Counterterrorism and Stability Operations Capacity of Foreign Military Forces with Section 1206/2282 Funding*, Washington, D.C., July 21, 2017. As of August 2, 2018: https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=802798
For details of specific cases in Africa, see Stephen Watts, Kimberly Jackson, Sean Mann, and Stephen Dalzell, *A Developmental Approach to Building Sustainable Security–Sector Capacity in Africa*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2048-AFRICOM, 2018. As of August 31, 2018: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2048.html

6 Stephen Watts, *Identifying and Mitigating Risks in Security Sector Assistance for Africa's Fragile States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-808-A, 2015. As of August 2, 2018: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR808.html

7 The former assessment was that of Phillip Carter, former U.S. ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire and former deputy to the commander for civil–military engagement at AFRICOM, offered in an interview with RAND researchers. The latter assessment was that of an SSA planner in an anonymous interview with RAND researchers. See Watts, Jackson, et al., 2018.

8 The U.S. National Defense Strategy, for instance, contends that the United States is entering a new era of great-power competition. See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., January 19, 2018. As of July 6, 2018: https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf

9 Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock, and Matt Andrews, *Capability Traps? The Mechanisms of Persistent Implementation Failure*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development, Working Paper 234, December 7, 2010. As of August 2, 2018: https://www.cgdev.org/publication/capability-traps-mechanisms-persistent-implementation-failure-working-paper-234
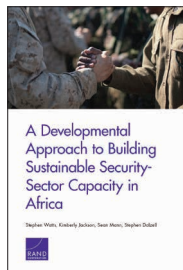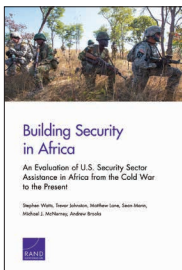
10 The United States, for instance, greatly increases SSA expenditures to the frontline states that border a country experiencing a civil war, presumably in an effort to protect those states from the destabilizing spillover effects of wars. But there is no evidence that these surges in SSA make the neighboring states any more resilient. See Stephen Watts, Patrick B. Johnston, Jennifer Kavanagh, Sean M. Zeigler, Bryan Frederick, Trevor Johnston, Karl P. Mueller, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Nathan Chandler, Meagan L. Smith, Alexander Stephenson, and Julia A. Thompson, *Limited Intervention: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Limited Stabilization, Limited Strike, and Containment Operations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2037-A, 2017, pp. 84–92. As of August 2, 2018: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2037.html

11 Public Law 114-328, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, December 23, 2016. As of August 2, 2018: https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-114publ328/content-detail.html

On the Cover:

Soldiers of the Burkina Faso Army stand at attention at Camp Zagre, Burkina Faso, on February 27, 2017, at the opening of Flintlock 2017. The annual exercise, sponsored by the U.S. Africa Command, aims to strengthen security institutions, promote multilateral information sharing, and develop interoperability among partner nations in the Trans-Sahara region.

PHOTO: U.S. ARMY/SPECIALIST BRITANY SLESSMAN, 3RD SPECIAL FORCES GROUP (AIRBORNE)

www.rand.org