

Biden escalates ‘forever war’ in Somalia

written by Uriel Araujo

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Biden has authorized the redeployment of hundreds of troops in Somalia, thus reversing Trump's December 2020 decision. The U.S. plans to establish a "persistent military presence" there. This new development is not very surprising, and in fact Washington had never quite left the country but has always maintained at least an advisory presence.

The U.S. has had an "[invisible](#)" presence in Africa for a while, encompassing a whole range of covert and clandestine operations - this includes the Horn of Africa, where Somalia is located. Washington has been militarily involved in the country since the early 1990s, as part of a humanitarian intervention in the context of civil war. By the early 2000s, violent fundamentalist Islamic groups started to grow in power and numbers, including the al-Shabaab, which started an insurgency in 2006-7.

At the end of his presidential term, former United States President Donald Trump had removed most troops from this African country, redeploying them to nearby states, so as to offer remote assistance to the Somali authorities against the al-Shabaab rebels. Recent U.S. intelligence reports claim that since the troops left, this group has grown stronger.

In July 2021 the Biden administration carried its [first airstrike on Somali soil](#) against al Shabaab combatants, shortly after withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. This took place without White House's approval and was justified by the Pentagon by invoking the 2001 "Authorization for the Use of Military Force", even though this pertains to the terrorist groups that attacked the World Trade Center towers twenty years ago. In a context of growing mobilization in both houses to reclaim oversight of the war powers the Presidency and the Pentagon have accumulated since the 911 attacks in 2001, even top Democrats (from Biden's own party) warned that such actions were a "[dangerous precedent](#)". Even so, other such strikes followed - there was a major one in February 2022, for example. Voices within the Pentagon had been defending the redeployment of troops in Somalia since early 2021. It has finally

happened.

One of recently elected Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's first actions was to issue a statement thanking President Biden for the redeployment and describing Washington as a "reliable partner" in the country's anti-terrorism efforts. However several sectors of the country's society dispute this description.

According to an Amnesty International April 2020 [report](#), by the year 2020 the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) had already conducted hundreds of air strikes over a decade, with zero accountability for the deaths of civilians, who were routinely labeled as "terrorists", and with no compensation of any kind to the families.

According to former Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council (in the U.S.) [Luke Hartig](#), it is simply not clear how Biden's escalation of Washington's "forever war" in Somalia even fits into the United States larger counterterrorism strategy, and this is so because the White House so far has not released its own National Strategy for Counterterrorism. As a result of this lack of transparency, nobody really knows what the strategy is and one can only speculate.

It is widely known, for example, that U.S. oil companies, such as Coastline Exploration Ltd, have interests in the country. Already in 1993, a Los Angeles Times [article](#) stated that "nearly two-thirds of Somalia was allocated to the U.S. oil giants Conoco, Amoco, Chevron, and Phillips".

When discussing Somalia, not so much is talked, though, about U.S.-China geopolitical competition in the region. Already in January 2021 the FPRI website published a [piece](#) by former U.S. Ambassador to Somalia Stephen M. Schwartz arguing that the withdrawal of troops could "open the door" to a "greater role for the People's Republic of China" on the continent. Moreover, he argued that Somalia is "more" than just al-Shabaab. [Chinese presence in Africa](#) is of course a great concern for Washington.

More recently, in a March 18, 2002 article, former Pentagon official Michael Rubin criticized Biden's "neglect" of Africa in general and of Somalia and its neighboring region, arguing that it was about time Washington provided "democratic, pro-Taiwan Somaliland" with the means to "defend itself against a Chinese-backed regime". The Republic of Somaliland is a de facto state internationally considered to be part of Somalia, which lies on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden, a very strategic area, for a number of reasons, and is bordered by Djibouti, where China has its only overseas military base.

There is no indication so far the current administration will pursue any such policy pertaining to Somaliland specifically. In any case, for Washington, its activities in Somalia and in the larger Horn of Africa region are in now way merely about classic counter-terrorism operations. It is also about a kind of great power competition with Beijing.

While carrying on such a geopolitical dispute, the very legality of the U.S. military actions has been disputed, and Washington's terrible record of human rights infringement in the region has been largely forgotten, while Biden's presidency still hypocritically pursues the narrative of a moral leadership regarding human democracy and the rule of law.

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