

Western Military Intervention in Somalia: The Correct Approach

Written by Dan G. Cox

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DAN G. COX, MAY 25 2012

Western military intervention into Somalia reflects a reasoned logic and understanding of the environment that is rare. Having said that, the lessons of the first western intervention into Somalia have taught us that great plans can morph into chaos in a heartbeat. This is especially true in the current foreign policy context dominated by armed democratization and a low tolerance for mass atrocities or human suffering in any state.

Before delving into the mission creep that could manifest in the Somali case, it is necessary to emphasize the genius of the current approach. Some scholars have taken issue with the development of the joint combatant command overseeing Africa, (AFRICOM). But time has shown that not only is Africa important to current American security interests, potential terrorist threats from Al Shabab and Boko Haram, but as Africa develops, it will likely prove more vital to western economic interests. Not enough ink has been spilled extolling the virtues of the planning and execution prowess this command has achieved under very trying circumstances.

The plan to address insecurity emanating from Somalia has always been two-fold: 1) provide security force assistance to friendly neighbors and Transitional National Government Forces (TNG), and 2) provide actual firepower on a limited basis when necessary. Training has been ongoing for several years between the American Army and the Ethiopian Army. This led to a successful Ethiopian incursion into Somalia against Al Shabab in 2007 and 2008. Unfortunately, diplomatic wires were crossed and while the American government warned the Ethiopian military against taking the Somali capital of Mogadishu, they did so anyway. This unified the country against the Ethiopian interlopers and resulted in their eventual expulsion. Al Shabab grew in power but it would be short-lived.

Currently, successful special forces raids and drone attacks against key Al Shabab leaders combined with better contractor trained Somali forces has resulted in Al Shabab's near demise. While Rachel Maddow might believe that all military contractors are universally bad and part of a wider Cheney conspiracy to unconstitutionally expand presidential war powers, in this case, military contractors are shouldering the burden and accepting the risk that should help insulate the United States from a "drift" toward war in Somalia that she is allegedly so concerned about. In fact, these contractors and the corporations they work for have no interest in seeing the mandate in Somalia spread into a nation-building exercise. They are paid by the Somali government to help them shore up their own internal defense capability and then they leave when that narrow mission is accomplished.

As Al Shabab's power wanes, western powers are now focusing on the problem of Somali piracy. This is further evidence, in my opinion, of the genius of the AFRICOM and NATO planning cells dealing with Somalia for it appears that the effort is phased to focus maximum power against security threats in Somalia sequentially. The efforts against piracy initially involved an ineffective international interdiction effort, but as more thought was given to the environment, it became clear that the source of the piracy problem was on land: specifically the land-based safe havens and headquarters of the pirates. Recently, the European Union launched a full air attack against pirate leaders in Puntland. This follows on the heels of an EU decision to pursue pirates into internal waters and attempt to disrupt pirates from internal water choke points before they hit the high sea.

The air strikes could not have gone off without significant intelligent assets on the ground. Do not be surprised if

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small special or conventional force incursions follow. There will be a need to develop further intelligence and take out high value targets from the ground as well. All of these actions fit into the original plan and do not overly entangle the United States or Europe in Somalia.

However, all of this comes with a warning because some policy-maker somewhere might be thinking about the future of Somalia after piracy and hatching a plan to rebuild the nation (and state) of Somalia. This is precisely what happened last time and it will lead to the same failure. Let us hope that the lessons of intervention in Somalia have been learned and will not be repeated. Somalia will be rebuilt but it will be rebuilt by the Somalis themselves. Westerners will play a role but it will largely be entrepreneurial. As dark as the past two decades for Somalia have been, the stability and development in both Somaliland and Puntland coupled with the demise or near demise of Al Shabab and a concerted attack on Somali piracy point to a brighter future for the Horn of Africa.

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