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MILITARIZATION IN AFRICA

UPDATE

By Ava Silva

Since the initial briefing over militarization in Africa, Congress has moved to introduce a bill to “Counter Chinese Threats to U.S. National Security in Africa” on October 11, 2023 (HR 5931). The legislation was introduced by Republican Representative John W. Rose from Tennessee with Stacey Plaskett, a Democrat from the Virgin Islands, as a cosponsor. The bill is in the early stages of the legislative process, and still needs to be considered by committee before it is sent to the full House or Senate.

The bill being sponsored by both a member of the Democratic and Republican party shows the bipartisan potential of the United States involvement in Africa. Due to the bipartisan nature of this issue, Biden has attempted to commit as having African relations be a key priority in his campaign. While the Biden Administration initially promised a new US-Africa strategy in 2022, as recorded on page three of the initial briefing, his current priority has been to push for the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The pact is a two-decade-old agreement between eligible African countries, including the following: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Republic of Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2022).

The program allows qualifying countries duty-free access to the U.S. market; many of the African countries are requesting the pact to be extended for 16 years (Brice, 23). Democratic Senator Chris Coons, a leading voice on US-Africa foreign policy, has released a draft of the AGOA reauthorization act (Fabricius, 2023). However, the draft

version of the bill is not identical to the program that has been in place since 2000. The updated rendition would maintain benefits for countries as they grow wealthier, until they are determined high-income for five years, rather than removing them if they reach that threshold for a single year (Brice, 2023). Across the aisle, James Risch, a Republican in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wrote a letter to President Biden expressing support for the reauthorization with the caveat of changes to the program's eligibility criteria (Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2023). This letter largely voiced a distaste at South Africa's continued eligibility, considering their close relationship with Russia.

The main motivation behind this government action is to support American hegemony against other nations. The main influences in the region, outside of American influence, continues to be Russia and China; however, in recent years, China's influence has been growing while Russia's diminishes (Bartlett, 2023). Paul Nantulya, a research associate at the African Center for Strategic Studies, points to this relationship to the military development in the African countries. Russia has long been the largest arms supplier, but as Nantulya says, "China is ahead on every other metric, when you look at military professionalism, when you look at military training and capacity building, when you look at support to the African Union." In fact, China's People's Liberation Army marked the 96th anniversary of its founding this week and the occasion was celebrated in many African countries.

Within Africa itself, there are some signs that military coups are on the rise again (Mwai, 2023). On August 30, 2023, a group of Gabonese military officer seized power after President Ali Bongo Ondimba was elected to a third term (Henry, 2023). This marks the latest in a series of military takeovers on the continent. In 2022, there were two coups in Burkina Faso, as well as failed attempts in Guinea Bissau.

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