

The United Kingdom - Training Troops and Maintaining Influence in Africa

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

The United Kingdom (UK) has largely avoided a permanent military presence in Africa since the de-colonisation period that began in the 1950s, with the notable exception of the British training units in Kenya. Instead, the UK has favoured ‘soft’ approaches to projecting military power, such as bilateral capacity-building and peace support. This approach serves the UK’s broader goals of projecting its global reach and military strength, while securing influence with and access to allies and former colonies.

TRAINING BRITISH TROOPS IN KENYA

Kenya is of great strategic importance to the UK. This is partly because it is home to a permanent British military installation, a training facility operated by the British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK) under a bilateral defence cooperation agreement with the Kenyan Government.

Located 200 km north of Nairobi, BATUK is comprised of a relatively small number of permanent staff who provide logistical support for exercises carried out by as many as 10,000 British troops on the ground annually. The training conducted in Kenya is seen as vital to preparing British troops for deployment on expeditionary operations in hot and arid climates and terrains, such as Afghanistan. BATUK is also used for forward operating bases and other tasks.

This valuable training unit is an illustration of British colonial heritage in the region. The UK’s military presence in Kenya dates back to British colonial rule, when thousands of British troops were stationed in the country. Early plans for a military base were first drawn up after World War II, in recognition

of Kenya’s strategic position near key shipping lanes and the need for British capabilities ‘east of Suez’. At the time, it was argued that a permanent base in Kenya would speed up the acclimatisation process for British troops and provide a launching pad for those bound for the Middle East.

Over the years, BATUK has occasionally emerged as a point of tension between the UK and Kenya. Diplomatic spats have been reported concerning land use, as well as jurisdiction over British military personnel accused of committing crimes in Kenya, among other issues. Nonetheless, the UK and Kenya secured a new agreement on defence cooperation in 2015, ensuring the smooth continuation of BATUK.

As part of the defence relationship between the two countries, Britain also holds joint military exercises with Kenyan forces and offers training in the UK for members of the Kenya Defence Forces. The UK has recently invested 20 million GBP in a seven-year project to rebuild the premises that will assemble all of its training assets onto a central site in Nanyuki, signalling BATUK’s continuing importance.

BRITISH MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO AFRICAN PARTNERS

In addition to training British troops, the UK operates a vast network of military assistance programmes aimed at training African troops. This typically involves deploying short-term advisory, training, and peace support teams that focus on capacity-building of the host country’s local personnel in, for example, tackling terrorism.

As part of this effort, the UK has been leading a security training centre in Baidoa, Somalia, since January 2017. Approximately 85 British personnel train the Somali National Army and the African

Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). The UK has also had resident military training teams in Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and South Africa, in addition to short-term training teams deployed in several other countries.

The British Army has recently established specialised infantry battalions trained in cultural and linguistic skills and with a focus on capacity-building of UK partners. By educating and training the national forces of other African countries in the British military tradition, the UK purports to contribute to stability and good governance, as well as to the interoperability of its own security structures with each of theirs.

Building and maintaining security links with African states also addresses issues – such as terrorism and violent extremism – that are increasingly perceived by British policymakers as threats to the UK's domestic security. In 2017, for example, the British Peace Support Team handed over an Asymmetrical Warfare Battle Camp to the Kenya Defence Forces, for the use of both Kenyan and British troops.

At the same time, providing military assistance allows the UK to cultivate strategically bilateral relationships and build influence; in other words, it uses defence networks for the purpose of exerting 'soft power'. This focus on relationships is central to the current strategy of making British defence policy 'International by Design', and fits into the government's broader 'Global Britain' vision that aims to maintain the UK's status as a global player on the world stage.

An important component of this approach is defence engagement, defined as 'non-combat activities with international partners, which contribute to stability, security and prosperity'. Since the release of the latest national security review (the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, hereafter the British National Security Strategy), defence engagement has become a funded, core task of the British Ministry of Defence. The further creation of a regional British Defence Staff, in Abuja, Nigeria, intended to oversee a growing program of military advisory and capacity-building activities on the continent, signals a continuing focus on this 'soft' arm of the UK's military.

NURTURING KEY RELATIONSHIPS

Other British military efforts in the region can similarly be viewed as part of an emphasis on maintaining relationships, and relevance, in an evolving geopolitical arena. The recent deployment of a British contingent to aid French counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel, for example, indicates a growing British focus on the Anglo-French defence partnership.

Observers have described this shift as being part of a perceived need to cement the UK's position as a reliable security partner to European countries in the context of Brexit. Others have predicted that the UK may find it difficult to maintain its influence in places where EU member states will likely take advantage of Brexit for their own benefit, such as in North Africa.

Also noteworthy is the UK's relationship with the United States (US) concerning security in the region. According to media reports, British military personnel have been stationed at the large US Camp Lemonnier, in Djibouti. The UK and the US also jointly operate bases in two British overseas territories near Africa: Ascension Island, in the South Atlantic Ocean, and Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean.

A CONTINUING 'SOFT' PRESENCE?

It appears unlikely that the UK will completely shift its focus away from the African continent, given their historical ties, in the near future. Moreover, the current British National Security Strategy specifically identifies that instability in northern Africa poses a Tier One (highest level) risk for the UK. Accordingly, it is in the UK's interest to support peace and stability in the region, and to prevent 'ungoverned spaces' that can be exploited by terrorist groups.

In the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan, with British public opinion seeming to weigh against direct military intervention, the UK's 'muscular soft power' approach in Africa appears likely to endure. It remains to be seen, however, once the effects of Brexit crystallise, whether a military presence in Africa will become prioritised.

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