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## **The United States Foreign Policy in Arresting the Al-Shabaab Insurgency in Somalia, 2001-2022**

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**Ryan Amley Moyo**

*Centre for Security, Peace, and Conflict Resolution*

*Faculty of Humanities*

*Nelson Mandela University, South Africa*

*Email: [Ryan.Moyo@mandela.ac.za](mailto:Ryan.Moyo@mandela.ac.za)*

**Ntsikelelo Breakfast**

*Centre for Security, Peace, and Conflict Resolution*

*Faculty of Humanities*

*Nelson Mandela University, South Africa*

*Email: [Ntsikelelo.Breakfast@mandela.ac.za](mailto:Ntsikelelo.Breakfast@mandela.ac.za)*

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### **Abstract**

This article reflected on the conventional military-centric approach (hard power) and how it has been applied in countering the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. Over the past decade, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the Somali National Army (SNA), and its allies like the United States of America (USA) have actively engaged Al-Shabaab. Popular discourse suggests that Al-Shabaab is on the decline, yet despite undergoing heavy casualties and significant losses, there remains little evidence pointing towards defeat. This article assessed the United States' foreign policy strategies in arresting the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. The strategic theory was employed as the positionality of this article. This is a qualitative literature assessment study based on desktop research. Our central thesis is that the

strategy of the United States against Al-Shabaab in Somalia has resulted in short-term gains and has not necessarily ended the armed challenge in Somalia.

**Keywords:** *Al-Shabaab, AMISOM, Insurgency, Military-centric, SNA, Somalia, United States of America.*

## **Introduction**

Today, the Somali conflict remains a poster case study of a multi-faceted and deep-rooted struggle that has spanned several decades. It presents complex subject matters, including a shift from conventional and nuclear warfare, political instability, governance deficiencies, power struggles and factional rivalries. Additionally, governance challenges, including corruption, weak institutions and a lack of accountability, have hindered the establishment of effective government measures. Furthermore, gaining traction in Somalia is the impeding famine catapulted by the recurrent climate changes and drought, which have worsened economic conditions, leading to high starvation levels. Despite many issues that continue to plague the country and region, Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidin remains a potent threat.

Since 2007, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), supported by international allies such as the United States, has been in a military campaign against Al-Shabaab. Successive U.S. administrations from Bush to Biden have pursued strategies to weaken and eliminate insurgency/terrorist groups that pose a perceived threat to the United States. The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2002, The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism 2003 and 2006, The National Strategy for Homeland Security 2007, The National Security White House 2010, the National Security Strategy 2017, The National Security Strategy, 2022 serve as critical legislative policies that form the cornerstone of the U.S. Foreign Policy thinking. These documents provide the overarching framework and guidance for the United States' approach to national security, counterterrorism efforts, homeland security and strategic decision-making.

President Joe Biden's decision to redeploy the U.S. military to Somalia to combat Al-Shabaab represents a marked departure from his administration's position on extended military engagements (O'Brien, 2022). President Biden entered the White House having campaigned on the promise of an end to "forever wars", a term often used to refer to conflicts born of the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. response (Barrow, 2019),

raising expectations that the U.S. would reappraise wars and military engagements across the board, including various reviews that his foreign policy team committed to undertake upon entering office (Savage & Schmitt, 2021). However, a United States counterterrorism rationale continues to be influenced by the promise of threat by insurgents at the expense of a shift towards greater power politics.

Perhaps one of the main challenges of the U.S. policy in Somalia lies in the incongruity of pursuing military objectives and providing substantial humanitarian assistance if the country grapples with divisive internal politics. Given the prevailing circumstances, assessing whether the United States possesses a more favourable alternative to its current approach in Somalia is imperative. This alternative should offer a heightened prospect of steering Somalia towards sustainable stability while acknowledging the inherent limitations of the U.S. state-building capabilities. A significant question for the U.S. foreign policy is whether counterterrorism strikes are effective (Sterman, 2023) and if not, why.

This article examines the conventional military-centric approach (hard power) and how it has been applied in countering the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. It aims to assess the United States' foreign policy strategies in arresting the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. The strategic theory is employed as a positionality of this article. This is a qualitative literature assessment study based on secondary sources. The main limitation of this article is that it is non-empirical.

Moreover, this gap creates a scope for further research regarding the issue under the spotlight. The central thesis of this study is that the strategy of the United States against Al-Shabaab in Somalia has resulted in short-term gains and has not necessarily ended the armed challenge to the U.S. and its allies.

## **Methodology**

This article employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is valuable when sensitising concepts needed to explore and understand the phenomena under study (Flick, 2014). The selection of this research methodology is driven by the societal context in which the participants function and the underlying psychological factors that shape their decision-making processes. Essentially, it addresses the reasons and methods behind decision-making.

## ***Research Design and Approach***

There are numerous qualitative strategies of enquiry or research, including narrative design, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory studies and case studies (Creswell, 2009). This study employed an exploratory case study approach, explicitly focusing on Somalia, a nation deeply affected by prolonged internal conflict, famine and enduring poverty. Nonetheless, utilising the Somalian case study contributed to comprehending the relevant participants' decision-making intricacies. Ultimately, this comprehension was pivotal in assessing the effectiveness of American strategy. Furthermore, Somalia served as an ideal case study, enabling the examination of participants' observable behaviours and dynamics over an extended period.

This article employed a research approach that primarily involves an analytical review of existing literature on counterterrorism and terrorism, specifically focusing on American and Somali perspectives. This approach was driven by the challenges posed by distance and time constraints in collecting new data, aligning well with the nature of the research. It relied on a desk-based methodology, utilising pre-existing data that was subjected to thorough analysis.

Furthermore, this paper incorporated comprehensive document analysis as a crucial component. Bowen (2009: 27) defines document analysis as a systematic procedure for evaluating various documents, including printed and electronic materials. Various documents, such as press releases, books, institutional reports, diaries and journals, were considered. Document analysis uncovered the historical context and background of research, facilitating a deeper understanding of counterterrorism from the U.S. perspective. It also played a pivotal role in tracing the critical developments in the Somalian case study concerning the current situation.

## ***Data Collection***

The data collection method for this paper was document review. Liu (2018: 6) notes that documents are a rich source of qualitative data that provide insights into the origins and meaning of the processes and practices being discussed.

One significant advantage of document analysis is its ability to track changes and developments, especially when multiple document drafts are

available for comparison (Bowen, 2009). In the context of this paper, it allowed for precise observation of the evolution of the United States counterterrorism strategies. Documentary sources are typically categorised into two main types: primary and secondary materials. Primary sources refer to documents created during the studied time frame, while secondary sources are interpretations and analyses of historical events based on primary sources (Bell, 1999).

For this paper, secondary data collection methods were employed. Various sources were utilised, encompassing academic journals, articles, books, materials from humanitarian organisations, individual research findings and publications.

### **Theoretical Standpoint**

Strategic theory was employed as the standpoint of this article. The utilisation of strategic theory in this article serves as a fundamental standpoint due to its valuable contribution to analysing the complex political dynamics of the Somali conflict. It provides a framework for evaluating the strategies employed by the United States in addressing the issue of terrorism in Somalia. Strategic theory, as an interdisciplinary approach, encompasses the art and science of leveraging a state's political, economic, social, psychological and military capacities in alignment with policy guidelines to create effects that protect or advance national interests (Yarger, 2006). Strategic theory offers systematic insights into effectively utilising force in conflict scenarios by employing armed forces to advance political, social, economic, cultural or ideological objectives. It acknowledges the underlying assumption that both nation-states and non-state actors possess significant interests and employ various elements of power to vigorously pursue and promote their respective interests, representing the resources available to them.

Strategic theory enables the development of contexts while maintaining a coherent framework that systematically organises the content (Neumann, 2002). This framework is guided by three underlying assumptions: (1) military force is a dimension of power exercised towards political goals, (2) politics can be likened to a competition for power among actors seeking to maximise their influence relative to others, and (3) all actors act rationally (Smith, 1991). It constitutes a theory in the broader sense that it advances a set of propositions that, if accurate, can be held to explain specific facts or phenomena. In this regard, strategic

theory reveals itself less as a set of hard and fast rules and more as a series of purposive assumptions that guide analysis (Smith, 2011).

Strategically analysing the Somali conflict entails utilising a framework to comprehensively grasp the objectives, interests and power dynamics of the various actors involved, including the Somali government and the international stakeholders. This analysis further delves into the formation of alliances, decision-making processes, and the considerations of risks and benefits undertaken by these actors. Further, it informs on the approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding by examining reconciliation efforts, governance strengthening and addressing underlying causes of conflict. In the next section, we explore the historical development of the U.S.'s foreign policy regarding terrorism in Somalia.

### **US Engagement in Somalia: Historical Phases and Motivations**

U.S. engagement in Somalia is very complex, spanning over several decades. Key phases include the Cold War era (1960s-1980s), Operation Restore Hope (1992-1993), Battle of Mogadishu (1993), withdrawal and international involvement, limited engagement (2000s-2010s) and various counterterrorism efforts. To comprehensively understand the involvement of the United States in Somalia, it is also important to consider its role within the broader context of the U.S. counterterrorism efforts across the African continent. Examining U.S.–Somali relations throughout history becomes essential in contextualising the current situation. By delving into this discussion, we can address the fundamental question of why Somalia has emerged as a new frontier for direct U.S. military presence, unravelling the political dynamics and motivations behind such strategic decisions. To grasp the current dynamics in U.S.–Somali relations, it is imperative to conduct a brief retrospective analysis of American foreign policy across the African continent as a brief window into how Somalia remains an area of strategic importance. An understanding of prevailing circumstances necessitates a historical examination, as the past plays a pivotal role in elucidating the present.

From the late 1950s until the late 1980s, U.S. engagement with the region was largely defined by Cold War logic and remained relatively limited (Lawson, 2007). Consequentially, before 1960, U.S. involvement in Africa was minimal, politically and militarily, but was very active from an economic perspective. Many of its companies were involved at various stages in the scramble for Africa, flooding the continent and

looking for markets. However, Cold War contestations with the Soviet Union turned it towards some strategic places of interest in Africa, like Zaire, Angola and apartheid South Africa. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union's effort to secure a foothold on the African continent resulted in the United States lavishing attention and resources on the continent, establishing unique relationships with geo-strategically important states such as South Africa and Zaire to counter communist expansion (Pham, 2007). American foreign policy, especially during the Cold War era, was therefore predetermined by the Soviet action, as no significant action was taken without consideration of its prime enemy. Furthermore, American foreign policy, like that of the Soviet Union, has always been shaped “in a triangular arena: The United States, Africa and the Soviet Union” (Desfosses, 1987:3). Therefore, as the United States transitioned to a more engaged posture, Somalia gained significant prominence among several other nations, leading to a shift in the U.S. approach towards more active engagement in the region.

In response to the perceived threat of Soviet influence and the spread of socialism in Africa, the United States sought to form alliances with African leaders to align them with the Western bloc. Economic aid played a crucial role in the success of U.S. actions, as it provided the support that the Soviet Union could not offer and addressed the lack of government backing prevalent in many African countries. The provision of foreign aid by the American government traces back to the Truman Doctrine in 1947, which formalised the Cold War foreign aid programme. Secretary of State George C. Marshall, in a speech at Harvard University on June 5, 1947, emphasised the importance of restoring economic health worldwide, as political stability would remain elusive without it. Initially, during the 1940s and 1950s, such aid focused primarily on European colonial powers responsible for the region. However, in the 1960s, the United States shifted its focus to the African continent. Therefore, before the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. government did not have strategic interests in Somalia.

### ***Rationale and Reasoning behind the Somali Intervention***

Having considered the historical nuances of American foreign policy in Africa, it is crucial to explore the underlying reasons that led the United States to shift its focus towards Somalia. The year 1991 holds great significance in global affairs as it marked the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading to the end of the Cold War. Simultaneously, the downfall

of Siad Barre's government in Somalia in the same year triggered the disintegration of the Somali state, plunging the country into a protracted civil war. For nearly 40 years, the U.S. policy towards Africa had been influenced by the dynamics of the Cold War, resulting in fluctuating levels of American interest in the continent depending on perceived Soviet gains or threats. With the end of the Cold War, however, the United States had an opportunity to redefine its relationship with Africa. It is crucial, therefore, to explore the circumstances that led the United States to engage with Somalia during this period. Notably, the diminished influence of the Soviet Union no longer held sway, yet the U.S. government continued its involvement in Somalia. Moreover, one could argue that following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, there were no threats or emerging security concerns that demanded immediate attention, reaffirming the United States' position as the sole superpower.

The United States, operating under a "big brother" stance has been in Somalia since the turn of the Cold War. As the sole remaining superpower, despite limited previous interest in Africa, the U.S. government sought to win over many of the allies that had been in the Soviet camp through the offer of conditioned aid, liberalisation of the markets and foreign direct investment. However, a significant shift occurred in American strategic policy in Africa from 1992 to 1994. The massive influx of weapons and small arms from Eastern Europe during the 1990s fuelled the conflicts, and with no central authority to govern such states as Somalia, civil unrest broke out (Solomon, 2015). The United States army, with a long-standing history and tradition of humanitarian relief and aid and unable to explain to the world why the United States, as the sole remaining superpower and leader of the new world order, was unable to stop starvation, took the onus upon itself to offer aid. Fresh from its triumph in Operation Desert Storm, the President George H. W. Bush-led administration felt it could not ignore the situation despite the apparent risks of intervening in a country still at war with itself (Stewart, 2002). Therefore, prompted by the need to aid the chaotic country, the operation code-named "Restore Hope" was initiated in 1992. Operation Restore Hope was a joint and combined effort under the direction of a unified task force or Unified Task Force (UNITAF) with a clear mission of ensuring that food supplies got to the people by securing safe passages in Somalia. In response, the U.S. government deployed troops to Somalia under Operations Restore Hope and Continue Hope. The failure of these missions, notably through the tragic events of "Black Hawk Down", led to the withdrawal of American



troops from Somalia. The loss of 18 American personnel and the injury of 78 others served as a significant catalyst in ending direct American military engagement in Somalia and Africa for a lengthy period.

### ***United States efforts in Somalia***

Under Operations Restore Hope and Provide Relief, the U.S. government sought to stabilise the free flow and movement of relief aid in Somalia, a country plagued by the absence of a central government, prolonged famine, and the emergence of competing factions vying for power and control. The U.S. troops assumed responsibility for the distribution of food supplies. However, they encountered opposition from the warlords who, lacking a stable government, diverted all the aid, which meant that the relief aid did not always reach its intended beneficiaries. Consequently, a confrontation between the U.S. troops and the warlords meant that the mission went beyond just humanitarian operations and became more of a nation-building initiative. Therefore, Washington found itself embroiled in efforts of capacitating Somalian leaders to take control, thus entangling the U.S. in a complex and contentious endeavour spanning over the past two and half decades in Somalia. United States' efforts in Somalia, particularly in the 1990s when Operation Provide Relief and Operation Restore Hope were initiated, indicate diplomatic missions gone wrong. American troops entered Somalia in early 1992 following the approval of U.N. Resolution 751, which mandated the genesis of relief programmes in the drought and poverty-stricken country (Moyo, 2018).

The development of counterterrorism strategies in Africa can be traced back to the deployment of American troops to Somalia in 1992. The true motivations behind the decision to go into Somalia remain unclear, with some suggestions pointing towards providing relief aid and assistance. Conversely, others speculate about establishing a military presence in a non-influential country (Moyo, 2018). However, it would be simplistic to believe that the U.S. would send troops to a dangerous location solely for humanitarian purposes. The decision to intervene in Somalia was partially influenced by the significant role played by Bill Clinton as an opposing candidate in the election, highlighting Bush's hesitancy to respond to situations in Somalia and Bosnia. The media also played a substantial role, as wrenching images from Somalia prompted a reluctant administration to act (Moyo, 2018). This intervention was further catalysed by the media's portrayal of Africa, perpetuating

powerful stereotypes and creating a negative context for considering African policy. Television-wrenching pictures from Somalia goaded a reluctant administration to act (Goodman, 1992).

Furthermore, the emotional description of suffering reportedly prompted Bush to order a policy review and instruct the State Department to become forward-leaning about Somalia (DiPrizio, 2002). One can thus argue that in as much as Bush's turn towards Somalia was stirred by the humanitarian stance the President had taken, what seemed to go well with most of the citizens, it was also the role of the media that catalysed the Somali intervention. Members of Congress, lacking direct experience or a deep understanding of the African situation, relied on the pessimistic tone of the U.S. media coverage to shape their perceptions. The U.S. military intervened in Somalia for the first time as part of "Operation Restore Hope". In October 1993, after the Battle of Mogadishu and the infamous "Black Hawk Down" incident, which resulted in the deaths of 18 U.S. servicemen, the U.S. military withdrew from the country (Maruf & Joseph, 2018).

However, the irony of the situation lies in the resolution authorising U.S.-led Operation Restore Hope, which was initiated two weeks after Bush lost the presidential election to Bill Clinton. Thus, one can argue that his decision to send troops to Africa was predetermined by the fact that he was already on his way out of office; therefore, he could not leave office with half a million lives in his hands that he could save. President Bush had also been unable to solve the humanitarian problem in Bosnia, and despite the end of his presidential tenure, he was not willing to fail again. However, despite having lost the election, speaking in an address to the nation following the passing of Resolution 794, President Bush noted: "The people of Somalia, especially the children of Somalia, need our help. We can ease their suffering. We must help them live. We must give them hope. America must act" (Bush, 2002). For the Bush and Clinton administrations, it was a military miscalculation that neither administration could place on the terrorism framework. Consequently, American troops withdrew from the Horn of Africa. The interests of the President Clinton-led administration prevailed over principles of securing human rights and democracy, evidenced by the United States' withdrawal from the war-torn country of Somalia in 1994 (Wennesland, 2013; Magstadt, 2004). The focus of the U.S. agenda in Somalia has revolved around counterterrorism; hence, the next section will bring about an appraisal of the various strategies that have been applied in Somalia from the Bush-led administration to the current Biden-led administration.

## **Counterterrorism Strategies by the U.S. Government**

### ***Bush, 2001 – 2009***

It was not until the events of September 11, 2001, commonly referred to as 9/11, that the spectre of terrorism assumed a definitive and unequivocal position at the forefront of Washington's policy agenda during the Bush-led administration. The attack on America by Al-Qaeda forces changed America's foreign policy perspective from a casual wave of global democratisation, recognised as an internal process, to a radical war against terror just nine days after 9/11.

Under President George Bush's administration from 2001 to 2009, the United States implemented a politically driven counterterrorism policy in Somalia. In the months following 9/11, a stunning 98% of all bills passed, resolutions and amendments proposed by the House of Representatives and 97% by the Senate were related to terrorism. President Bush issued 12 executive orders and 10 Presidential proclamations related to the attacks (Nacos, 2003). Seeing Somalia as a largely ungoverned space where jihadist militants could thrive, Washington soon made the country a front in its wide-ranging war, with its targets being Islamist militants it deemed linked to al-Qaeda. This category eventually widened to include Al-Shabaab (United States Report, 2023). One can, therefore, argue that the United States government was beginning to show signs of really prioritising terrorism, taking it to be one of its core policy stances. In December 2006, Ethiopian forces, with U.S. support, intervened in Somalia to oust the ICU from power and support the Transitional Federal Government. This policy entailed providing substantial support to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to establish stability and combat the influence of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. The United States engaged in security corporations, fostered regional alliances, facilitated intelligence sharing, and employed financial measures to disrupt terrorist activities. The overarching goal was to counter the terrorist threat, promote regional stability and facilitate the formation of an effective government in Somalia.

Given the circumstances of the events in Somalia, Washington's reaction was that of sending troops on the ground as an indication of the gravity of the issue of providing relief. President George W. Bush, acting under the Authorisation for Use of Military Force (AUMF) – the legal authority granted to him by Congress in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the USA, allowing him to use force against the

perpetrators of the attacks – sent U.S. government forces back to Somalia (Maruf & Joseph, 2018). Generally, precipitated by the September 11 events, President George W. Bush pursued a militarised counterterrorism strategy – relying on the 2001 AUMF and possibly other statutes and constitutional powers as authorisation for waging war on al-Qaeda and affiliates with no territorial limits (Crisis Group Interview, 2023).

### ***Obama, 2009 – 2017***

In 2009, when the Barack Obama-led administration entered the White House, its senior officials agreed that U.S. Somalia policy required a comprehensive review, as they were worried that if they were to press ahead with the Bush Administration's approach, the U.S. military would be involved in Somalia perpetually (Crisis Group Interview, 2022). During President Obama's administration from 2009 to 2017, the United States pursued a robust and multi-faceted counterterrorism policy in Somalia. This approach encompassed targeted airstrikes, covert operations, support for AMISOM, security sector assistance to the SNA, regional and international collaboration, and humanitarian and development aid provision. The primary objectives were to degrade the capabilities of Al-Shabaab, strengthen Somali security forces, foster regional cooperation, and address the root causes of instability in Somalia. The preponderant focus of its efforts was to counter Al-Shabaab militarily – which it did with increasing intensity through Obama's two terms in office (Crisis Group Interviews, 2023).

On May 22, 2013, President Obama issued the 'Presidential Policy Guidance', which established the operating procedures for action "against terrorist targets outside the United States and areas of active hostilities, including Somalia" (PPG, 2013). In 2016, strikes no longer required that Americans be under direct threat. President Obama outlined a counterterrorism strategy. As part of the U.S. leadership decapitation policy, he vowed to degrade and defeat extremist groups and promised to use force primarily against anyone who threatens American interests (Office of the Press Secretary, 2014). This is a run-up to the American counterterrorism strategy focused on targeted killings, most prominently using drones and special operations as applied against Godane in 2014. However, years after Godane's death, nothing has changed. This strategy of targeting senior leadership was described as "cutting off the head of the snake." It enticed policymakers because it

offered a "neat and relatively cheap solution to the intractable global problem of violent anti-Western Islamism."

On September 5, 2014, the United States military officially confirmed the death of Ahmed Godane, Al-Shabaab's Emir since 2008 remarking that "removing Godane from the battlefield is a major symbolic and operational loss to Al-Shabaab (Alexander, 2014). While significantly weakening the organisational capacity of Al-Shabaab, it was not enough to inflict devastating destruction on the group. Since the death of Godane in 2014, Al-Shabaab engaged in a series of attacks in 2017 and 2018, highlighting major limitations in the U.S. counterterrorism strategy of targeting senior officials as it has not served to destroy the group. Furthermore, the dominant counterterrorism strategy or approach adopted by the United States of eliminating key leadership personnel of opposition irregular warfare groups has failed to deliver key results. The idea is that, without leadership, these groups will flounder. Al-Shabaab has continued to thrive even after the death of key leaders within their ranks, which has raised serious concerns about the effectiveness of such a strategy.

Over the years, the Obama Administration chose to adopt and expand its predecessor's policy of providing limited, indirect diplomatic and military support to the TFG, hoping it would provide a bulwark against militant Islamist forces in Somalia (Brutton, 2010). However, this strategy has further alienated the Muslim community from the West, particularly Washington, and further divided the community of Muslims between the more moderate sympathisers and those on the extreme side. Drawing upon specific case points, for example, in 2013, when Al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate Shopping Mall in Kenya, killing approximately 70 people, raised serious questions about the effectiveness of the counterterrorism strategy. This attack occurred after AMISOM, supported by Ethiopia and the United States, had recorded a significant victory against Al-Shabaab, which points to the need for further reformations.

### ***Trump, 2017 – 2021***

During President Donald Trump's tenure from 2017 to 2021, the United States pursued a politically motivated counterterrorism policy in Somalia. This policy involved an assertive military approach, including targeted drone strikes and special operations, to combat the presence of Al-Shabaab and other extremist groups. Additionally, the administration provided substantial support to the Somali security forces, engaged in

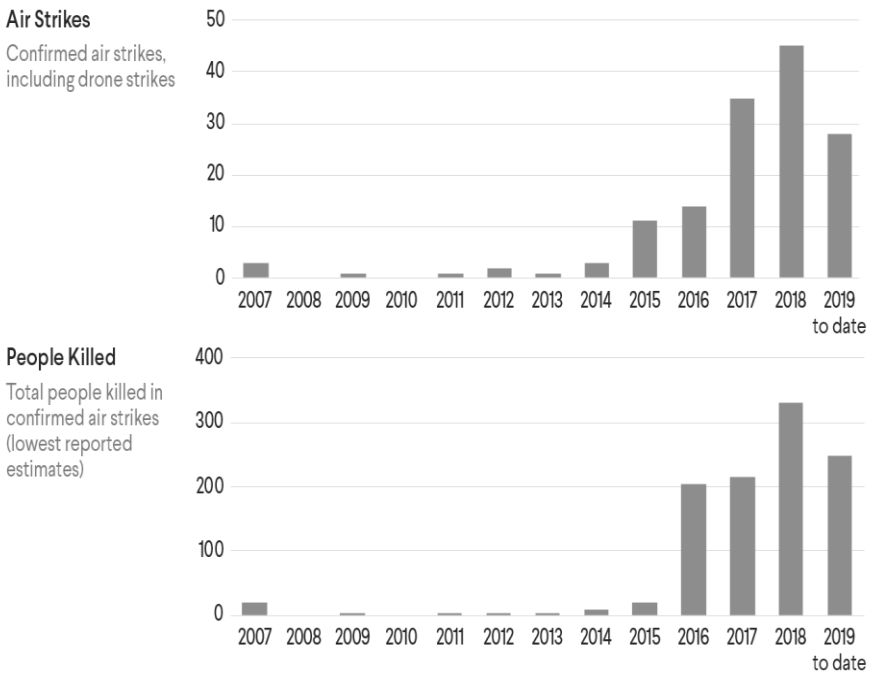
cooperative efforts with AMISOM, expanded the authority of the U.S. military, and sustained financial aid for stabilisation, governance reform and humanitarian assistance in Somalia. The primary goal was to address the terrorist threat, enhance security and advance political stability in the region. In September 2017, President Trump's administration released a proclamation stating that “a persistent terrorist... emanates from Somalia territory and for that reason, Somalia was identified as a terrorist haven” (Williams, 2018). The Trump-led administration proclaimed fighting terrorism as one of its primary objectives (Ferozhar & Gregory, 2017). It followed up on the policies of the Bush and Obama administrations, which had three main objectives in sub-Saharan Africa which are securing oil and natural resources; preventing terrorism; and implementing market reforms (Dunn & Englebert, 2013). However, this could be possible through a hybrid strategy, combining active assistance to armies with a small number of U.S. forces on the ground and a high degree of military assistance.

One can note that U.S. operations in Somalia have previously been characterised by efforts to single out the high-value targets rather than focusing on the overall groups. Due to significant failures in thwarting the enemy by getting rid of its leaders, the United States opened itself up to becoming flexible, hence a change in strategy. In 2017, 24 years after the events of 1993 (Black Hawk Down), the United States government finally deployed the U.S. soldiers to the poverty-stricken and conflict-ridden country of Somalia. This is the first time the United States government has put regular troops on the ground. However, a host of other U.S. personnel, like military advisors and combatant trainers, had previously been present. The deployment of more personnel has been aimed at training and equipping the African Union and Somali forces. With that in mind, President Trump signed on the military request to loosen the grip that had been previously in place, now allowing AFRICOM more autonomy in its missions. President Trump loosened the restrictions on drones in the same way as he loosened restrictions on other forms of strikes, giving AFRICOM more freedom to pursue suspected militants with drone strikes (Callimachi, Cooper, Schmitt, Blinder, & Gibbons-Neff, 2018). Such a strategy would focus on surgically removing not only significant Al-Shabaab targets but also the group at large with significant targets such as training camps. The United States had noted with great concern the inability of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) Force to thwart Al-Shabaab's influence.

Hence, it took it upon itself to do more in the region as part of its global mission against terrorism.

Shortly after President Trump came to power in January 2017, the U.S. modified the policy and legal framework governing U.S. military operations in Somalia, after which the number of U.S. air strikes in Somalia increased dramatically (Amnesty International, 2019). The escalation of U.S. strikes in the region comes under the key policy change implemented under the Trump-led administration on the Principles, Standards and Procedures (PSP) about engagement. The Trump administration highlighted the preference for a more aggressive approach to countering Al-Shabaab's threat, starting with U.S. troops on the ground. The "gloves off" approach was a major escalation without decisive results. More strikes were conducted in the Trump administration's four years – 219 total strikes – than during the two previous administrations combined, when some 60 strikes had occurred over 12 years (New America Foundation Database) (see below).

## U.S. Air Strikes in Somalia (as of April 2019)



Source: Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

The U.S. military reportedly conducted six airstrikes between 2012 and 2014, 11 in 2015, and 14 in 2016 (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism). Furthermore, President Trump issued a directive designating parts of Somalia an ‘area of active hostilities’ (AAH) after which the reported number of airstrikes increased drastically – making individuals now considered to be lawfully targeted based solely on four key criteria: age, gender, location and geographical proximity to Al-Shabaab (Amnesty International, 2019).

### ***Biden, 2021 – present***

The choices made by President Biden deviate from those of previous administrations. However, they also signify the ongoing progression of a transition process that originated under the Obama administration and further developed under the Trump administration.



President Biden, who is currently midway through his first term, faced a challenging decision to reintroduce military forces in Somalia following former President Trump's recalling of U.S. troops. U.S. troops are now working with Somali forces to press an offensive against the insurgents; a first phase focused on central Somalia made good progress, primarily because of local clan collaboration; phase two (which will focus on the south) will be much more difficult (United States Report, 2023). Savage and Schmitt (2017) cite a senior administration official in summing up the U.S. approach: “The Biden administration’s strategy in Somalia is to try to reduce the threat from Al Shabab by suppressing its ability to plot and carry out complicated operations.” While the United States cannot achieve victory solely through strikes, it can significantly reduce Al-Shabaab’s capability to meet its end state (O’Brien, 2022). In October 2022, President Biden closed out the remaining policy review his administration had undertaken relevant to Somalia. This review concerned the administration’s policy for counterterrorism operations outside "areas of active hostilities" where the U.S. is fighting al-Qaeda or similar groups. It culminated in Biden signing a Presidential Policy Memorandum that laid out safeguards relating to the use of force in all theatres other than Iraq and Syria (Iraq and Syria were excluded from the review because the administration considers them areas of active hostilities (Crisis Group Interviews 2022 - 2023). Nonetheless, the Biden-led administration, working with AFRICOM, has conducted several strikes against Al-Shabaab forces (see table below), which does not highlight a major deviation from the predecessors’ administrations.

ADMINISTRATION	STRIKES	DEATHS			
		TOTAL	CIVILIANS	UNKNOWN	MILITANTS
<b>TOTAL</b>	314	33-120	57 - 70	1,573 - 1,972	1,663 - 2,162
<b>BUSH</b>	12	26-68	13 - 21	38 - 55	77 - 144
<b>OBAMA</b>	48	01 - 22	10	338 - 521	349 - 553
<b>TRUMP</b>	219	06 - 22	34 - 39	1,009 - 1,113	1,049 - 1,1882
<b>BIDEN</b>	35	0	0	188 - 283	188 - 283

*New America Report 2023 – Somalia Public Data*

The existing U.S. approach to Somalia, which views it as a 'hotbed for terrorism' and in need of counterterrorism measures, has produced no tangible and positive outcome for Somalia (Mueller, 2023). There are various debates surrounding the extent to which Al-Shabaab has been

weakened. This alone presents major limitations in assessing U.S. Foreign Policy in trying to arrest the Al-Shabaab insurgency. Most experts believe that Al-Shabaab cannot be defeated militarily. Nonetheless, the fact that Al-Shabaab remains a worthy adversary to the United States and its allies even after a series of attacks leading to its loss of significant territory within Somalia is evidence that the United States and its allies still face a security issue. Al-Shabaab has succumbed to several counterterrorism initiatives spearheaded by AFRICOM now known as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), after a United Nations Security Council mandate. With the Biden administration already signalling an increase in military initiatives, the group is set to brace itself for more impact. Therefore, the reality of an end to terrorist activities in the region and an end to terrorist activities both within and outside Somalia demands considerable focus on the actual development of terrorism before any other strategy or initiative can be put across.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The study finds that Al-Shabaab has survived numerous invasions and has persisted as an armed force carrying out attacks in Somalia. The resilience of Al-Shabaab highlights the limitations of the past three administrations' approaches to counterterrorism on the continent and has already presented significant challenges to the new Biden administration. Drawing upon specific case points, for example, two car bombs killed at least 120 people and wounded 300 outside the education ministry building. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that the ministry was responsible for a 'war on minds' that has removed Islam from schools and recruited students into militias (Global Terrorism Index, 2023). This raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the counterterrorism strategy. The Global Terrorism Index (2023) finds that in 2022, terrorism deaths attributed to Al-Shabaab increased for the first time in six years, rising by almost 23% from the previous year. Of the 784 deaths attributed to Al-Shabaab in 2022, 93% occurred in Somalia. This shows that terrorism is widespread and even worse in some regions. Such findings ultimately suggest that the U.S. counterterrorism strategy as has been applied in Somalia has, to a great extent, fallen short of being successful, noting an increase in terrorism-related activities.

Acknowledging that terrorism is largely the result of state failure and complex socio-economic phenomena entails that greater financial resources and efforts need to go there instead of fighting the symptoms,

which is terrorist violence (Solomon, 2015). Nine years ago, then-President Bush remarked, "I believe, however, that the use of force must be seen as part of a more extensive discussion we need to have about a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy -- because for all the focus on the use of force, force alone cannot make us safe. We cannot use force everywhere that a radical ideology takes root; and in the absence of a strategy that reduces the wellspring of extremism, a perpetual war -- through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments -- will prove self-defeating and alter our country in troubling ways" (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). Thus, lacking in Somalia is a more nuanced soft counterinsurgency approach instead of the hard-pressed military strategy.

Furthermore, Somalia is daunted by extreme poverty, unfavourable climatic conditions and famine which have manifested through various levels of civil wars, clan wars, corruption and a weak justice system. The social, economic and political conditions of the country have only served to further plunge the country into even more chaos. Even more critical is the fact that such harsh societal conditions have helped in the recruitment of members for the terrorist groups with the promise of a better lifestyle and conditions of living if they do join their groups.

Many of the Bush administration's strategic imperatives and associated policies have endured over the last two decades (Löfflmann, 2023), guided by the National Security Strategy of 2002 with a more significant focus on terrorism and, ultimately, the 2003 National Security Strategy for Combating terrorism derived mainly from the Reagan Era policy. Over the years, the two pieces of legislation have become a benchmark for ensuing strategies. Questions have been asked as to what extent a strategic vision of national security formulated in the wake of the '9/11' terrorist attacks still holds political relevance for U.S. foreign and security policy and if, despite significant fluctuations in personal temperament, political-ideological outlook and communicative and behavioural style between George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, structural policy continuities outweigh rhetorical and ideational changes in American grand strategy discourse (Löfflmann, 2023). U.S. policy, especially the use of military force, continues to be driven by 9/11 thinking and strategic defence of American core values and liberal democracy. Therefore, policy narratives surrounding U.S. efforts on the African continent should be devoid of the Bush narrative that continues to influence policy thinking.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The paper has examined the United States' foreign policy strategies in arresting the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia from 2001 to 2022. While it is difficult to conclude whether the U.S. Foreign Policy, as has been applied to Somalia, has been effective, one can note a case of mixed emotions regarding successes in the region. Washington still maintains the sole focus of rooting out and thwarting Al-Shabaab by denying them a haven in the Horn of Africa.

The study concluded that the traditional counterterrorism approach in the global arena remains the most dominant paradigm. However, the events in Somalia have raised significant criticism of the traditional approach to counterterrorism. It is, therefore, evident that such an approach cannot be solely used to break the carnage and influence brought by the terrorists. However, one may note that, if such a strategy is to be more than effective, more resources must be directed mainly at those conditions that have served to produce terrorism. Despite constant efforts to thwart the rise of irregular warfare groups, significant reminders continue to highlight that these irregular warfare groups continue to plan attacks on their enemies. Thus, the United States government must work with its allies to develop an effective strategy to end the terrorist challenge in Somalia. Instead, the marriage of deterrence and military capacity presents a viable solution to countering the evolving breed of terrorism prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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