Wilson Center

AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

JUNE 2015

STRENGTHENING AFRICA'S SECURITY GOVERNANCE: ARE WE REACHING TAKE-OFF VELOCITY?

by
Dr. James A. Schear,
Global Fellow

When President Obama hosted the Africa Leaders Summit last August, his biggest challenge was to navigate adroitly between the continent's aspiring hopes and enduring hardships. And future historians, I'd predict, will conclude he succeeded. The Administration effectively (and fairly) trumpeted Africa as a venue for expanding economic growth, social development and rising democratic governance while also spotlighting the grueling realities of transnational terrorism, illicit trafficking and intra-state conflict that still grip parts of the continent. So here's an obvious question: how can we best assist our African partners in turning a corner on these security hardships, thereby helping to usher in a more hopeful, hospitable environment for greater stability, prosperity and democracy? For the past two decades, our answer has been very mission-centric: specifically, to help African countries build their peacekeeping and counter-terrorism capacities. That's very understandable, given the challenges they and we face, and the Obama Administration has pressed forward on these priorities. But at the Summit meeting, the White House added a third element to the US's partnering repertoire – the so-called Security Governance Initiative (SGI) – which aims to work jointly with partners on ways to help strengthen institutional capacity to manage their security forces with greater integrity and accountability.

A COMPELLING RATIONALE

Is the SGI a good match between Africa's needs and America's interests? Yes, it absolutely is, and two imperatives capture its essential rationale. The first is sustainment. Candidly, our training and equipping investments in Africa have proved difficult to sustain when recipient nations have been unable to maintain those capabilities.

The second imperative is self-reliance. While we do have security interests at stake in Africa, it's hard to imagine the continent will be a venue for major US troop deployments. Our partnering models can't rely on "side-by-side" operational support on any large scale; what's needed is close coordination among self-reliant actors in pursuit of common goals.

It's hard to imagine [Africa] will be a venue for major US troop deployments.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Which leads to a more challenging question: How will SGI actually be implemented? On the plus side, the Administration has assembled a dedicated interagency team – including diplomatic, developmental, defense, law enforcement and border security experts – to orchestrate this effort. They're completing initial consultations with six countries – Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia – who signed on as partners. The Administration is also aiming for dialogue with, and feedback from, civil society advocacy groups – another definite plus.

Still, let's keep expectations in line with reality. SGI will be a slow growth enterprise. Internally, achieving unity of effort can never be taken for granted. And externally, even with strongly committed partners, positive outcomes will require a complex choreography of diplomacy, advisory engagements and expert-level technical assistance across a broad swath of domains – from community policing to investigative and prosecutorial functions, resource management, defense budgeting and logistics, just to name a few.

Looking broadly at this unfolding saga, four hurdles will loom large.

Getting the Analytics Right

How do we make informed judgements on what a recipient country really needs and how well our technical assistance can be absorbed? The starting point, clearly, is a rigorous assessment of institutional performance across the security sector, drawing data from multiple sources. What assistance a partner might ask for is obviously a necessary ingredient in framing such analysis but it is rarely sufficient, given that candid self-assessments aren't always easy and there may be a range of views within the recipient country on where performance gaps are greatest.

And then there's an oft-overlooked facet of rigorous analytics – what I'd call "perturbation" impact assessment. What impacts – foreseen or otherwise – might our assistance have? Will it help to catalyze

long-awaited incentives for reform? Or might it tend to aggravate fault lines within a recipient institution by creating self-perceived winners and losers? Those charged with crafting joint action plans for each pilot country will need to think through the impact issue and how various reactions might be enhanced or mitigated.

Putting Key "Building Blocks" in Place

Next, it's really important for SGI orchestrators to hone in on the foundational elements of governance reform – namely, human capital and financial resources. Each of these domains has its own life-cycle attributes that capacity-building efforts must address. For example, the tasks of personnel recruitment, vetting and training are always key functionalities for any human resource (HR) management system, but is it wise to make those investments if, say, personnel retention or merit promotion processes are only semi-functional?

Our cohort of African partners is diverse, and the Obama Administration has stressed up front that SGI-related programs will vary in each case. Countries on the lower end of the developmental ladder may benefit most from focused efforts on core HR and financial management requisites, while countries higher on the ladder may seek to invest greater effort on specific task-oriented needs – e.g., logistics, transport, cross border security, etc. – especially if they're grappling with threatening transnational actors.

What we must avoid is falling prey to "quick win" pressures, in effect defaulting to inputs rather than outcomes to claim credit for deliverables. Just as our kinetic operators have been criticized at times for conducting "whack-a-mole" campaigns in battlefield settings – basically, shooting at whatever target pops up – our SGI implementers should avoid critiques that they're reverting to an overly bureaucratic "plug a hole" strategy, in essence using technical advisors fill whatever job slot a desperately overstretched security ministry says it needs.

Building Stakeholder Support

Third, there are local "buy-in" challenges we can ill afford to ignore. At the ministerial level, we need to assess what modes of engagement will elicit the best response. Our options include imbedding advisors in specific ministries, or conducting periodic engagements via visiting delegations with a wider range of expertise, or a mix of the two. In either case, cultural sensitivity, language skills and mentoring expertise are always necessary to augment technical skills.

> If local communities tend to view their police or soldiers more as predators than protectors, governance refrom isn't going to succeed

There's also the "relational" imperative among different stakeholder communities within the governance sphere. Specifically, how well do civilian authorities and their country's uniformed services (e.g., police and military) work together? While achieving accountable civilian control will always be an imperative, success in crafting mutually beneficial civil-military relationships – especially on planning, programming and budgeting – can be a vital means toward that end.

Perhaps the most significant stakeholder here is the public at large. At all levels – national, subnational and local – security governance is fundamentally about the provision of public services. So what the consumers think matters hugely. If local communities tend to view their police or soldiers more as predators than protectors, governance reform isn't going to succeed until it cycles back to causation and finds ways of changing that optic through concrete remedial efforts.

Tackling Corruption

Finally, here's the 64,000 dollar question: how will SGI's implementers tackle the issue of corruption? For sure, it's a pervasive problem that they're going to encounter in some way, shape or form. Will they focus on modeling good administrative behavior, or will they resort to whistle blowing and, if so, what might be the security risks?

There are some technical fixes that can aid and abet a counter-corruption strategy – e.g., electronic salary payments to soldiers or police. But the larger issue goes to the overall transparency and accountability of revenue generation, budgeting, programming, acquisition and auditing practices. If SGI implementers can design indirect approaches that apply constructive pressures in favor of reform, that's a positive step forward even though it won't solve every problem all at once.

OTHERWISE, IT'S EASY, RIGHT?

These hurdles by no means cover the entire swath of implementation issues here. Coordination with other donor countries will be necessary, as will be assuring a strong degree of US congressional support, given the diverse funding streams that feed into this effort.

And finally, let's always keep a degree of humility here. Folklore has it that when a journalist once asked Mahatmas Gandhi what he thought of Western civilization, India's iconic leader smiled and replied: "Oh, I think it would be good idea." The same applies here too. Security governance reform is forever a work-in-progress everywhere, including here at home.

Photo Credit on page 1:

2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

Dr. James A. Schear
Global Fellow

Dr. James A. Schear is currently a Global Fellow with the Africa Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center, and was previously a Public Policy Scholar with the Africa Program. Prior to this, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Partnership Strategy and Stability Operations from 2009-2013. From 1989-94 he served as an advisor at the United Nations where he assisted senior officials in shaping implementation of 1991 Gulf War cease-fire resolutions and providing analytic support to the leadership of UN missions in Cambodia and Former Yugoslavia. As a deputy assistant secretary of defense, 1997-2001, he and his peacekeeping & humanitarian affairs team played key roles in supporting U.S. efforts to end the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, to stabilize East Timor following its separation from Indonesia, to counter predatory violence in war-torn regions, and to strengthen international standards against the use of child soldiers. Finally, as Director of Research at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2001-2008, he supervised seven project teams conducting studies on regional security affairs, strategic concept development and terrorism/transnational challenges. Dr. Schear obtained his B.A. from American University, his M.A. from Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies and his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

STAY UP TO DATE ON ISSUES FACING AFRICA BY READING OUR BLOG:

africa UP close
a blog of the Africa Program at the Wilson Center

FOLLOW US ON:

http://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/Africa-Program

http://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/

https://Facebook.com/AfricaProgram

https://Twitter.com/AfricaUPClose

THE AFRICA PROGRAM

The Africa Program's mission is to analyze and offer practical, actionable options for addressing some of Africa's most critical, current and over-the-horizon issues; to foster policy-focused dialogue about and options for stronger and mutually-beneficial US-Africa relations; and to challenge the dominant narrative about Africa by enhancing knowledge and understanding about Africa in the United States. The Africa Program has four programmatic pillars: i) governance and leadership; ii) conflict management and peacebuilding; iii) trade, investment, sustainable development and human security; and iv) Africa's evolving role in the global arena. The roles of youth, women, and technology are critical to Africa's future - to good governance, securing peace, mitigating poverty and assuring sustainable development. As such, these issues are addressed across all four thematic areas.

The contents of this publication are solely those of the author. They do not reflect the views of the Wilson Center. The Wilson Center's Africa Program provides a safe space for various perspectives to be shared and discussed on critical issues of importance to both Africa and the United States.

The Wilson Center

@TheWilsonCenter

facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter
www.wilsoncenter.org

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027