Subduing al-Shabaab: The Somalia Model of Counterterrorism and Its Limits

In September 2017, Donald J. Trump’s administration released a proclamation stating that “A persistent terrorist threat … emanates from Somalia’s territory. The United States Government has identified Somalia as a terrorist safe haven. Somalia stands apart from other countries in the degree to which its government lacks command and control of its territory.”¹ This has been a longstanding view of successive U.S. administrations and external analysts for whom Somalia became the world’s paradigmatic example of state failure, warlordism, and corruption.² Yet, successive U.S. administrations have been unwilling to deploy large numbers of their troops to Somalia to counter the threat. Instead, since 2007 they used a “tailored engagement strategy,” or as a recent RAND report explained, “a small number of U.S. special operations forces to conduct targeted strikes, provide intelligence, and build the capacity of local partner forces to conduct ground operations.”³ That report concluded such a strategy was “key in degrading” the principal source of the terror threat: Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (hereafter, al-Shabaab / “the youths”).

The extent to which al-Shabaab has been weakened remains the subject of debate. Nevertheless, it is clear that this U.S. strategy could not have been implemented without troops from the African Union Mission in Somalia.

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The Washington Quarterly • 41:2 pp. 95–111
https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1484227
Deployed to Mogadishu in March 2007, these African peacekeepers have played the leading role in combating one of the world’s deadliest insurgencies. Along the way, AMISOM has also been mandated to help protect political VIPs, build the new Somali state’s security forces, support various electoral processes, and facilitate humanitarian assistance.

AMISOM’s story is remarkable in its own right, but it also sheds light on how the United States was able to adopt a tailored engagement strategy and whether it might be used to address some of the most difficult challenges facing contemporary stabilization operations in other theaters. This requires scrutiny of what I will call the AMISOM “model,” namely, the deployment of local (in this case, African) troops to undertake enforcement and stabilization activities with vital logistical and financial assistance provided by external partners, including international organizations and states. In AMISOM’s case, the model required the African Union (AU) to supply troops; the European Union (EU) to pay their allowances (and other forms of support); the United Nations (UN) to provide logistics support and equipment reimbursement; and key bilateral partners, notably the United States and United Kingdom, to provide equipment, training and other forms of security assistance to the troop-contributing countries.

This model has subsequently been adapted to a variety of African theaters including central Africa (against the Lord’s Resistance Army), Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, the Lake Chad Basin and most recently with the G5 Sahel Joint Force. However, numerous challenges plague this model, including how these operations can stabilize a territory without a functional central government or a peace process; how they can subdue transnational terror and criminal networks that retain deep roots in significant segments of the local population; how multiple international organizations and states can partner effectively to defeat such foes; and how such missions can implement effective exit strategies.

In the Somali case, AMISOM has delivered some notable achievements, but using this model meant it was also one of the most complicated peace operations ever assembled, requiring coordination, cooperation and resources principally from three large international organizations—the AU, EU and UN—and a range of bilateral partners, most notably the United States and the United Kingdom. Although it would be extremely difficult even to reassemble the configuration of partnerships that sustained AMISOM, a strong case can be made not to even try to repeat this model because of the political, financial and operational problems it generated in the fight against al-Shabaab. Hence, while the AMISOM model of
counterterrorism has delivered significant achievements, it ultimately could not
defeat al-Shabaab and has limited applicability beyond Somalia. Given these
limitations, can, and should, the United States use similar tailored engagement
strategies in other theaters?

AMISOM’s Evolution

Despite having an initial authorized strength of 8000, AMISOM operated for its
first nine months in 2007 with just 1600 Ugandan soldiers. Initially, its mission
was to support dialogue and reconciliation in Somalia as well as the country’s
fledgling Transitional Federal Institutions. But within two years, it became the
principal force tasked with defeating al-Shabaab’s fighters in Mogadishu.
AMISOM was the AU’s fifth peace operation, following earlier missions in
2010, however, it became the AU’s longest and largest operation, and by mid-
2017 it represented the largest deployment of uniformed peacekeepers in the
world with just over 22,000 personnel. Unsurprisingly, AMISOM also became
the AU’s most expensive operation, costing by 2014 approximately US$1
billion per year. AMISOM also became the deadliest peace operation in
modern history, due to bloody urban warfare and threats from al-Shabaab
snipers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), complex suicide/commando raids,
ambushes of convoys, as well as more conventional large-scale attacks on its
bases. Although the precise number of casualties has not been made public, prob-
aply over 1500 peacekeepers have died.5 The mission therefore serves as a crucial
case study of how to develop effective force protection policies.

Over its decade of operations, AMISOM evolved geographically, politically,
and militarily. Geographically, the mission started out occupying just a handful
of strategic locations strung across Mogadishu. By 2012, however, AMISOM’s
area of operations expanded from roughly 100 square kilometers in Mogadishu
to more than 400,000 square kilometers covering the whole of south-central
Somalia, a region nearly the size of Iraq. AMISOM also started operations with
its military and civilian components based in different countries: while its
troops were in Somalia, the head of the mission and its tiny civilian component
were based in Kenya. This left AMISOM’s Force Commander—the head of the
military component—as the de facto head of mission and the principal interlocu-
tor with the Somali authorities and international officials visiting Somalia.

The composition of AMISOM’s force has also changed in response to political
developments over time. Initially, the AU and UN concluded that it would be
unwise for AMISOM to draw its peacekeepers from Somalia’s neighboring
countries. Since 2012, however, Somalia’s neighbors have played a central role
in the mission. Today, roughly half its peacekeepers come from Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya (the rest hail mainly from Uganda and Burundi). Operationally, this meant AMISOM evolved from a Ugandan-led mission (supported by Burundi, the only other troop-contributing country until December 2011) to a much more complex multinational force. In practice, AMISOM’s troop-contributing countries exercised a high degree of autonomy and usually conducted unilateral operations within the mission’s designated sectors (after expanding beyond Mogadishu, from January 2012, AMISOM created four land and two maritime sectors, but in January 2014 its force posture was revised around six land sectors and the maritime sectors).

Militarily, AMISOM’s mandated tasks also evolved in significant ways. Initially, it was tasked with securing a foothold in Mogadishu to help the Ethiopian soldiers who had intervened in Somalia to install the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in December 2006. From 2009, AMISOM gradually increased in size and fought a bloody urban battle, which by early 2012 had expelled al-Shabaab’s fighters from Mogadishu and its environs. Al-Shabaab then dispersed its forces across numerous towns in south-central Somalia, which prompted AMISOM to undertake a range of expansion and stabilization operations designed to push the insurgents out of these settlements. To do so, AU forces increased to over 22,100 by January 2014. Almost all of these were soldiers because the intense insecurity in Somalia meant AMISOM was only able to deploy a handful of police officers and civilian personnel.

Key Elements of the AMISOM Model: Leadership, Finances, and Operations

The model of AMISOM’s deployment became extremely complicated because it required coordination and cooperation between several international organizations and an array of bilateral partners. The mission also had to derive its political authority, generate financial support, and conduct its operations in often

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Joined AMISOM</th>
<th>Army Size</th>
<th>Defense Spending (deployment year, in US$ millions)</th>
<th>AMISOM Contribution 2018 (approx.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>5,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>Unknown (2010) 12</td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>4,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>135,000</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>4,200</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: IISS, The Military Balance (Taylor & Francis, relevant years).
unhelpful ways: its leadership was contested between the AU and UN; its finances were inadequate, unpredictable and unsustainable; and its operations were hamstrung by the divergent national interests of its contributors.

Political Leadership
AMISOM’s political authority derived from both the AU and the UN, which sometimes led to unhelpful competition between the two organizations. As an African peace operation, the AU claimed nominal control and authority over AMISOM. In practice, however, it was the UN Security Council that set the definitive mandates for the mission because, from 2009, it and the EU were providing the bulk of the financial resources (see below). In Addis Ababa, the seat of the African Union, operational authority over AMISOM was vested in the Chairperson of the AU Commission, who delegated responsibility for all peace operations to the Commissioner for Peace and Security. With the approval of the AU Peace and Security Council, the Commission Chairperson appointed a Special Representative (SRCC) as head of the mission. Although the SRCC was supposed to lead AMISOM’s civilian, police and military components, in practice this was exceedingly difficult because successive SRCCs were based in Nairobi, Kenya and only visited Somalia intermittently until 2014 when the office was moved to Mogadishu.

In New York, the Security Council saw its resolutions as providing the definitive version of AMISOM’s mandate, in part because they also specified the nature of UN support it could receive. To facilitate its support, in 2009, the UN established a novel mechanism—the UN Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA)—to provide logistical support to the AU peacekeepers (and later to some Somali security forces working jointly with AMISOM). UNSOA was financed from the UN-assessed peacekeeping contributions and was transitioned into the UN Support Office for Somalia (UNSOS) in late 2015. Following the end of Somalia’s TFG and its replacement with a permanent Federal Government in September 2012, Somalia’s president also vied for a more significant say in AMISOM’s activities, which caused more arguments over the political direction of the mission.

Finance
A second key issue was that the model failed to generate sufficient, sustainable or predictable financial support for the mission. By 2014, AMISOM cost roughly US $1 billion per year. The AU was unable to cover the cost because its official system
of financing peace operations did not work, largely because a majority of AU member states did not pay their dues or deposit money into the organization’s Peace Fund. AMISOM therefore had to rely on financing from multiple sources beyond AU member states and the AU Peace Fund, notably AMISOM partner countries and institutions, the UN Trust Fund for AMISOM, the UN Trust Fund for Somali Transitional Security Institutions, and from 2009 UN-assessed peacekeeping contributions, which paid for AMISOM’s logistics support.

This reliance on external partners was part of the reason why the AU made several attempts to find alternative sources of indigenous funding for its peace and security activities. The early initiatives led by former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo suggested taxing foreigners flying into Africa or staying in hotels there, but a potential solution was finally found with reforms proposed by Donald Kaberuka, Rwanda’s former finance minister and head of the African Development Bank. Kaberuka recommended imposing a universal levy of 0.2 percent on all eligible goods imported into Africa to fund the AU’s peace and security activities. By April 2018, roughly a dozen AU states had begun implementing this levy, which aimed to generate US$400 million for the Peace Fund by 2020.

Initially, therefore, AMISOM’s financial costs fell directly on its troop-contributing countries, Uganda and Burundi. They required considerable financial assistance from external partners, notably the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, the EU, and a private firm, Bancroft Global Development. The United States, for instance, provided over US$1.2 billion worth of bilateral security assistance to support AMISOM between 2006 and mid-2015. While bilateral partners provided most training, equipment and mentoring support, the EU provided the allowances for AMISOM’s personnel as well as other forms of support. The EU monies came from its African Peace Facility (APF), which as part of the European Development Fund had restrictions on paying for lethal equipment. By the end of 2017, the APF had disbursed more than €2 billion to support peace and security activities in Africa, with nearly €1.5 billion going to support AMISOM. The UN also established a Trust Fund for AMISOM and later the Somali Security Forces. These received donations from various partner states and international organizations. After UNSOA was established in 2009, AMISOM also received financial support for its logistics package from the UN’s assessed contributions for peacekeeping. Despite these efforts, by 2016 major shortfalls emerged and caused a variety of arguments between AMISOM and its partners.

**Operations**

AMISOM’s field operations also had to rely on support from multiple actors and suffered accordingly. At the strategic level, things were relatively simple for
AMISOM’s first five years when it functioned as a Ugandan-led force with Burundi as junior partner. This changed after 2012, however, when Djibouti, Kenya, Sierra Leone and then Ethiopia joined the mission and proceeded to operate with a high degree of autonomy in their respective sectors. Various coordination mechanisms were established to give the AU Commission and AMISOM’s partners a greater role in decision making, but they were unable to fully control the contributing countries.\(^\text{10}\)

At the operational level, for AMISOM’s first five years, successive Ugandan force and contingent commanders made most of the key decisions. Of course, official discussions took place among AMISOM’s senior leadership team, but the reality of the SRCC based in Nairobi and the AU Commission in Addis Ababa was that the Ugandan commanders listened first and foremost to their long-time President, Yoweri Museveni. This was also reflected in the mission’s tactical decision making since 2012, where it was AMISOM’s national contingent commanders and sector commanders that really exercised operational control in their respective areas. Being in essence a war-fighting operation, AMISOM’s national contingent commanders retained a considerable degree of autonomy. As one AMISOM former Deputy Force Commander put it, the mission’s Force Headquarters had official command but no real control of the national contingents, hence trying to ensure coordination between them was the best that could be achieved in practice.\(^\text{11}\) In some ways, this simply reflected the realities and international politics of coalition warfare wherein the Force Headquarters could only ever provide a coordinating function and facilitate positive interaction between the contributing countries. But it often led to incoherent operations.

The AMISOM model of African troops financed and supported logistically by multiple external partners was far from optimal because it required considerable coordination across these different actors. It also raised challenges for the mission’s leadership, financing and operations. Nevertheless, advocates for replicating the AMISOM model in other theaters became more vocal in 2012 after al-Shabaab began to operate as a success story after al-Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu.\(^\text{12}\)

**AMISOM’s Achievements**

Despite these complicated arrangements, AMISOM achieved some notable successes. Operating in Mogadishu and then, from 2012, across south-central
Somalia represented an extremely complex and insecure strategic environment. The severe insecurity fundamentally shaped how AMISOM and its partners operated. It also fueled early international pessimism about the mission, limited the number of countries that provided peacekeepers, left the mission under-resourced and hence with no option but to remain on the defensive, and kept AMISOM a military-heavy mission that was unable to deploy significant police and civilian components until 2012. The insecurity in Somalia stemmed from the country’s civil war in the late 1980s and subsequent lack of a functional central government. It spawned a proliferation of armed groups including clan militias, clan paramilitaries, district commissioners’ militias, business security guards, personal protection units, local private security firms, international private security firms, and neighborhood watch groups.13 It was into this turbulent, often violent context that AMISOM deployed.

Any attempt to assess AMISOM should therefore begin by speculating what Somalia might look like without it. First, AMISOM’s deployment was the precondition that enabled Ethiopia to withdraw its soldiers that had installed the TFG in Mogadishu in December 2006. Without AMISOM, al-Shabaab would have almost certainly toppled the TFG soon after Ethiopian troops withdrew in January 2009. In that sense, AMISOM’s initial and most important success was protecting the TFG. This was the crucial foundation upon which all other developments in Somalia rested. AMISOM also went on to successfully secure the two electoral processes that produced new Somali Federal Governments in September 2012 and January 2017.

The mission also weakened al-Shabaab, certainly from its so-called golden age during 2009 and 2010.14 Most notably, AMISOM won the bloody battle for Mogadishu during 2010 and 2011, which led al-Shabaab to withdraw the majority of its forces from the city. This was initially made possible by al-Shabaab’s counterproductive terrorist attack on Kampala in June 2010, which led to Uganda reinforcing the mission, and al-Shabaab’s failed Ramadan offensive against AMISOM and TFG forces in Mogadishu in September 2010. AMISOM triumphed in the subsequent battle for Mogadishu because of its enhanced pre-deployment training regimes, notably those provided by the U.S. ACOTA program; the innovative use of urban warfare tactics such as sniper teams, “mouse holes,” and breaching operations; and the sheer resilience of the mission’s rank-and-file troops.

Ironically, AMISOM’s military success in Mogadishu and then beyond pushed al-Shabaab to become more transnational and rely more heavily on asymmetric tactics.15 Specifically, al-Shabaab militants
waged a war of destabilization, facilitated by their ability to blend with the local population, retain considerable freedom of movement, and infiltrate Somali forces. This proved difficult for the AU peacekeepers to counter. Nevertheless, by 2017 al-Shabaab was a much politically weaker organization than it was when Ethiopian forces withdrew from Mogadishu in January 2009, although it retained lethal destructive capabilities.

AMISOM also helped extend humanitarian access during several periods of famine, drought and severe food insecurity, and itself provided humanitarian and medical assistance to tens of thousands of Somalis. Its engineering projects to rehabilitate some of the country’s road network and repair infrastructure were also significant and will probably be its most visible legacy after the mission leaves. AMISOM also succeeded in giving the UN a relatively secure foothold in Somalia, which enabled the deployment and expansion of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) from mid-2013. The same could be said for most of the international embassies that were set up in Mogadishu that relied, in large part, on AMISOM’s security blanket.

**AMISOM’s Limitations**

But the mission also had real limits. First, it initially struggled to establish a positive reputation among local Somalis, largely because of the harm it sometimes caused to Mogadishu's civilians, either through indirect fire, accidental shootings, traffic accidents, or sexual exploitation and abuse.\(^{16}\) Perhaps surprisingly, AMISOM was not given an explicit mandate to protect civilians, mainly because its focus was protecting the Somali authorities and degrading al-Shabaab. Moreover, neither the AU nor its various partners were willing to provide AMISOM with the additional resources that such a mandate would require.

AMISOM’s reputation was also damaged by allegations of corruption when some of its personnel engaged in the illicit sale of various commodities including rations, fuel, equipment and even ammunition. The most controversial allegations revolved around claims that Kenyan forces in southwest Somalia were profiting from the illicit export of charcoal, which not only assisted al-Shabaab but also breached a UN Security Council embargo authorized in 2012.\(^{17}\)

A second major failure related to inadequate force generation, which left AMISOM with severe capability gaps. First, the mission’s authorized capabilities were insufficient to achieve its mandated tasks, especially once it expanded beyond Mogadishu from late 2011. This was in large part due to the faulty planning assumption that the Somali National Army (SNA) would be able to field over 15,000 effective troops to conduct joint operations with AMISOM. Instead, the SNA never developed as planned and was often more of a hindrance
than help, with most of its brigades little more than clan militias that often extorted and abused local populations.\textsuperscript{18} Second, the AU and its partners failed to generate some of the key capabilities they authorized for AMISOM. There were large and persistent vacancy rates of personnel; a lack of critical enablers such as aviation, engineering, medical, special forces, mine action and unexploded ordinance, heavy transportation, ISR units, and night-fighting capabilities; as well as a woefully short-staffed civilian component which struggled to hire and retain sufficient numbers of personnel. To give just two brief examples, AMISOM’s early logistics support was so bad that between April 2009 and May 2010, approximately 250 peacekeepers contracted lower limb edema and symptoms compatible with wet beriberi from lack of thiamine/vitamin B1.\textsuperscript{19} Over fifty of them were airlifted to hospitals in Kenya and Uganda, and four died. It is also shocking that AMISOM did not acquire its first military helicopter as a mission asset until December 2016 despite being authorized an aviation component of twelve military helicopters in February 2012.\textsuperscript{20}

As noted above, there was a related failure to secure predictable and sustainable financing for the mission. This resulted in considerable time lost spent chasing potential donors, and also negatively affected the peacekeepers’ morale as their allowances were regularly delayed and not always commensurate with the rates available to UN peacekeepers. In 2007, AMISOM’s troops initially received allowances of only US$500 per month, which was subsequently raised to US$750. But it was not until January 2011 that they received an equivalent rate to UN peacekeepers at US$1028. This dropped to about US$800 from January 2016 when the EU reduced its allowances payments by 20 percent. (UN allowances meanwhile had increased to approximately US$1400 per month.)

AMISOM’s most fundamental limitation, however, was its inability to align its military and political tracks. Crucially, AMISOM and its partners failed to get Somalia’s political elites to reconcile, agree on the nature of the new federal state, and prioritize al-Shabaab’s defeat. This was crucial because, ultimately, there was no military solution to Somalia’s problems. AMISOM discovered that its military successes were not enough to ensure stability and sustainable peace in Somalia because these outcomes depended on political progress being made on the fundamental questions of national, regional and local governance, especially related to power-sharing and reconciliation. And for most of AMISOM’s first ten years, Somalia’s political elites failed to reconcile on these issues and even to unite around a shared operational security architecture.
to defeat al-Shabaab. This subsequently hobbled the international efforts to build a legitimate and effective set of Somali national security forces.

During the period of the two TFG administrations in Mogadishu (2006-2012), AMISOM’s principal strategic challenge was to consistently win the support of the local population when the mission was mandated to support a government that was perceived as illegitimate, corrupt, and ineffective by many of those locals. With the establishment of a new Federal Government in September 2012, AMISOM’s key local partner was considered more legitimate than the prior transitional government, but it still suffered from chronic levels of corruption and very limited capacity to deliver essential services to Somali citizens. As successive reports by the UN Monitoring Group pointed out, there was in essence a misalignment of political interests between AMISOM, its partners and Somali political elites. While AMISOM and its partners engaged in an essentially top-down exercise in state-building that usually prioritized the supply of resources to the central government in Mogadishu rather than Somalia’s regions, the political elites in the capital saw little incentive to make the tough decisions on power-sharing and reconciliation that would have enabled the creation of more legitimate and effective state institutions. It was, after all, Somalis, not foreign peacekeepers, who ultimately held the key to peace in Somalia. AMISOM was therefore caught in a difficult position in large part because no matter what military successes it achieved, sustainable peace in Somalia depended on political progress being made on the fundamental questions of governance.

The lack of effective Somali institutions crippled AMISOM’s ability to implement its stabilization agenda from 2013. Although it recovered dozens of towns across south-central Somalia from al-Shabaab control, AMISOM was unable to consistently “clear” al-Shabaab forces, which usually ran away, let alone implement the “hold” and “build” phases of its operations because of the lack of governance capacity from the Somali authorities. It was not helped by the fact that it remained a massively military-heavy mission with only a small police component of about 400 officers and tiny civilian component of less than 100 personnel. This further exacerbated the mismatch between AMISOM’s capabilities and its mandated tasks. Sometimes, however, the errors were of the AU’s own making. Notably, the early heads of the mission who were based outside Somalia provided only distant and disengaged political leadership. This forced successive AMISOM force commanders to become the default head of mission, a task they met with inconsistent results.

Finally, AMISOM failed to establish a unified system of command and control across its troop-contributing countries. This had several negative consequences including AMISOM’s inability to launch and coordinate cross-sector operations, which allowed al-Shabaab to seek relative safety in the borders between the mission’s sectors. Sometimes, technical limitations and challenges disrupted the chain
of command, such as the lack of a dedicated mission signal unit and lack of signalmen to staff existing communications nets. But the more fundamental issues were political, with national contingents usually prioritizing the views of their commanders and capitals over the AMISOM Force Commander. The situation was so problematic that the February 2016 summit of the mission’s troop-contributing countries issued a declaration that explicitly emphasized the need for AMISOM contingents to follow the Force Commander’s orders.\(^23\) Without effective Somali political institutions and unity of purpose among its contributing counties, AMISOM could not fully achieve its mandate and stabilize the country.

**The AMISOM Model Revisited**

Where does this leave the AMISOM model as a means for tackling other terror groups beyond Somalia? Put simply, the configuration of partnerships and mechanisms that developed to support AMISOM from late 2009 cannot and should not be reassembled as the basis for conducting sustained counterterrorism or stabilization tasks elsewhere. AMISOM is thus likely to represent more the exception than the rule as a means of organizing robust peace enforcement and stabilization operations because of the political, financial and operational problems the mission encountered.

**Political Problems**

First, the sheer complexity of the partnerships that were required to make AMISOM work would be incredibly difficult to replicate. Despite being an AU-led operation, AMISOM depended on assembling and coordinating a range of external partners—both official, formal partnerships (e.g. with the UN, the EU, and key states) and parallel operations within the mission’s area of operations that sometimes supported some of the same objectives (e.g. those conducted by Ethiopia, Kenya and the United States).

The array of partnerships also generated confusion about which organization should really call the shots and, at times, political differences emerged and unhelpful competition developed. For years, AMISOM was given two different mandates, one written by the UN Security Council and one by the AU Peace and Security Council. Competition also flared between the AU, the UN and, especially after September 2012, the Somali authorities, over which actor should direct civilian operations, including security sector reform and rule of law, in south-central Somalia.
Somalia. And when AMISOM began conducting stabilization operations in earnest after 2012, its partners did not always agree on what to prioritize. Sometimes the lack of a shared vision wasted time and resources. On other occasions, it also undermined the legitimacy and effectiveness of the mission.

Additional problems were generated because of legitimate differences that emerged from the distinct organizational cultures at the UN, AU and EU. Each of these organizations had different rules, frameworks and procedures for dealing with aspects of crisis response and they were not always in sync. AMISOM-UNSOA relations, for instance, became at times particularly fraught because the UN’s rules and procedures for logistical support were based on expectations of supporting a fairly standard UN peacekeeping operation. AMISOM, however, was a war-fighting mission and hence despite UNSOA’s laudable efforts, the UN was not able to consistently meet the logistical demands of maneuver warfare for a mission stretched across roughly 400,000 square kilometers.

This arrangement also broke one of the cardinal rules of warfare: not to separate a commander from control of their logistics. The resulting “push” model—whereby a central hub decides what equipment items to “push” out to the field as opposed to the field commander choosing to “pull” in what is required—could work with the right planning schedules, coordination and preparation, but it was ill-suited to respond rapidly and flexibly to AMISOM’s unpredictable needs. Differing political opinions also generated problems for AMISOM that distracted from its mandated tasks such as when, for example, both the United States and the EU suspended various forms of security cooperation and financial assistance to Burundi after the country’s internal unrest since 2015.

Finally, the range of partnerships required to make AMISOM function added further bureaucratic complexity to already complicated issues of strategic coordination and cooperation. As the number of AMISOM’s partners increased, so the mission’s coordination structures had to expand. But it was not clear that the increasing decision-making layers and sophistication of the various coordination structures delivered greater effectiveness in the field or altered the reality that AMISOM’s contingent commanders looked primarily to their national capitals for direction.

Financial Problems

On the positive side, AMISOM’s partners generated considerable amounts of funding for the mission, which by 2014 was costing approximately US$1 billion per year. At its best, the international division of labor was enough to sustain the mission—the EU paid the monthly allowances to AMISOM’s peacekeepers but could not support lethal equipment; the United States supplied lethal equipment but would not pay allowances; while the UN paid for logistical support but
not initially for lethal items such as ammunition or any of AMISOM’s civilian personnel. But these arrangements left AMISOM’s finances unpredictable, unsustainable and insufficiently flexible.

From January 2016, the EU allocated less of its financial support to paying AMISOM’s monthly allowances, which were reduced by 20 percent to about US$800 (while commensurate allowances for UN peacekeepers had increased to US$1365). By early 2017, the EU also signaled it planned to reduce its funding stream to AMISOM during 2018. Despite this shortfall, the AU failed to find other donors to fill the gap. Similarly, the UN’s reliance on trust funds to support AMISOM meant money appeared inconsistently and often came with caveats that made it impossible to spend it on what the mission really needed.

These arrangements were also susceptible to fickle partners changing their priorities. Take, for example, how one of AMISOM’s key partners, the United States, approached the issue of whether the UN should finance the mission. In response to longstanding AU calls to transition AMISOM into a UN peacekeeping operation, in late 2008, the George W. Bush administration pushed for exactly that but only as it was leaving office. Barack Obama’s incoming administration quickly stopped this plan in January 2009 and supported the UNSOA mechanism instead. More recently, Donald J. Trump’s administration announced its desire to kill more terrorists in Somalia but simultaneously cut US$1 billion from the UN assessed peacekeeping contributions, which finance AMISOM’s logistics.

Operational Problems

Most fundamentally, the AU and its partners failed to generate AMISOM’s authorized force requirements which were crucial for effective operations—not just the individual personnel but the military enablers such as medical support, engineering, aviation assets and ISR units, and force multipliers ranging from body armor, night-vision goggles, and counter-IED capabilities to training regimes. This undermined morale and the operation’s ability to achieve its mandated tasks. Part of the problem was that AMISOM was based on optimistic assumptions about the potential for reconciliation among Somalia’s political elites and their ability to develop an effective set of Somali security forces. But there were other problems as well. AMISOM’s lack of military helicopters, for instance, was highly significant and deprived the mission of the ability to strike al-Shabaab from depth, air drop troops, provide rapid reaction forces in response to emergencies, and provide air cover for peacekeepers, escort
convoy and protect the mission’s main supply routes. As noted above, AMISOM’s logistics support mechanism was based on UN peacekeeping rules that were not suited to the mission’s war-fighting needs. Nor was the model optimal for ensuring oversight and accountability of AMISOM and later Somali forces. These issues became even more acute after the UN adopted its Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) in July 2011, which stipulated all support to non-UN security forces must comply with relevant international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. The challenges of complying with the HRDDP were made more difficult because the AU had embarked on AMISOM before it had developed internal guidelines and standard operating procedures on a range of relevant issues from civilian protection and sexual exploitation and abuse to medical policy and risk assessments.

Support for AMISOM and its troop-contributing countries also generated all the usual risks and dilemmas of providing security assistance for such enforcement operations. Since partners cannot control the military forces they assist, there are inherent risks, including that recipients underperform; that resources could be used more effectively, either on other partners or on other activities; and possible damage to the donor’s reputation if the recipient’s forces engage in misconduct or are used for oppression back home. These issues were most notable for AMISOM’s partners when Kenyan forces were accused of engaging in illicit trading and during the controversial elections in Uganda (2011, 2016), Burundi (2015), and Ethiopia (2015). Some of the same risks also became more problematic for the UN once it adopted the HRDDP and began providing logistical support to AMISOM and some Somali forces.

The Uniqueness of AMISOM

Without AMISOM, the United States could not have adopted its preferred strategy of “tailored engagement” in Somalia. This clearly delivered some notable achievements, but the complicated AMISOM model could not and should not be replicated elsewhere. It generated several problems that left AMISOM able to degrade and displace al-Shabaab forces but not defeat them, and unable to turn its military successes into sustainable political gains. In part, this was because AMISOM had to work with successive Somali authorities that consistently failed to deliver on their promises to reconcile the country’s feuding elites, agree and implement a new constitution as well as a roadmap to a new federal system of governance, and build a legitimate and effective set of national security forces. Only sustained, high-level political engagement had any hope of delivering these results, not the deployment of more peacekeepers or enablers.
Both the United States and AMISOM therefore still face some tough challenges in order to implement a successful exit strategy and truly stabilize Somalia. AMISOM and its partners must simultaneously further reduce the threat posed by al-Shabaab, enhance the ability of local Somali forces to deal with that as well as other threats, and help implement a political settlement that enables Somalia to build a legitimate, effective and sustainable set of security services. Given AMISOM’s expansive list of mandated tasks and the still embryonic capacity of many Somali institutions, the prospects for a rapid and successful exit remain slim. All these challenges should give leaders from the United States and elsewhere significant pause before trying to replicate the Somalia model of counterterrorism in other theaters.

Notes


5. For details, see ibid, Appendix C.


8. Lauren Ploch Blanchard, testimony to U.S. Senate before the Senate Foreign Committee Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health Hearing: U.S. Security Assistance in Africa, June 4, 2015, 2 https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/060415_Blanchard_Testimony.pdf. This figure does not include U.S. contributions to UNSOA/UNSOS, which amounted to an additional $720 million between 2009 and 2016, or support to the Somali security forces.


11. Senior AMISOM official, interview with author, Nairobi, April 9, 2015.


20. UN Security Council Resolution 2036, S/RES/2036 (2012), February 22, 2012, Annex. From late 2009, AMISOM was able to call on the support of the two utility helicopters provided as part of UNSOA.

