

The Cabo Delgado Insurgency: A Prime Opportunity for AFRICOM to Prove the Efficacy of its  
Holistic Counterterrorism Approach

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## **Introduction**

Since its inception in 2007, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) has been repeatedly tasked with counterterrorism missions on the continent, consistent with the early-21st century framing of US foreign policy and the proliferation of extremist groups in Africa and around the world (Griffiths). Despite various counterterrorism missions, such as those in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Libya, and Somalia, none indicate a complete victory, meaning a peaceful resolution to the conflict and ensuing stability (Griffiths) (“CrisisWatch”). The relatively nascent insurgency in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province marks the latest iteration of AFRICOM involvement in counterterrorism operations.

By highlighting the holistic underpinnings of AFRICOM’s mission and outlining the conflict’s underlying dynamics, this paper seeks to argue that the insurgency in Cabo Delgado represents a prime opportunity for AFRICOM to prove the efficacy of its holistic approach to counterterrorism after years of repeated failure. In order to defend this claim, the paper will proceed as follows. First, the United States’ framing of security policy toward Africa in the 21st century will be overviewed, followed by sections addressing the importance of pursuing a holistic approach to counterterrorism in Africa and previewing how AFRICOM is the best suited vehicle for carrying out such an approach. Next, the Cabo Delgado insurgency will be introduced as a prime opportunity to prove the efficacy of AFRICOM’s holistic counterterrorism approach via four main components. The introduction to the argument is followed by sections that provide an overview of the conflict and discuss the extremist group’s founding, grievances, and member composition, in addition to a brief section on the group’s sources of financing. After providing this context, the Mozambican government’s responses to the insurgency will be described, followed by accounts of external involvement in the conflict, including that of the United States. Before discussing how AFRICOM should become more holistically involved in Cabo Delgado,

specific US economic interests in the province are identified in a brief section in order to justify (i.e., beyond altruistic motives) increased US involvement. The main argument, discussing how AFRICOM should build on its holistic approach to the Cabo Delgado insurgency through four main components—counterfinance, training local militaries/police (in professionalism and transnational cooperation), building and assisting with maritime capacity, and providing aid (both humanitarian and development)—is subsequently advanced, followed by a conclusion about how holistic approaches can be used in preventing civil conflict from erupting in the first place.

### **US Security Policy Toward Africa in the 21st Century**

In his book, *U.S. Security Cooperation with Africa: Political and Policy Challenges*, Robert J. Griffiths names counterterrorism, access to natural resources, and strategic competition as the main paradigms through which the United States views its security policy toward the African continent (Griffiths). Since the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, and especially since the September 11th attacks, countering the spread of violent extremism and terrorism has been America's paramount concern in Africa and across the world (Wekesa and Rikhotso) (Griffiths). In the present day, such counterterror framing has some merit. The African continent has witnessed a growth in violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in recent years, corresponding with a conflict landscape that boasts an increasing share of extremism-related attacks and deaths (Marc) (Faleg and Mustasilta). Though current VEO-related insurgencies in Africa do not possess the capacity to act globally and strike the American homeland, their respective abilities to harm civilians, governments, and development outcomes are evident (Marc).

Regardless of their global reach, the proliferation in VEOs—especially Islamist ones—amid numerous American efforts to thwart their existence and activities over the past 20 years demonstrates that the counterterrorism framework and its related initiatives are flawed (Bacon and Warner) (Turse) (Seldin). Assessing why such efforts have fallen short requires an improved understanding vis-à-vis the connections to Islamism that these African VEOs possess. In most cases, these VEOs possess very weak links to global jihadist networks (i.e., minimal financial or military support, if at all) and simply use such connections-in-name-only to bolster their image and the scale of their threat (Marc). In addition to lacking significant connections with global jihadist groups, many African VEOs are more heavily rooted in localized political and economic grievances rather than any Islamist ideology (Wekesa and Rikhotso). While not to discredit the jihadist motivations of some VEO leaders, such high-level terrorist actors often manipulate local issues and grievances to recruit new members and advance their interests (Bacon and Warner). With an understanding of such characteristics and dynamics, one can accurately conclude that any military-only counterterrorism approach that overemphasizes supposed global connections and jihadist motivations while overlooking political and economic root causes, is bound to fail (Griffiths) (Faleg and Mustasilta).

### **The Imperative for a Holistic American Approach to Countering Terrorism in Africa**

Given the nature of the terrorist threat in Africa, the US must employ a holistic approach to counterterrorism on the continent (Griffiths). A 2013 RAND study, entitled, “Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies,” confirms the efficacy of such an approach. Examining 71 insurgencies that have occurred between 1944 and 2010, the study finds that governments—whose forces American military advisers would be training in counterterrorism operations—that relied on a military-only, heavy-handed approach have fared worse in their

handling of insurgencies than those that employed a mixed (i.e., holistic) approach (Paul et al.). Despite repeated US counterterrorism failures on the continent, the US government has actually understood and attempted to employ such a holistic approach since the Bush Administration (Wekesa and Rikhotso). For example, in 2003 President Bush announced the East African Regional Security Initiative, which included social and economic development programs as integral components of a counterterrorism response (Griffiths). Despite these initiatives, the US has continually fallen short of resolving extremist insurgencies holistically, such as by prioritizing military capacity building over boosting the ability of governments to address underlying grievances (Bacon and Warner).

### **AFRICOM: The Best Vehicle for Pursuing a Holistic Approach**

Before discussing AFRICOM specifically, it is critical to outline why a military command should be the coordinator for a holistic counterterrorism response that eschews a military action-only approach. Above all, establishing a secure environment is necessary for any form of political stability or economic development, which are critical to addressing related underlying grievances (Griffiths). Though some may criticize the securitization of America's Africa policy, there is no question as to whether establishing security is a prerequisite to many other objectives. Another advantage the US military possesses is its connections to African governments, whose capacity is critical to establishing security and preventing dangerous grievances from arising. In contrast to other US government agencies, the US military has been the most visible and concrete symbol of US commitment to the region since the 1990s (Devermont and Steadman). AFRICOM senior leaders travel to the continent more often than other senior US officials and such interactions often constitute African leaders' highest-level connections to the US government (Devermont and Steadman). By building on such

already-established relationships, AFRICOM is able to more easily undertake a new approach and programming.

A major theme of Griffiths' book, *U.S. Security Cooperation with Africa: Political and Policy Challenges*, is that AFRICOM was created and designed to address a broader security agenda than one solely focused on military operations (Griffiths). Griffiths writes, "the creation of AFRICOM and the inclusion of the State Department and USAID along with other US government stakeholders reflect the understanding that security is not exclusively a military responsibility" but rather "a holistic approach that recognizes the connection between security and development" (Griffiths, 143). By including other US agencies under the AFRICOM umbrella, the US is able to pursue a "whole-of-government approach to African security with an emphasis on interagency cooperation" (Griffiths, 91). With respect to counterterrorism programming, AFRICOM enables the US to pursue four components that comprise a holistic approach: counterfinance, training local militaries/police (in professionalism and transnational cooperation), building and assisting with maritime capacity, and providing aid (both humanitarian and development).

Though these components will be thoroughly discussed in relation to this paper's case study, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, elucidating their broader relevance is warranted. Engaging in counterfinance operations highlights the reality that if VEOs become unable to finance their operations—including rewarding their fighters economically—they will not be able to carry out attacks nor remain viable. Employing such an approach to incapacitate VEOs also avoids a recurrent issue that relates to training militaries: heavy-handed abuses of power or collateral damage. A 2017 UNDP study found that 71% of voluntary recruits to VEOs cite excessive government military action (or abuses) as the final trigger that motivated them to join

(“Journey to Extremism in Africa”). This glaring statistic highlights the importance of training local militaries and police in professionalism and human rights in order to reduce VEO recruitment and limit civilian casualties/abuses (Faleg and Mustasilta). Given the transnational nature of terrorism and its benefits to some VEOs (e.g., to move money, personnel, and weapons), many African militaries also require training in cross-border cooperation and capacity building (Griffiths). In coastal African countries, maritime capacity is a critical yet often overlooked component of counterterrorism operations, and presents a key opportunity for US support (Lycan et al.). Lastly, humanitarian aid—whose swift delivery can be ensured by AFRICOM’s logistical capacity to coordinate with USAID and the State Department—is critical to mitigating human suffering and increasing civilian support for the local government, while development aid is crucial to addressing the root causes of conflict and its manifestation as violent extremism (Griffiths) (Devermont and Steadman).

### **Constructing AFRICOM’s Holistic Counterterrorism Approach in Cabo Delgado**

Writing in 2016, Griffiths noted that “while the interagency approach adopted by AFRICOM signaled a more holistic view of security, it remains to be seen whether the DOD and other US stakeholders can cooperate effectively to achieve this goal” (Griffiths, 96). A year later, an insurgency turned violent in northern Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province; throughout 2021, the conflict has shown few signs of abating, and even possesses the potential to intensify (“CrisisWatch”). Containing conflict characteristics that align with the four aforementioned components of a holistic counterterrorism approach, the Cabo Delgado insurgency offers a pristine opportunity for AFRICOM to demonstrate the effectiveness of such an approach.

Before demonstrating how AFRICOM is suited to engage holistically in the conflict, it is imperative to provide background on the insurgency, including the group’s origins, grievances,

member composition, and financing. Responses to the insurgency to date, both domestic and foreign (including the US), will also be overviewed, in addition to identifying US interests in the conflict and country that justify its intervention beyond one rooted in humanitarian and development interests.

### **Overview of the Cabo Delgado Insurgency**

The violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado commenced in October 2017 with an armed attack on the town of Mocímboa de Praia (“Stemming the Insurrection”). The group driving the insurgency—which has been given multiple names such as Ahlu Sunna Wa-Jamma (ASWJ)<sup>1</sup>, Ansar-al Sunna, al-Shabaab<sup>2</sup>, and ISIS-Mozambique—generally targeted military and police personnel during this first attack (O'Donnell et al.) (Curran et al.) (Columbo and Doctor) (Godfrey and Gonzales) (Morier-Genoud). Since 2017, ASWJ’s armaments and operational tactics have significantly improved (“Stemming the Insurrection”). By 2020, the insurgent group had become much more violent and ambitious, carrying out simultaneous attacks in different districts and targeting civilians in two-thirds of their violent campaigns, a higher figure than among other Islamist groups in Africa (“The Islamist Insurgency”) (“Stemming the Insurrection”) (Pirio et al.). Cabo Delgado’s insurgency became major international news beginning in March 2021 after ASWJ attacked the city of Palma using covert infiltration, multiple points of simultaneous attack, and maritime support (Vines) (Columbo and Doctor). The assault, which impacted military personnel, civil servants, and civilians, as well as banks and government buildings, resulted in the death of 87 people (Columbo and Doctor) (“The Islamist Insurgency”). TotalEnergies’ suspension of construction on its nearby \$20 billion gas

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym ASWJ will be used in this paper to refer to this group.

<sup>2</sup> No connection to the group with the same name operating in Somalia.

complex—part of the largest foreign investment in Africa—grabbed headlines and generated sustained attention as well (Vines).

As is the case with other Islamist groups operating in Africa, though ASWJ was formally adopted by the Islamic State (IS) as the Mozambican wing of its Central Africa Province in June 2019, the IS brand is primarily used to sow fear in conflicts that are primarily local in nature (Lister) (Walsh and Schmitt). Thus, while ASWJ—whose fighters number in the few thousands—is certainly a formidable armed group that has contributed to the death of 3,000 people and the displacement of 1 million others, its Islamist nature is tame in comparison to its locally-rooted political and economic grievances (“Stemming the Insurrection”) (“Five Keys”). However, before elucidating such grievances, it is critical to discuss the founding of ASWJ—which admittedly has some Islamist elements—and its evolution from religious sect to terrorist group.

### **ASWJ’s Founding and Evolution: From Religious Sect to Terrorist Group**

In 2007, Muslim youth in Cabo Delgado began aggressively challenging established Sufi religious orders such as the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO), accusing them of acquiescence with the government authorities, dominated by ethnically-distinct Christians (“Stemming the Insurrection”) (Gartenstein-Ross et al.). Many of these youths disputed with Islamic and government authorities regarding appropriate dress, the availability of alcohol, and secular education (Lister). The government’s sole response to these loggerheads was mass arrests, which only worsened the youth’s relationship with the state (“Stemming the Insurrection”). By 2016, the contentious relationship reached a tipping point as the government began actively countering the religious sect, arresting men and boys en masse simply for belonging to it (Morier-Genoud). In response to this increased opposition and repression by the

Mozambican government as well as mainstream Islamic organizations, the sect concluded that living in a peaceful counter-society was no longer viable and thus turned to violent opposition (Morier-Genoud). Though the sources of some of the sect's animosity were evidently Islamist (e.g., active opposition to secular education), it is critical to note that accusations of Islamic organizations' acquiescence with the state became a point of contention, highlighting a distrust and even hatred of the Mozambican government (Mahtani et al.). This active distrust and hatred of the Mozambican government hints at the myriad grievances possessed by youth in Cabo Delgado, many of which have no connection to Islamism.

### **Sources of Grievances in Cabo Delgado: Mobilizers for ASWJ Recruitment**

Despite possessing an Islamist tinge, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado is fueled primarily by localized political and economic grievances ("Five Keys"). The Cabo Delgado Province in northern Mozambique, known colloquially as 'Cabo Esquecido' (Portuguese for 'Forgotten Cape'), is among the country's most neglected provinces, ranking near the bottom in nearly every social indicator (Kleinfeld). The abject poverty is compounded by high unemployment and illiteracy rates (67%), despite the significant foreign investments made in the region's nascent natural gas industry (Curran et al.) ("Building Community Resilience") ("The Islamist Insurgency"). The recognition that the largest private investment in Africa is not translating into livelihood improvements has worsened the perception that many residents of Cabo Delgado have of the Mozambican government, whose ethnic favoritism and neopatrimonial corruption is certainly complicit in their lack of opportunity (Quinn) ("Stemming the Insurrection"). Evidenced in multiple instances, mistreatment by the central government constitutes a significant source of grievance among residents of Cabo Delgado. In addition to not benefiting from improved economic conditions and opportunities as a result of the natural gas discoveries, some

residents of Cabo Delgado were actively harmed by such developments; many people were forcibly displaced beginning in 2010 to make way for natural gas-related operations and provided with minimal compensation and lack of access to related jobs (“Five Keys”) (“Stemming the Insurrection”). Similar grievances stem from the Mozambican government’s 2014 decision to forcibly remove artisanal miners from ruby fields near the town of Montepuez in order to benefit commercial interests<sup>3</sup> (“Five Keys”). These expulsions from ruby fields were violent and denied Mwani people of their already-minor income streams (“Stemming the Insurrection”). In fact, such an ethnic dimension to the government’s mistreatment constitutes another key grievance among residents of Cabo Delgado.

Cabo Delgado’s Makonde minority—a predominantly Christian ethnic group—holds the majority of the province’s social, economic, and political power (Morier-Genoud). This power dynamic puts the Makonde minority—which has connections to the FRELIMO<sup>4</sup> government—at odds with the Mwani and Makua communities in the province (“Stemming the Insurrection”). Returning to the issue of the province’s natural resource wealth, not only do few benefits accrue to Cabo Delgado as a whole, but the benefits that do remain flow to the well-connected Makonde elite (Lister). This ethnic elitism and exclusion also manifests itself in other aspects of the province’s economy, both licit and illicit. The licit economy is effectively controlled by Makonde elites and their government and business allies; profits from illicit activities such as heroin trafficking—which dominate the provincial economy—are also concentrated among the Makonde elite. Further, the importance of heroin trafficking in lining the pockets of well-connected Makonde is a major factor contributing to the province’s relative levels of impunity and underdevelopment (“Stemming the Insurrection”) (Curran et al.).

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<sup>3</sup> Given what happened with respect to the natural gas projects, it is unlikely that these commercial developments would have benefited residents of Cabo Delgado.

<sup>4</sup> The party in power since Mozambique’s independence and civil war

These ethnic inequalities have only worsened since the election of current President Nyusi—a Makonde from Cabo Delgado—in 2014 (“Stemming the Insurrection”). As a result of Nyusi’s presidency, Makonde business elites have exhibited greater bullishness in their acquisition of economic power in Cabo Delgado (“Stemming the Insurrection”). In addition to this ethnic economic impunity, Nyusi has also implemented various policies that have benefited the Makonde at the expense of the province’s other residents. For example, Nyusi has skewed veteran pension allocations in favor of Makonde recipients, which has had the impact of allowing working-class Makonde to buy land on the Mwani-dominated coast (“Stemming the Insurrection”). Further compounding these grievances, the new Makonde arrivals on the coast have engaged in extortion of local businesses and fishing operations, severely damaging the economic prospects of Mwani youth (“Stemming the Insurrection”).

Comprehending the plethora of grievances held by many in Cabo Delgado’s Muslim-majority population—especially among youth—Islamist insurgents take advantage of them as a means of recruiting new members. In contrast to the failing services and ethnically-biased policies associated with the Mozambican government, the insurgents promise a messianic social order and the provision of basic benefits such as food, clothing, and protection (Pirio et al.). Insurgents especially target entrepreneurial youth, offering them small loans to help them build businesses and wealth in exchange for their joining the group (Gartenstein-Ross et al.). Despite the Islamist beliefs of some of the group’s leaders, especially those from Tanzania, ASWJ’s public messaging has largely focused on poor governance and corruption, highlighting that local grievances are key to the insurgency’s success in recruiting the majority of its members (Columbo). By assessing the composition of ASWJ’s membership, this preeminence of local grievance becomes even clearer.

### **ASWJ Membership Composition**

ASWJ's membership can best be described as composite ("Stemming the Insurrection"). The group boasts both locals and foreigners, and both those whose primary concern is economic opportunity and those who truly believe in the Islamist mission of the insurgency ("Stemming the Insurrection"). The groups' lower-level militants are primarily Mwani and Makua<sup>5</sup> residents of Cabo Delgado, especially those lacking economic security, such as former fishermen and unemployed youth ("Stemming the Insurrection"). Looking for a way to combat their economic frustration and often lured in by insurgents offering instant cash and a promise of future wealth, these rank and file members do not highly prioritize—and perhaps lack any care for—the Islamist ideology associated with ASWJ ("Stemming the Insurrection"). Though only a few hundred strong, foreign fighters (primarily Tanzanian) represent an important part of the group's leadership (Columbo and Doctor). Islamist ideology plays a much more significant role in framing the motivations of these high-level militants, though their success in recruiting local fighters hinges on inflaming local grievances and welding them into the insurgency's mission, demonstrating the importance of understanding and addressing the political and economic root causes of the conflict ("Five Keys"). In contrast to other Islamist insurgencies, foreign fighters are not arriving en masse to join the ranks of ASWJ, and any global terrorist links, such as those related to financing, are minimal (Columbo and Doctor).

### **ASWJ Sources of Financing**

Though the capacity to mobilize fighters and support is key to the insurgency's success, no operations can be achieved without adequate financing. ASWJ enjoys considerable revenue sources, which are primarily local ("Stemming the Insurrection"). The insurgent group primarily

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<sup>5</sup> There were some Makonde fighters who joined, primarily those kicked off ruby deposits by the government.

exacts protection rackets and taxes from local businesses, while also engaging in extortion and kidnapping for ransom (“Stemming the Insurrection”) (“Five Keys”).

### **Mozambican Government Responses to the Cabo Delgado Insurgency**

After the October 2017 attack on Mocímboa da Praia which marked the insurgency's emergence, the Mozambican government opted for a military-centric response to the unrest, ignoring the insurgency's root causes (e.g., poverty, expropriation, and ethnic marginalization) and made no effort to address them (Lister). Security forces responded with mass arrests and careless counterattacks, a heavy-handed approach that only stoked local grievances further (“Stemming the Insurrection”). This military-centric, heavy-handed, and heedless approach continued unabated until 2020<sup>6</sup> and to some extent remains today, evidenced by the collateral damage and human rights violations attributed to Mozambican forces operating in the region (Pirio et al.).

In addition to the counterproductive approach to the insurgency on land, the Mozambican maritime response has been weak and ineffective (Vreĳ). Since early 2020, ASWJ has developed a growing maritime prowess with notable capacity both for the purposes of carrying out operations and as a means of financing (Curran et al.) (Quinn) (Lycan et al.). For example, using two stolen naval patrol vessels, the insurgent group employed maritime support to an attack on Mocímboa da Praia in March 2020; the group also deploys similar naval crafts, sailboats, and canoes to more easily move fighters and resources along the coast (Lycan et al.) (Curran et al.). In contrast to sea blindness, which is rooted in ignorance, the Mozambican Navy's failure to address ASWJ's maritime operations likely stems from a lack of naval capacity; the country's

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<sup>6</sup> In March 2020, the Mozambican government created the Integrated Development Agency of the North in order to coordinate humanitarian assistance and spur economic growth and youth employment in Cabo Delgado and other northern provinces.

entire navy is composed of only 200 sailors and 14 patrol boats (Lycan et al.) (“Chapter Nine: Sub-Saharan Africa”).

Mozambique’s development response to the conflict (i.e., one that would address its core causes) has been rather muted, though the creation of the Integrated Development Agency of the North in March 2020 signals a step in the right direction. This agency is tasked with attracting millions of donor dollars in order to coordinate humanitarian assistance, spur economic growth, and address youth unemployment in Cabo Delgado and two other northern provinces (“Stemming the Insurrection”).

### **Non-US External Involvement in the Cabo Delgado Insurgency**

Aside from seeking assistance from rather ineffective private military contractors beginning in 2019<sup>7</sup>, for years President Nyusi was wary of asking for formal external support, fearing that doing so would scare away investors (Campbell) (Quinn) (“The Islamist Insurgency”). After the Palma attack in March 2021, which not only scared away new investors but paused investment projects already underway, Nyusi formally requested foreign help to quell the insurgency (“The Islamist Insurgency”). Given the weakness of the Mozambican military and the intensification of ASWJ’s attacks, external military intervention is warranted, though a nimble group of advisers, intelligence specialists, and limited combat support is favorable to a very heavy external force that risks a quagmire (“Stemming the Insurrection”). To date, military advisers and trainers have been deployed by members of the Southern African Development Community (especially Angola, Botswana, and South Africa), the European Union (primarily Portugal, the country’s former colonizer), and Rwanda (“The Islamist Insurgency”) (“Five Keys”). Beyond simply advising and training, Rwandan armed forces have been actively

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<sup>7</sup> The Russian Wagner Group departed in 2019 after suffering significant casualties; the South Africa-based Dyck Advisory Group continues to operate in the region.

engaged in combat against ASWJ fighters, actions that have achieved a level of success and are well-received by many civilians in Cabo Delgado (“The Need to Build”).

### **The United States’ Response and Approach to the Cabo Delgado Insurgency to Date**

Thus far, the United States has undertaken a rather holistic approach to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, especially ramping up its efforts beginning in early 2021 after deeming the Mozambican government’s response inadequate and witnessing the Palma attack as evidence that US interests were threatened (O'Donnell et al.). In a March 2021 digital press briefing, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of African Affairs Michael Gonzales confirmed the United States’ holistic strategy, stating, “our approach not only seeks to address the security side but also addressing the socioeconomic drivers of the threat, countering ISIS messaging, and providing greater economic opportunity and resilience of the community so that the attraction to violent extremism is lessened” (Godfrey and Gonzales). In the same briefing, Gonzales discussed the terrorist designation that the State Department placed on ASWJ the day before, arguing “I certainly see these designations as the continuation of U.S. focus on addressing terrorism threats across the continent but recognizing that that is done as part of a holistic U.S. Government approach that addresses drivers, response, as well as the humanitarian effects – part of our ongoing commitment to the African continent and our partners there” (Godfrey and Gonzales). Despite some criticizing such designations as potentially overemphasizing global jihadist connections at the expense of addressing local grievances and conflict dynamics, the current US response to the insurgency has demonstrated a holistic approach that includes counterfinance activities, military training and equipment provisioning, and both humanitarian and development aid (Bacon and Warner) (“Stemming the Insurrection”).

In March 2021, John Godfrey, the State Department's Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, noted that the US was already working with the Mozambican government to bolster its capacity in countering ASWJ's financing (Godfrey and Gonzales). Beginning in the same month, the US deployed a dozen special forces soldiers to conduct counterinsurgency training missions, a program that was modest in size and scope ("The Islamist Insurgency") (Walsh and Schmitt). A second US training program launched in August, additionally incorporating the provision of medical and communications equipment to the Mozambican military ("The Need to Build").

The United States has also significantly increased both humanitarian and development aid over the past year in response to the insurgency. In a May 2021 press release, the State Department noted that the United States, which is the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance in Mozambique, was "working with the Government of Mozambique, international organizations, civil society organizations, and the private sector to increase our humanitarian assistance to those in need of food, water, and shelter, among other emergency relief items, in response to the devastating violence by ISIS-Mozambique in Cabo Delgado province" ("U.S. Humanitarian Aid and Supplies Help"). The United States, through USAID, has also launched numerous development projects in Cabo Delgado province, such as USAID Recovery Cabo Delgado and USAID Olipihana ("USAID Recovery Cabo Delgado") ("USAID Olipihana"). USAID Recovery Cabo Delgado works with the government, local organizations, and the private sector to help internally displaced persons and host communities "develop sustainable sources of income that will decrease their need for humanitarian assistance," including through the provision of vocational and entrepreneurial training targeted at youth ("USAID Recovery Cabo Delgado"). Operating in other districts of Cabo Delgado, USAID Olipihana similarly works with

the government, local organizations, and the private sector to “restore education and livelihood opportunities for 12,000 residents,” employing financial literacy training and supporting the establishment of savings and credit groups in order to support youth entrepreneurship and employment (“USAID Olipihana”). These programs illustrate the US interest in mitigating suffering and promoting development, especially given its potential to address the root causes of the conflict and thus potentially contribute to its peaceful resolution. The insurgency’s endangerment of specific US economic investments in the province’s nascent natural gas industry, however, heightens US interest in combating the insurgency and is likely the primary driver behind AFRICOM’s assessment that ASWJ represents “an emerging threat to U.S. interests in East Africa” (O’Donnell et al., 19).

### **US Economic Interests in the Cabo Delgado Insurgency**

Following the discovery of natural gas reserves—some of the world’s largest—off the coast of Cabo Delgado, three multinational corporations pledged considerable investments. The largest of these investments comes from ExxonMobil, a giant in America’s energy sector (Hill and Burkhardt). A 2020 interagency Inspector General Report indicates that “ExxonMobil, the Export-Import Bank of the United States, and other U.S. entities seek to have a stake in developing these assets to provide energy security and direct economic benefits to the United States,” underscoring the direct economic interests that the US has in the security of the province (O’Donnell et al.). At present, these projects have been halted due to insecurity, with ExxonMobil announcing that it will delay making a final decision about investing until 2023 (“Stemming the Insurrection”) (“The Islamist Insurgency”). Therefore, in addition to insecurity posing a risk to Mozambique’s potential revenue stream from natural gas—a critical development in the world’s sixth poorest country—it is also jeopardizing US economic and energy interests (Lister) (“The

Islamist Insurgency”) (“Stemming the Insurrection”) (Hill and Burkhardt) (Bacon and Warner). These direct threats to national interests, in addition to genuine concern for human rights and regional stability, demand that the United States, through AFRICOM, more profoundly respond to the Cabo Delgado insurgency, expanding on its current holistic approach.

### **Building on AFRICOM’s Holistic Approach to the Cabo Delgado Insurgency**

In spite of the US pursuing a rather holistic approach to the Cabo Delgado insurgency to date, there is nonetheless opportunity to build on and expand US engagement in the four components that comprise a rounded and sound counterterrorism program: counterfinance, training local militaries/police (in professionalism and transnational cooperation), building and assisting with maritime capacity, and providing aid (both humanitarian and development).

Counterfinance programming is listed first purposefully: it is one of the simplest, yet most effective ways to incapacitate an insurgent group in the short term. Without the necessary economic flows, an insurgent group is unable to carry out its functions and operations (Curran et al.). It is critical that the US markedly increase its counterfinance programming in Mozambique both in terms of engaging directly and in training Mozambican forces to act independently, actions that exceed the current small training program and the terrorist designations that freeze any ASWJ assets in the US<sup>8</sup> (Godfrey and Gonzales) (Columbo and Kurtzer). Such programming allows for swift insurgency incapacitation on the cheap, providing the US and the Mozambican government with additional time to implement the other three components of the holistic counterterrorism approach.

Military training has been a central aspect of the United States’ approach to the Cabo Delgado insurgency since March 2021 (Walsh and Schmitt). Given that the Mozambican

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<sup>8</sup> It is unlikely that ASWJ members have assets in the US since their financing is primarily local, so this approach is not very effective and certainly not total.

military's armed response to the insurgency has been hampered by unprofessionalism and carelessness that results in unnecessary civilian casualties and human rights violations, the US needs to increase professionalization training in the country (Quinn). However, such training should include more than just elite Mozambican military units—regular military personnel and police are active participants in the conflict, constitute a key point of interaction with civilians, and suffer from coordination problems (Devermont) (Walsh and Schmitt). Similar coordination problems exist across the border of Tanzania, with ASWJ taking advantage of the porous border and the inability of Mozambican and Tanzanian forces to effectively cooperate (“Five Keys”). An ASWJ attack in southern Tanzania in late 2020 spurred Tanzania to send troops to the region and tighten its border with Mozambique following years of ambivalence, yet coordinating with Mozambican troops remains a serious challenge (Quinn) (“The Islamist Insurgency”). The United States should provide coordination capacity training to Mozambican and Tanzanian forces, addressing topics such as joint intelligence collection and border security (Columbo and Doctor).

The border with Tanzania is not the only porous transit point plaguing the Mozambican response: the weakly controlled coast remains a substantial impediment as well (“Five Keys”). Maritime support represents an area where the United States—and its world's most capable and powerful navy—can play a major role in ending the conflict. ASWJ is likely to continue developing its maritime capabilities in the near future, a trend that presents a direct risk to US interests in the Mozambican natural gas industry (Curran et al.). AFRICOM already leads maritime exercises with African navies, including that of Mozambique, through the Africa Partnership Station (Griffiths). By establishing regular and targeted exercises with the Mozambican Navy that allow for capacity building and coordination training, AFRICOM can

help Mozambique address a crucial weak spot being consistently exploited by ASWJ (Columbo). In the short term, AFRICOM can also deploy ships and resources off the Mozambican Coast to deter and counter ASWJ's maritime operations.

Deploying humanitarian and development aid, programming that addresses the underlying causes of the Cabo Delgado insurgency, constitutes the final component of a holistic AFRICOM approach to counterterrorism. In order to ensure that humanitarian aid earmarked for Cabo Delgado can effectively reach the hardest hit and most dangerous areas, the United States should deploy AFRICOM personnel to coordinate and handle logistics, a key strength of the US military. AFRICOM's role in aid delivery is especially critical given that the State Department's terrorist designation of ASWJ deters some humanitarian actors from providing aid, fearing they will incidentally assist the terror group and be held criminally liable (Columbo and Kurtzer).

Despite the importance of humanitarian aid in reducing human suffering and rebuilding some trust in the Mozambican government among affected civilians, development aid is necessary to confront the grievances that bolstered the armed insurgency in the first place. There can be no long term solution to the insurgency and instability in Mozambique without equally-distributed development. The Mozambican government ought to provide better services and economic opportunities for people in Cabo Delgado, and not just among the Makonde (Vines). Using AFRICOM to coordinate aid procurement and delivery in a conflict environment, the US can support Mozambican initiatives such as the Integrated Development Agency of the North in order to make DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) efforts and a societal building of trust possible. In contrast to military action-only counterterrorism initiatives that focus narrowly on fatally eliminating insurgents, development initiatives that provide jobs possess the ability to convince insurgents—many of whom are motivated by lack of economic

opportunity rather than Islamism—to forego their militancy and reintegrate back into civilian life (Vines) (“Stemming the Insurrection”).

Building societal trust between the people of Cabo Delgado and the Mozambican government requires a more long term time horizon, though it remains the most important means of securing a stable and prosperous future for the province and the country. In order for these development programs to be effective in mending societal divides, however, the Mozambican government must be viewed as the provider, with the United States simply assisting in the funding and logistical implementation. In a May 2020 article, Devermont and Steadman prioritize such an approach for the US military, writing, “the U.S. military’s most effective intervention is assisting partner nations to improve their behavior and rebuild trust” because “when U.S. forces support efforts to repair the broken bonds of governance and positively impact the behavior of African security forces, it reinforces the idea that the state’s job is to protect people, instead of going after them” (Devermont and Steadman). Therefore, promoting development initiatives and their ability to establish accountable bonds between citizenry and government is crucial not only to the DDR process that can bring the Cabo Delgado insurgency to a peaceful resolution, but also to pursuing a long term, sustainable approach that prevents future civil conflict and ensures an equitable path of development (Pirio et al.).

### **Conclusion: AFRICOM’s Role in Preventing Future Civil Conflicts**

Though this paper focused primarily on holistic strategies to insurgency resolution, civil conflict prevention should increasingly frame AFRICOM’s approach to the continent. While recognizing that the US cannot dictate foreign government policies, it is evident that in contrast to other insurgencies on the continent, Cabo Delgado’s was relatively avoidable. According to the 2019 United States Institute of Peace Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, preventive

measures “reduce the likelihood that extremists will turn local conflicts into transnational jihads, hold territory, or establish governance” and in comparison to responding to conflict, save money at a ratio of 16-to-1 (“Preventing Extremism”, 14) (Devermont). Going forward, AFRICOM ought to consistently coordinate an interagency approach that partners with African governments, civil society, and the private sector in order to ensure accountable governance, civil liberties, and economic opportunities, rather than playing reactionary catch-up and making knee-jerk decisions about where to drop the next payload.

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