

**EXCLUSIVE**

# U.S. Congress Moves to Restrain Pentagon Over Africa Drawdown Plans

Esper already faces an uphill battle in trying to push through potential cuts to Africom. New legislation could make that even tougher.

BY **ROBBIE GRAMER** | MARCH 4, 2020, 8:51 AM

**A** bipartisan group of lawmakers is maneuvering to prevent the Trump administration from reducing the U.S. military footprint in Africa, an issue that has sparked political blowback on Capitol Hill against Defense Secretary Mark Esper.

Democratic Rep. Jimmy Panetta, Republican Rep. Richard Hudson, and Democratic Rep. Jason Crow are expected to introduce legislation in the House this week that would prevent the administration from cutting U.S. forces deployed under U.S. Africa Command (Africom) unless the Pentagon issues detailed reports to Congress on the moves' impacts. An advanced draft of the legislation was obtained by *Foreign Policy*.

The legislation reflects growing congressional backlash against the potential reduction in U.S. troops on the continent at a time when terrorist groups are gaining ground in East Africa and the Sahel region of West Africa. It also previews the uphill battle Esper could face in his efforts to push through a series of ambitious military reforms as the Trump administration works to reposition the military for an era of what it calls "great power competition" with China and Russia.

Esper has insisted repeatedly that no decisions on force reductions have been made, and the military would not fully withdraw troops from Africa amid a review of the United States' global military posture. Top Pentagon officials have pointed to the recent decision to dispatch the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade to Africom as a sign of its commitment to training and advising partner governments in Africa.

Those reassurances haven't been enough to quell pushback from Capitol Hill, including from some of the Trump administration's top political allies such as Republican Sens.

Lindsey Graham and Jim Inhofe. Inhofe, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has called for an increase in the number of U.S. troops deployed to Africa.

The Trump administration's ongoing review is meant to ready the U.S. military for a new era of competition to confront Russia and China. The Pentagon has reportedly floated cutting several hundred troops in West Africa and leaving a base in Niger to redirect resources toward Russia and China.

Lawmakers contend that such moves would be counterproductive, given those countries' glowing clout and military footprints in Africa itself. "Any withdrawal or reduction would likely result in a surge in violent extremist attacks on the continent and beyond as well as increase the geopolitical influence of competitors like Russia and China," Graham and Sen. Chris Coons, a Democrat, **wrote** in a letter to Esper in January. (Graham later **denied** a report that he threatened to make Esper's life "hell" if he directed troop reductions in West Africa.)

If passed, the new bill—called the U.S.-Africa Strategic Security Act—would throw yet another roadblock in front of any plans to redeploy Africom resources. The bill calls on the defense secretary to submit reports to congressional committees on the strategic and operational risks of withdrawing U.S. forces from the region.

Esper has insisted he won't shut out Congress from the process. "Once we get through the reviews of Africom, at the appropriate place and time, I will ... update Congress," he told reporters on Jan. 22. He added: "Mission No. 1 is compete with Russia and China."

Africom has about 6,000 troops, most training and advising partner governments and conducting counterterrorism operations. It accounts for just about 3 percent of the overall number of U.S. troops deployed abroad, with some 200,000 U.S. troops based in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

Terrorist groups in the Sahel, including branches of al Qaeda and the Islamic State, are rapidly expanding and ramping up deadly terrorist attacks aimed at both military and civilian targets despite international counterterrorism campaigns. The **Trump administration is expected to** name a special envoy to the Sahel region to help coordinate a response to the surge in violence in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. But governments in West Africa and France—which has nearly 4,000 troops deployed across the region—say they rely on U.S. military support.

"U.S. support is critical to our operations and ... its reduction would severely limit our effectiveness against terrorists," French Armed Services Minister Florence Parly said



during a visit to Washington last month.

**Robbie Gramer** is a diplomacy and national security reporter at *Foreign Policy*. Twitter: [@RobbieGramer](#)

---

**TAGS:** AFRICA, AFRICOM, EXCLUSIVE, MILITARY, PENTAGON

[VIEW  
COMMENTS](#)