

Countering Chinese and Russian Influence: The State Partnership Program in Africa

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Africa's strategic importance to global stability and U.S. national security has grown significantly over the past decade. Africa's population is growing rapidly. Its natural resources and digital infrastructure now make it a key arena of great-power competition. China and Russia have both intensified their presence across Africa in recent years, undermining the United States' (U.S.) influence in the region. China's largest foreign military presence is on the continent of Africa with a particular interest in ports.<sup>1</sup> China's approach combines infrastructure loans, military equipment and training, and post-conflict investment to reshape long-term norms of governance and security on the continent.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Russia has restructured its private military operations into the Africa Corps, fusing resource extraction, disinformation, and paramilitary activity to secure influence and project power.<sup>3</sup> These models emphasize regime survival and economic dependency rather than institutional development, leaving African states vulnerable to exploitation and strategic manipulation. The U.S. maintains a long record of humanitarian and security engagement in Africa, but its influence often fluctuates with political cycles and crisis intervention.<sup>4</sup> However, the National Guard's State Partnership Program (SPP) provides a cost-effective way to build lasting relationships between state National Guards and foreign partners. The program aligns directly with combatant command theater strategies, concentrating on the National Guard's core strengths in humanitarian assistance, disaster response, emergency management, and civil support.<sup>5</sup> The SPP builds trusted networks and resilient partners denying China and Russia the ability to exploit instability or spread disinformation across Africa.<sup>6</sup> The SPP serves not only as a tactical training mechanism but also a strategic one. For example, the partnership between California and Ukraine, established in 1993, helped build the Ukrainian Armed Forces' command and control structures and noncommissioned officer corps. These relationships and capabilities proved decisive in

Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion in 2022. When Ukrainian soldiers encountered maintenance issues with their tanks, they immediately contacted the California Guardsmen who had previously trained with them for assistance.<sup>7</sup> This success story demonstrates the program's capacity to build decisive, long-term strategic relationships to directly counter foreign aggression and sustain partner capacity. Therefore, to counter China's and Russia's rising influence in Africa, the State Partnership Program offers an effective solution by strengthening readiness and direct response, improving cyber security capacity, and advancing whole-of-society cooperation to build resilient states and long-term regional stability.

### **The Challenge: Chinese and Russian Influence**

China and Russia are advancing influence across Africa by providing resources and security assistance, often for short-term gain and long-term dependency. China promotes a comprehensive engagement approach through its *Belt and Road Initiative* and *Global Security Initiative*. These initiatives integrate economic, technological, and defense objectives into a single framework of influence. China's military presence now includes permanent rotations in Djibouti, joint training exercises, and officer exchange programs. Although presented as mutually beneficial partnerships, these activities embed African militaries and governments within Chinese logistical and financial networks, allowing Beijing greater access to strategic locations and national decision-making processes.<sup>8</sup> China's influence extends beyond hard infrastructure to encompass political and ideological dimensions, such as sponsoring political training seminars across Africa for emerging leaders.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, their extensive loan practices further entrench dependency. Chinese lenders have provided more than \$160 billion in loans to African nations between 2000-2024, often with opaque terms and collateralized agreements. Nations such as Zambia, Angola, and Kenya face mounting repayment pressures forcing them to

cede control of strategic assets or accept debt restructuring on terms favorable to China. These arrangements allow China to secure long-term access to ports, energy projects, and mineral resources while constraining African fiscal autonomy. In Angola, for instance, repayment of oil-backed loans now absorbs a large portion of government revenue. This limits the ability to invest in domestic services.<sup>10</sup> While China relies on economic statecraft, Russia advances influence through coercive security partnerships.

Russia employs a model centered on security manipulation and resource extraction. Russia exchanges military support for access to gold, diamonds, and oil in fragile states such as Mali, Sudan, and the Central African Republic (CAR). Recent reports reveal Russia is now pressuring CAR and other regional partners to formally transition from the Wagner Group to the new Africa Corps, a state-directed network under the Russian Ministry of Defense. This reorganization ensures Moscow retains operational control of local security contracts, consolidating access to critical mineral wealth, and reinforcing a pattern of extractive relationships.<sup>11</sup> Like China, Russia's military presence is increasing across Africa. They have filled the U.S. void in Niger and signed a military cooperation agreement with Togo, specifically for port access.<sup>12</sup>

China and Russia's influence is no longer confined to physical domains, but increasingly extends into digital and informational ecosystems, creating new vulnerabilities for African states and partners. Chinese sponsored telecommunications and media companies have a robust infrastructure across Africa.<sup>13</sup> Chinese media and communications fall under the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department. Promoting narratives portraying Chinese governance as efficient and stable while downplaying corruption and debt risks. Such messaging projects an image of partnership and mutual respect while masking the asymmetric benefits to

China.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Russia continues to exploit Africa's digital space through coordinated disinformation and cyber operations designed to manipulate public opinion and destabilize democracies. These efforts support Russia's strategic objective of eroding trust in Western partnerships and multilateral institutions by spreading conspiracy narratives and polarizing discourse.<sup>15</sup> Together, China and Russia's influence campaigns weaken African institutions, distort public perception, and challenge the United States' ability to build values-based relationships across the continent. China and Russia's activities represent a systemic challenge to African sovereignty and U.S. strategic interests. Their approaches exploit governance vulnerabilities under the guise of partnership. These threats underscore the urgency for a sustainable, trust-based alternative for strengthening African institutions and fosters long-term resilience. The SPP offers an enduring and cost-effective framework for shared responsibility while preserving African sovereignty.

### **The Solution: State Partnership Program**

#### History and Overview of the State Partnership Program

The SPP began in 1993, pairing U.S. state National Guards with 15 nations, many emerging from the former Soviet Union. Its early mission focused on strengthening democratic institutions, advancing military professionalism, and promoting stable defense governance. Over time, the program expanded beyond Europe. What started as a post-Cold War initiative has grown into a global network. The SPP operates as a security cooperation program and essential element of U.S. foreign policy. Through the National Guard Bureau (NGB), it connects state expertise with international partnerships to align efforts with U.S. strategic goals.<sup>16</sup> Currently, the program includes all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and three territories partnered with 115 nations in every geographic combatant command.<sup>17</sup> Over 35 states have more than one partner

nation, with many states interested in adding one or two more partner nations. The process for pairing states and nations begins when a foreign government submits a partnership request to the U.S. ambassador, who then forwards it to the appropriate combatant command for review. If the command and the Office of the Secretary of Defense determine the request supports regional and strategic goals, the NGB solicits proposals from state adjutants general outlining their capabilities, shared interests, and proposed engagement areas. Factors such as cultural affinity, economic ties, compatible force structure, and the state's expertise in key areas like engineering or disaster management influence selection. After evaluation by the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the combatant command, a final pairing is approved. This deliberate and collaborative process ensures each partnership aligns with national security priorities, national interests, and state capabilities.. Through sustained, low-cost exchanges the program builds capable partners who enhance crisis response, peacekeeping, and regional stability.<sup>18</sup> The program's scale far exceeds its fiscal footprint. It conducts more than 1,000 engagements annually, representing nearly thirty percent of all combatant command activities. Remarkably, it achieves this while using approximately one percent of the total defense security cooperation budget. This efficiency demonstrates its unique value within the defense enterprise as a low-cost and high-impact tool of strategic competition.<sup>19</sup>

At its core, the SPP represents a people-centered model of engagement by building enduring relationships through repeated interaction at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. To align National Guard capabilities with the partner nation's specific needs each partnership designs its own engagements. At times, partnerships may become inactive or dormant when a nation's actions conflict with U.S. interests, leading to the suspension of engagements. Over the past three decades, SPP engagements have evolved to meet the demands of a changing global

security environment. The SPP's 5-year engagement priorities include cyber defense, military professional development, disaster preparedness, and building partner capacity.<sup>20</sup> These priorities mirror the 2022 National Defense Strategy, emphasizing integrated deterrence and the strengthening of alliances and partnerships as central to defending the homeland.<sup>21</sup>

### The State Partnership Program in Africa

The SPP expanded into Africa in the early 2000s as part of a broader U.S. effort to strengthen security cooperation and counter instability across the continent. During the 1990s, U.S. European Command oversaw limited defense engagement in Africa, but the 2002 National Security Strategy identified the continent as increasingly vital to U.S. interests due to its mix of opportunity and insecurity. This strategy called for building Africa's capacity to secure borders and counter terrorism, laying the groundwork for the program's expansion. The creation of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 further established the Department of Defense's focus on Africa, providing the framework for broader SPP engagement.<sup>22</sup> The first African partnership began in 2003, when South Africa was paired with the New York National Guard due to shared aviation and infantry capabilities. Currently, there are 23 partnerships between 16 states and the District of Columbia, two additional partnerships (Cote d'Ivoire and Mauritius/Seychelles) are joining the program in 2025. The North Dakota National Guard's partnerships with Ghana, Togo, and Benin illustrate how the SPP advances U.S. strategic goals in Africa. Its five-year plan aligns with AFRICOM priorities through three main efforts: humanitarian response, peacekeeping readiness, and professional development.<sup>23</sup> These engagements build trust and cooperation over time. Together, they form the foundation for the SPP's broader role of supporting U.S. interests across the continent.

### Strengthening Readiness and Direct Response

The SPP provides African nations with a critical, trust-based framework for strengthening institutional capacity, directly fostering resilience against the transactional influence of China and Russia. Partnerships between U.S. states and African nations establish enduring relationships to advance mutual interests. A core component of this cooperation is strengthening the partner nation's ability to handle crises, directly enhancing military and civil operational readiness. For instance, the North Dakota National Guard's partnership demonstrates how localized cooperation promotes stability by combining leadership development, disaster response training, and joint exercises to instill shared responsibility. These engagements emphasize collaboration rather than dependency, providing African partners the flexibility to adapt lessons to their own specific systems and conditions.<sup>24</sup> By enhancing independent crisis management and internal stability, the SPP immediately diminishes the appeal of external, short-term security deals offered by rival powers. This capacity building addresses a wide spectrum of threats. For example, the Massachusetts National Guard's partnership with Kenya includes technical collaboration, such as maintenance training on M1117 Armored Support Vehicles. This enhances Kenya's ability to sustain counterterrorism operations and expand its capacity to respond to a variety of humanitarian and security challenges in East Africa.<sup>25</sup> Building this technical self-sufficiency ensures partner nations can maintain critical security assets without becoming reliant on foreign logistical chains. These chains could be leveraged for political concessions. Utilizing the unique state role of the National Guard, the program extends its reach into the civilian domain by providing training to respond to natural disasters and civil unrest with local agencies. The North Carolina National Guard hosted a lessons learned seminar on Hurricane Helene, inviting partners and state agencies, including the Department of Agriculture and Department of Health. This facilitated discussions on shared resources and military integration with civil authorities during a

crisis. These exchanges have direct, valuable implications for their partner nations, especially when they face events like massive flooding in Botswana and typhoons and flooding in Malawi.<sup>26</sup>

The SPP serves as an effective U.S. response to directly counter China and Russia's expanding reach in the region. Rooted in mutual benefits, the program strengthens both U.S. and African security interests. The SPP model promotes professional development, technical skill, and empowerment, contrasting sharply with China's focus on centralized control and Russia's use of coercion to secure influence. This mutual strengthening is vital as the competition increasingly shifts toward the digital battlespace, necessitating improved cyber security capacity in the next phase of engagement.

#### Improving Cyber Security Capacity

The SPP offers a people-centered alternative to coercive approaches by building the skills and expertise required for secure digital systems. Partnerships focusing on cyber cooperation, information security, and intelligence sharing create trusted networks among African defense members. These networks enable partners to counter malicious activity and protect national information domains. Several existing partnerships already serve as models for this type of engagement. The Virginia National Guard's partnership with the Republic of Tajikistan, for example, demonstrates how National Guard cyber specialists can train partner forces to detect and mitigate intrusion attempts.<sup>27</sup> Leveraging this model, partnerships could expand cyber-focused exchanges with Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, where digital infrastructure is rapidly growing but remains vulnerable to exploitation by external actors. Kenya hosts major regional data hubs. Ghana is expanding its e-governance systems and Nigeria's growing digital economy anchors connectivity across West Africa.<sup>28</sup> Such nations represent strategic entry points for

countering China's and Russia's digital influence through trusted, sustainable cooperation. Adapting this approach to Africa would strengthen regional defenses against disinformation, ransomware, and foreign surveillance.

Expanding SPP cyber engagements provides two key opportunities to reinforce democratic stability and mutual security. First, the National Guard's proven ability to provide electoral support domestically is highly valuable. This cyber expertise extends to protecting critical democratic processes as African nations transition to electronic voting systems. Partner states can provide specialized training to address election infrastructure issues and prevent intrusions into voting systems.<sup>29</sup> Second, these trusted networks enable critical, mutually beneficial information sharing. Intelligence sharing and joint threat analysis improve security for both the U.S. and the partner nation, as each gains access to unique cyber threat data and regional knowledge the other may not possess. Through this joint training and sustained collaboration, the SPP enables African nations to protect their digital networks and strengthen mutual trust with the U.S. In doing so, the SPP reinforces African sovereignty and strengthens integrated deterrence by rooting influence in shared responsibility rather than control. Guardsmen possess unique skills and real-world expertise to provide critical cyber support to partner military forces. The National Guard's dual capabilities require a broader, unified strategy. This approach must synchronize the SPP with diplomatic and developmental efforts continent-wide.

#### Advancing Whole-of-Society Cooperation

Integrating SPP activities into a broader framework would strengthen U.S. influence in Africa. China and Russia use economic, political, and informational tools to expand theirs. The SPP can counter this influence by extending its model of cooperation beyond the military. In his 2025 testimony in the House Oversight Committee's hearing on *The National Guard State*

*Partnership Program: Strengthening U.S. Security, One Partnership at a Time*, Major General William Edwards, NGB's Director of Strategic Plans and Policy, and International Affairs, emphasized the need to connect the SPP engagements with wider U.S. government programs to improve efficiency and encourage interagency cooperation. The National Guard's unique combination of military and civilian expertise distinguishes it from other defense programs. Guardsmen contribute knowledge from their civilian professions in areas such as engineering, medicine, education, emergency management, and law enforcement during partner-nation activities. Additionally, many National Guard units maintain relationships with universities, law enforcement agencies, and emergency management offices. Expanding this collaboration into direct civilian-civilian partnerships would multiply the program's long-term benefits. The North Carolina and Botswana partnership demonstrates how SPP can serve as the foundation for broader institutional collaboration. For example, Botswana visited their state partner specifically to gain insight and resources they can apply to enhance their own agriculture, tourism, and pharmaceutical industries. Building on those interests, opportunities exist to conduct a state university-sponsored research exchange or economy planning commissions.<sup>30</sup> Similar models could be expanded across Africa to build regional training centers, joint information hubs, and exchange programs uniting civil authorities. These relationships strengthen public organizations and demonstrate U.S. commitment to long-term development rather than temporary security aid.

This integrated approach benefits both Africa and America. By coordinating engagement across federal and state institutions, the SPP creates a more cohesive, lasting, and cost-effective model of foreign engagement, reducing duplication and projecting a consistent U.S. presence across Africa. Ultimately, this whole-of-society approach creates a more cohesive, lasting, and

cost-effective model of foreign engagement. It mutually strengthens both the U.S. and African nations by combining technical expertise and defense cooperation into a unified effort.

### **Recommendations**

After thirty years of demonstrated success, the SPP has proven to be one of the most cost-effective and strategically valuable instruments of U.S. engagement. The current interest from Congress, states, and nations to grow the program highlights its success. However, unaccounted growth can negatively impact pre-planned engagements as limited annual funds are diverted to cover initial expenditures. The program's core sustainability relies on a model where startup costs are the most expensive part of the partnership, primarily due to multiple familiarization visits between the two partners, followed by decreasing costs over time. Three actions are recommended to strengthen its role in countering Chinese and Russian influence across Africa. The first action is to increase the number of SPP partnerships across Africa by adding one or two nations each year for the next five years. Prioritization should be given to regions where Chinese or Russian influence threatens governance and access, such as nations with valuable port access.<sup>31</sup> To mitigate the impact of initial costs, the Department of Defense should establish a separate, dedicated fund to cover new partnership startup expenses, insulating mature, sustainable engagements from budget volatility.

Second, multiyear appropriations from the Congress would give the SPP predictable funding, allowing planners to build long-term engagement plans to sustain ongoing initiatives and improve readiness. Stable resourcing strengthens trust with African partners by ensuring the United States can sustain commitments and add new nations over time. Crucially, funding decisions rely on accurate data. The recent House Oversight Committee's hearing on the SPP highlighted reports indicating states not consistently providing engagement status updates, these

reports are sent to Congress. This lack of comprehensive reporting can limit future funding and engagements despite congressional interest in expansion. Therefore, Congressional action must be paired with mandated, consistent, and standardized reporting of all engagement types, ensuring full transparency to justify and secure predictable, multi-year appropriations for the program.

Lastly, continue to expand and emphasize SPP engagements for civilian activities such as public health, education, law, or civic institutions. These exchanges should focus on strengthening areas most vulnerable to Chinese and Russian influence, such as cyber resilience, financial management, port authority, and public health. Integrating state-level government agencies and private industry into these partnerships will expand the program's relevance while combating the allure of short-term gains promised by U.S. adversaries. These three recommendations will ensure sustained growth, transparency, and integration of the program within broader U.S. defense and diplomatic planning.

### **Conclusion**

The strategic expansion of the SPP is an essential, cost-effective countermeasure for advancing U.S. and African security interests by through enhancing readiness, increasing cyber and security capabilities, and promoting a whole-of-society approach. China and Russia continue to expand their reach across Africa through economic leverage and security assistance. This influence threatens to reshape the political and security landscape, fundamentally undermining long-term U.S. interests.<sup>32</sup> The SPP offers a powerful alternative grounded in partnership rather than coercion, built on three decades of global success. The SPP has become an enduring framework, blending security cooperation, diplomacy, and development to strengthen deterrence and support lasting regional peace. Unlike the coercive, top-down models of China and Russia,

the SPP leverages the National Guard's unique military-civilian expertise to build bottom-up institutional trust, fostering a whole-of-society resiliency emphasizing self-sustaining capacity and shared responsibility. This model of partnership exemplifies how consistent, small-scale engagement produces lasting strategic outcomes more effectively than short-term assistance. The program's flexibility is its greatest strength, allowing trust to grow organically and capabilities to align with the distinct needs of each partner nation. Implementation of the three core recommendations, strategic expansion, multi-year funding, and mandated reporting, will ensure the program's vitality. The SPP safeguards shared responsibility and cooperation, making enduring partnerships a decisive foundation for African nations to strengthen their sovereignty and resist exploitation in the competition for influence.

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