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The War in Iran: Lessons for African States Hosting Foreign Military Bases

Abstract

The eruption of “Operation Epic Fury,” the joint United States–Israel campaign against Iran launched on February 28, 2026, has exposed a structural vulnerability that African states hosting foreign military bases can no longer ignore. Iran’s retaliatory strikes against US installations across nine Gulf states, none party to the conflict, demonstrate that hosting foreign military infrastructure can transform a neutral state into a perceived belligerent. This article argues that the crisis constitutes a policy stress test for African basing arrangements and presents a rare opportunity to renegotiate them around four pillars: security guarantees, consultation rights, strategic autonomy, and regional stability.

Introduction: A Structural Vulnerability Laid Bare

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, a campaign of coordinated military strikes against Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure. Iran's response was immediate and geographically expansive. Ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and Shahed-series drones were fired at US military installations across nine Gulf states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iraq, and Oman. Civilian infrastructure was not spared: oil refineries, airports, and commercial hotels were among the targets struck. The strategic logic of Iran's response was unambiguous: states that host the military assets of a belligerent are, in Iran's calculus, legitimate targets, regardless of their formal posture of non-belligerency (Pamba, 2026). The Gulf precedent holds a direct and urgent mirror to African states that have entered into foreign military basing agreements. If the wealthy, diplomatically sophisticated Gulf monarchies, with layered air defence systems and decades of engagement with American security architecture, found themselves absorbing strikes because of hosting decisions made in a prior era of threat assessment, what does this portend for Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Eritrea, and other African hosts whose basing arrangements are comparatively rudimentary and whose defensive infrastructure is far more limited?

This article argues that the time for passive acceptance of asymmetric base agreements has passed. It advances a thesis of conditionality: African states must leverage the current moment of geopolitical flux, marked by great power competition, Western military retrenchment, and growing African agency, to demand and codify terms that protect their sovereignty, ensure their security, and preserve the primacy of regional stability. Drawing on the cases of Djibouti, Kenya, and the broader Sahel, this article examines the policy dimensions of each of the four pillars of a renegotiated African foreign base bargain.

The Anatomy of African Military Exposure

Africa is, by contemporary measure, one of the most externally militarised non-combatant regions in the world. At least thirteen foreign powers maintain military presence on the continent. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), alone, operates across a network of at least twenty confirmed outposts in addition to its principal installation, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, plus additional co-located sites at host-nation facilities in countries such as Uganda and Senegal (Turse, 2020). Internal AFRICOM documents reviewed by investigative journalists identified 34 sites in 2018, though subsequent consolidation and the closure of some contingency locations has reduced that number; congressional testimony has revealed persistent transparency deficits in AFRICOM's public accounting of its African footprint (The Intercept, 2023). The United States is not alone. China, France, Japan, Italy, Germany, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United Kingdom all maintain military facilities or access arrangements across African territory. The Horn of Africa is the epicentre of this competition: with over eleven foreign military bases—the precise count varying by definitional threshold—it represents, on a per capita and per square kilometre basis, one of the densest concentrations of foreign military infrastructure anywhere on earth (Pamba, 2026). Djibouti, with a population of approximately one million people, hosts at least eight foreign military bases, including the United States' Camp Lemonnier, China's People's Liberation Army Support Base—Beijing's first overseas military installation, and facilities maintained by France, Japan, Italy, Saudi Arabia, and Germany.

The economic dimensions of this arrangement are significant. The United States pays approximately USD 70 million annually to Djibouti for the Camp Lemonnier lease, with the total American financial contribution including construction, employment of Djiboutian nationals, procurement, and various assistance programmes considerably exceeding that figure (History Rise, 2025). France and China each contribute approximately USD 30 million, with Japan, Italy, and other smaller presences bringing the aggregate annual revenue from foreign

military bases to well above USD 200 million, a figure that represents an outsized share of Djibouti's sovereign revenue in an economy nominally valued at approximately USD 4.67 billion (Responsible Statecraft, 2025; Ali et al., 2025). For Djibouti, with an external public debt that has risen from 35 percent of GDP to 68 percent, largely attributable to Chinese infrastructure lending, the base economy is not merely a supplement but a fiscal pillar (Congressional Research Service, 2025). Yet economic dependency of this kind generates precisely the leverage asymmetries that make genuine renegotiation difficult. African host states have historically entered basing agreements from positions of fiscal necessity, with limited legal and technical capacity to assess the full strategic implications of the terms they accepted. The current moment of great power competition has paradoxically created new bargaining leverage, as multiple competing powers seek access, but this leverage remains largely unexploited in the absence of continental-level frameworks to support individual states.

The Proxy Belligerency Risk: A Structural Problem

The framing of the Gulf crisis as an exceptional geopolitical event obscures its more fundamental lesson: the exposure of foreign military base host states is not a contingent product of any particular conflict but a structural feature of the base-hosting relationship itself. Iran's decision to strike Gulf host states was not born of an error in strategic calculation, it reflected a deliberate coercive logic applied consistently to the geography of military deployment. Africa's own history offers a parallel that requires no abstraction. The UAE's initial base in Eritrea, established in 2015, was used extensively in the Saudi-led coalition campaign against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. This created an adversarial relationship between Eritrea and both Iran and the Houthi movement, a relationship that Asmara did not author through any sovereign act of policy, but inherited through the transactional terms of a base agreement with Abu Dhabi (Pamba, 2026). Kenya's Camp Simba at Manda Bay in Lamu County has been a launch platform for US surveillance and strike missions against al-Shabaab targets in Somalia. On January 5, 2020, approximately 30 to 40 al-Shabaab fighters attacked Camp Simba in a coordinated pre-dawn assault that killed three Americans, Army Specialist Henry Mayfield Jr., and two Department of Defense contractors, and destroyed seven aircraft, including a US Special Operations Command intelligence aircraft (US Department of Defense, 2022).

The 2020 Manda Bay attack was, critically, not an attack on Kenya in any meaningful sovereign sense. It was an attack on a foreign military installation operating from Kenyan territory. Kenya became a target not because of anything Nairobi decided, but because it provided the real estate from which others made decisions. Pentagon reviews of the attack found systemic failures, a culture of complacency, inadequate threat assessment, insufficient force protection, that were entirely internal to the US military chain of command (*VOA News*, 2022; *DefenceWeb*, 2022). Kenya bore the reputational and security costs of an event over which it exercised no operational control. This is the structural logic of proxy exposure, and it is not limited to non-state threats. As Iran has demonstrated in the Gulf, state actors can apply the same logic with vastly greater destructive capability. Djibouti, to its credit, has demonstrated awareness of this dynamic. Its refusal to host a Russian naval base, citing the risk of becoming a terrain of proxy confrontation between great powers, reflects a coherent application of strategic restraint (Pamba, 2026). Equally instructive is Djibouti's refusal, reported in 2024–2025, to permit the United States to use its territory for strikes against Houthi forces in Yemen, a decision that cost Djibouti political capital in Washington but preserved the operational neutrality that allows it to simultaneously host American, Chinese, French, and Japanese military installations without becoming a flashpoint (Responsible Statecraft, 2025).

The Four Pillars of a Renegotiated African Base Bargain

a. Comprehensive Security Guarantees and Defensive Capability Transfer

The Gulf crisis revealed a stark asymmetry between what base-owning states invest in protecting their own installations and what they invest in the host state's sovereign defensive capacity. Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base, the largest US air base in the Middle East, absorbed Iranian strikes with the protection of Patriot missile batteries, Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) systems, integrated radar networks, cyber-intelligence infrastructure, and coalition-coordinated interception architecture built up over decades of investment. The base survived. Qatar's civilian population also survived, in part because of the layered defensive bubble that US investment had erected primarily to protect US interests. African base-hosting states have no comparable arrangement. Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, despite hosting approximately 4,000 US and allied personnel and serving as the operational hub for counterterrorism missions across East Africa and Yemen, does not sit within a defensive architecture that extends meaningfully to the protection of Djibouti City or Djiboutian civilian infrastructure (Ali et al., 2025). The same is true of Camp Simba in Kenya, where the 2020 attack exposed not only a culture of complacency among US forces but the near-total absence of integrated host-nation defensive systems.

The policy implication is clear. African states must negotiate base agreements that include formal, treaty-level mutual defence commitments; real-time intelligence sharing on threats directed at or emanating from base installations; the deployment of air and missile defence systems that provide coverage to adjacent civilian and governmental infrastructure; and technology transfer arrangements that over time build indigenous defensive capacity rather than perpetuating indefinite dependency. Kenya's recent acquisition of the Spyder air defence system, financed through an Israeli government loan valued at approximately USD 27.1 million, represents a modest step in this direction, though it falls well short of the kind of comprehensive defensive architecture that the Gulf experience suggests is necessary (Prism Reports, 2025). The security guarantee pillar also has a temporal dimension. Base agreements that are structured as straightforward lease-and-rent transactions, as Camp Lemonnier's arrangement has largely been, provide no mechanism for host states to secure ongoing defensive support as the threat environment evolves. Renegotiated agreements must include review clauses that trigger reassessment of defensive commitments when the threat context changes materially, including when the base-owning state undertakes operations that foreseeably escalate adversarial attention to the host.

b. Meaningful Prior Consultation and Host-State Consent for Operational Decisions

Perhaps the most consequential asymmetry in existing African base agreements is the gap in consultation. Operation Epic Fury was launched without substantive prior notice to Gulf host states; by most accounts, those states scrambled to close airspace, alert populations, and activate air defence systems when strikes began on February 28, 2026, despite weeks of US-Iran diplomatic engagement that had created a public impression that military action remained a distant contingency (Pamba, 2026). For African base hosts, the consultation gap is likely wider still. The operational activities of AFRICOM, including drone strikes in Somalia, special operations raids in the Sahel, and intelligence missions across East Africa, have not, as a rule, been subject to formal prior notification to host governments, let alone consent. The 2020 Manda Bay attack occurred in the context of ongoing AFRICOM air operations from Kenyan territory against al-Shabaab; there is no public evidence that Kenya was consulted on the escalatory trajectory of those operations or their foreseeable consequences for Kenya's threat exposure. The independent Pentagon review of the attack found systemic communication failures within the US chain of command; the possibility of parallel failures in host-nation communication was not, within the scope of those reviews, given comparable scrutiny (US DoD, 2022).

The policy prescription is not a veto on all base operations, such a condition would be operationally unworkable and would not survive the negotiating table. Rather, it is a graduated framework of consultative obligations calibrated to operational significance. Routine logistical and training activities require notification but not consent. Operations that involve the use of lethal force, or that have a foreseeable potential to generate adversarial attention to the host state, require prior briefing and the opportunity for the host government to raise objections or impose conditions. Operations that involve the projection of force against a state actor with documented retaliatory intent, the category most directly implicated by the Gulf precedent, require explicit host-state consent. The legal architecture for this exists. Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) and bilateral defence cooperation agreements are negotiable instruments, not fixed templates. The challenge is that most African states have signed these agreements from positions of limited legal and technical capacity. The African Union's 2016 call for member states to be 'circumspect' in subscribing to foreign base agreements acknowledged the risk but did not provide the institutional support, legal templates, negotiating capacity-building, model SOFA provisions, that would translate that caution into enforceable terms. Filling this institutional gap is a continental-level policy priority.

c. Codified Strategic Autonomy and the Right of Operational Suspension

The Gulf crisis has produced one of the more striking contemporary demonstrations of strategic autonomy in action. Despite hosting the very bases from which US strikes against Iran have been conducted, and despite sustaining Iranian missile and drone attacks on their own territory, the Gulf states have maintained a studied policy of non-participation in offensive operations. They condemned Iran's retaliatory strikes, they activated their air defence systems, but they declined against considerable American pressure to join offensive operations against Iran (Pamba, 2026). This is not passivity; it is a disciplined assertion of the limits of the basing relationship. African states should aspire to the same quality of codified autonomy. The Gulf states could maintain this posture in part because their basing agreements, renegotiated over decades of post-Cold War strategic engagement, contain explicit non-combat clauses, clear definitions of permitted operational scope, and the political credibility that comes from membership in a functional regional security architecture, the Gulf Cooperation Council, that provides diplomatic cover for positions that deviate from base-owner preferences.

African states lack these institutional supports. The African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council has not developed binding continental norms on base-hosting terms. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the primary regional security body for the Horn of Africa, has not engaged systematically with the terms of bilateral basing arrangements. The result is that individual African governments negotiate in isolation, without the leverage of collective frameworks and without the political capital that regional backing would provide.

Codified strategic autonomy in the context of base agreements must include several specific provisions. First, an explicit operational scope clause that defines permissible uses of the base and requires renegotiation for uses beyond the agreed scope. The UAE's Assab facility in Eritrea was used for Yemen operations, a use that exposed Eritrea to adversarial attention from Iran and the Houthis, in circumstances that may or may not have been within the original contemplated scope of the base agreement. Explicit scope limits, with enforcement mechanisms, would create a legal basis for Eritrea to have required renegotiation before that exposure was created. Second, a suspension right, a codified host-state authority to order the temporary suspension of specified base operations when in the host government's reasonable assessment, those operations create disproportionate risk to civilian populations or regional stability. Third, a right of political non-attribution, by which the host state is formally not treated as a party to operations conducted from its territory by foreign forces, with base-owning states obligated to communicate this distinction publicly when relevant.

d. The Primacy of Regional Order and Stability

The fourth pillar of a renegotiated base bargain is the most abstract but in some ways the most consequential. It asserts that the terms of any base agreement must be subordinate to the preservation of regional peace and stability, not as a rhetorical aspiration, but as an operational constraint with practical effect. This principle has been partially vindicated by Djibouti's evolving practice of what scholars have characterised as 'omnidirectional hedging', maintaining balanced relationships with competing foreign powers as a strategy for preserving sovereignty and regional relevance (Silaen et al., 2025). By hosting both China and the United States, and by refusing to allow either power to use Djiboutian territory for operations directed against the other's interests, Djibouti has sustained a model of base-hosting that, imperfect as it is, has preserved its strategic neutrality. Notably, when Djibouti refused to permit US anti-Houthi operations from its territory, this decision was grounded precisely in the primacy of regional stability: the Houthi conflict, and the risk of retaliatory strikes, posed an existential threat to Djibouti City and to the commercial shipping traffic on which Djibouti's economy depends (Responsible Statecraft, 2025). The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which approximately 25 percent of global seaborne oil transits annually, is Djibouti's principal strategic and economic asset; operations that risked turning that chokepoint into a conflict zone were incompatible with Djibouti's national interest regardless of their compatibility with US strategic preferences (Mashariki Research and Policy Centre, 2025).

The practical institutionalisation of this principle requires African states to embed it in base agreement language, as a general limiting clause that conditions all operational uses of base infrastructure on their consistency with the host state's obligations under the African Union's constitutive act, IGAD's security architecture, and relevant UN Security Council mandates. It also requires African states to develop and publicise clear national security doctrines that articulate the limits of base use they will accept, creating political accountability structures that make departures from those limits politically costly for base-owning states.

The Political Economy of Renegotiation: Opportunities and Constraints

Pamba (2026) rightly identifies the current moment as a rare geopolitical window for African states to renegotiate base terms. Several structural developments converge to create this opportunity. The first is the wave of French military withdrawals from West and Central Africa, driven by a combination of anti-French public sentiment, post-coup military government decisions, and French strategic retrenchment. France has withdrawn from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Ivory Coast, and Senegal within the span of approximately two years (2022–2025). By the end of 2025, French military presence on the continent was effectively limited to Djibouti and Gabon (Anadolu Agency, 2025; The Conversation, 2025). This represents a dramatic contraction of a military presence that had totalled approximately 20,000 pre-positioned troops in 1970 and still comprised 6,000 as recently as 2022 (The Conversation, 2025). The mechanism of this withdrawal is instructive. In most cases, it was not the result of principled renegotiation but of abrupt unilateral termination by host states following coups or elections that brought to power governments with strong anti-colonial mandates. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad all terminated their defence cooperation agreements unilaterally, in some cases within weeks of regime change (Anadolu Agency, 2025; France 24, 2025; Harvard International Review, 2025). The political and security consequences of these abrupt terminations, including the rapid backfilling of vacated

French positions by Russian mercenaries, and the acceleration of jihadist territorial gains in the Sahel, underscore the risks of unmanaged withdrawal. They also demonstrate, conversely, that deliberate, structured renegotiation from a position of strategic clarity is far preferable to reactive termination under duress.

The second structural development creating a renegotiation window is the intensification of great power competition for African base access, which increases the bargaining leverage of host states. US Africa Command has been seeking alternative drone and logistics base locations following its expulsion from Niger's Agadez drone base in 2024 (Harvard International Review, 2025; The Intercept, 2023). The US military's plans, documented in internal AFRICOM construction documents totalling more than USD 330 million in projected spending from 2021 to 2025, reflect a long-term commitment to the African basing architecture that creates leverage for host states in renewal negotiations (Mail & Guardian, 2020). China's continued interest in expanding maritime access around the Red Sea and Indian Ocean littoral, including reported negotiations around Berbera in Somaliland and Bosaso in Puntland, creates competitive pressure that African states with existing Chinese bases can use in negotiations with Western partners.

Institutional Constraints and the Need for a Continental Framework

The constraints on renegotiation are equally structural. The most significant is the absence of a continental framework for base-hosting norms. The African Union's 2016 call for circumspection was advisory; it generated no binding legal architecture, no model agreement provisions, no continental negotiating support mechanism. Individual African states continue to negotiate bilaterally with far more powerful counterparts, typically in contexts of fiscal dependency, Camp Lemonnier's annual rent of USD 70 million represents a substantial fraction of Djibouti's government revenue, that constrain assertiveness (Silaen et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2025). The Gulf Cooperation Council's institutional infrastructure, collective security commitments, joint air defence planning, coordinated diplomatic postures, provided Gulf host states with a framework within which to maintain the strategic restraint described above. African states, particularly in the Horn of Africa, lack an equivalent. IGAD has relevant mandate and geographic scope, but limited institutional capacity and a membership that includes states with competing strategic relationships, Djibouti hosts both Chinese and American bases; Eritrea's Assab base involvement in Yemen generated tensions with Ethiopia—that complicate the development of consensus norms. The African Union's Peace and Security Council has the continental mandate but limited enforcement authority over bilateral agreements between member states and non-African powers.

Filling this institutional gap should be a priority for both the African Union and IGAD. A continental model SOFA, developed collaboratively, with legal and technical input from member states, and incorporating the four pillars advanced in this article, would provide individual states with a negotiating template that reduces the asymmetry of bilateral engagements. Regional review mechanisms, by which proposed base agreements or renewals are subject to peer assessment against agreed criteria, would create accountability without infringing on sovereign decision-making.

Case Studies in Strategic Exposure and Agency

Djibouti's foreign basing model, often characterised as a strategy of 'small state diplomacy' or omnidirectional hedging, represents the most sophisticated instantiation of African base-hosting agency on the continent. By hosting multiple powers simultaneously, including strategic rivals, President Ismail Omar Guelleh's government has diversified its security guarantees and extracted maximum economic rent from its geostrategic position. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which 15,000 ships transit annually, and control of which was rendered dramatically more consequential by the Houthi-driven reduction in Red Sea container traffic of up to 80 per cent in some months of 2024 (Mashariki Research and Policy Centre, 2025), has made Djibouti genuinely indispensable to multiple powers simultaneously.

The results are tangible. Anti-piracy operations coordinated from Djibouti-based installations reduced piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden from 163 in 2011 to fewer than 10 annually by 2020 (Mashariki Research and Policy Centre, 2025). China's USD 14.4 billion in infrastructure investment, including the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone projected to be Africa's largest, a railway to Addis Ababa, and a water pipeline from Ethiopia, has transformed Djibouti's physical infrastructure and generated approximately 15,000 jobs (Responsible Statecraft, 2025). China-Djibouti trade exceeded USD 3 billion in 2024, compared to only USD 185 million with the United States (History Rise, 2025).

Yet the model's limits are also instructive. Djibouti's public debt has risen to 68 percent of GDP, with Chinese institutions holding over half of its USD 2.6 billion in external debt obligations (Congressional Research Service, 2025). This debt dynamic has created a different form of dependency, one that constrains Djibouti's sovereign manoeuvring even as it maintains the appearance of multi-alignment. The Congressional Research Service has flagged this as a significant vulnerability, noting that US diplomats regard Djibouti as being 'on the front lines of US strategic competition with China' (Congressional Research Service, 2025). Djibouti's ability to maintain genuine neutrality, demonstrated in its refusal to permit anti-Houthi operations, is thus perpetually in tension with the leverage that debt-holding powers exercise quietly through financial rather than military means. The policy lesson for Djibouti, and for other African states contemplating the multi-alignment model, is that strategic autonomy requires not only diversified basing arrangements but also diversified economic relationships and reduced fiscal dependency on base revenue. Djibouti's stated aspiration of becoming 'the next Singapore', a global logistics hub that transcends dependence on military rents, represents the correct long-term strategic direction, though it faces the formidable constraints of a small population, limited human capital, and a harsh physical environment (History Rise, 2025).

Kenya: The Costs of Unmanaged Exposure

Kenya's experience at Camp Simba represents the sharpest contemporary example of the costs of base-hosting arrangements that lack the four pillars advanced in this article. The January 5, 2020 al-Shabaab attack killed three Americans, destroyed seven aircraft including a SOCOM intelligence platform, and exposed fundamental weaknesses in both US force protection and host-nation integration (US DoD, 2022). Pentagon reviews found a 'deeply rooted culture of a false sense of security' among US personnel, inadequate threat assessment, and systemic failures across multiple echelons of command (VOA News, 2022; DefenceWeb, 2022). From Kenya's perspective, the attack demonstrated proxy exposure in its most direct form: the base was a launch point for surveillance and strike missions against al-Shabaab in Somalia, missions for which Kenya was not the operational authority but over whose strategic consequences it bore the territorial risk. Al-Shabaab's motivation was explicitly linked to the US operations conducted from Kenyan soil. The attacking fighters had conducted months of reconnaissance; the attack was planned and resourced, not opportunistic (The Elephant, 2023). Kenya's territory had become a legitimate military target, in al-Shabaab's operational planning, precisely because of the base's operational role.

The diplomatic dimension is equally instructive. Kenya has hosted British bases since independence in 1963, and has maintained a generally cooperative posture with both UK and US military presences. Yet there is no public evidence of a formal consultation framework by which Kenya was briefed on the escalatory trajectory of AFRICOM operations from Manda Bay, or given the opportunity to raise concerns about operations that foreseeably increased Kenya's threat exposure. The Camp Simba attack occurred three weeks after the US assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, a moment of peak retaliatory risk and while al-Shabaab denied any link to Iranian directives, the temporal proximity of the attack and its targeting of a US ISR platform are consistent with a threat environment that Kenya's government arguably deserved prior notification about. The US Department of State's Country Reports on Terrorism 2020 acknowledged the attack's significance as 'the most notable attack' of the year in Kenya, but framed it in terms of al-Shabaab's capabilities rather than the structural conditions of host-state exposure (US Department of State, 2020). In the aftermath, the US made extensive security upgrades at Manda Bay, increasing the protection force size by more than double, installing fencing around the entire perimeter, overhauling intelligence-sharing protocols, and improving air force security training (DefenceWeb, 2022). These were improvements to US force protection. The policy question this article raises is whether equivalent investments were made in Kenya's own defensive capacity, in the kind of integrated air surveillance, early warning systems, and joint command structures that would give Kenya real situational awareness about the threat environment generated by operations from its territory.

The Sahel: The Lessons of Abrupt Retrenchment

The Sahel case studies—Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and to a lesser extent Chad and Senegal—, offer a cautionary tale about the consequences of base relationships that lose their political legitimacy. France's Operation Barkhane deployed approximately 5,000 troops across the G5 Sahel countries from 2014, conducting counterterrorism operations against jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Al Jazeera, 2023). Yet by 2025, France had been expelled from virtually every Sahelian country, with its military presence reduced to Djibouti and Gabon (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

The mechanism of expulsion was not primarily military failure, though Operation Barkhane's inability to suppress the Sahelian jihadist insurgency was a contributing factor. It was political delegitimization, driven by

perceptions of neo-colonialism, allegations (denied by France) that French forces had tolerated or enabled jihadist movements to protect French mining and energy interests, and the instrumentalization of anti-French sentiment by coup leaders who found in France's military presence a politically useful target (*France 24*, 2025; ECFR, 2025). The post-French security vacuum has been partially filled by Russian mercenaries whose record of civilian protection has been significantly worse, a fact that underscores the distinction between the desirability of security partnerships and the terms on which they are conducted. Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye's December 31, 2024 announcement that all foreign military bases in Senegal would close by 2025, delivered alongside Ivory Coast's announcement of the handover of France's Abidjan base, represents a more principled instantiation of the same impulse (*The Conversation*, 2025). Unlike the post-coup expulsions, Senegal's decision was taken by an elected government acting on a democratic mandate, and it was framed in terms of sovereignty rather than anti-French animus. This is precisely the kind of assertion of codified strategic autonomy this article advocates, though its implementation will require careful management of the transition to avoid the security vacuums that have marked abrupt expulsions elsewhere.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing together the analytical threads of this article, the following policy recommendations are directed at three levels: African host states individually, the African Union and IGAD institutionally, and the international community normatively.

For African Host States

- Conduct a systematic threat reassessment of existing base agreements against the Gulf precedent. Each host state should formally evaluate the foreseeable adversarial attention generated by current base operations, the defensive infrastructure available to protect civilian populations and critical infrastructure, and the adequacy of existing consultation mechanisms.
- Initiate renegotiation of base agreements to incorporate the four pillars advanced in this article: security guarantees, consultation rights, strategic autonomy clauses, and regional stability primacy provisions. Renegotiation should be presented not as hostility to base-owning states but as a maturation of the partnership, a transition from transactional lease arrangements to structured strategic relationships consistent with modern norms of sovereignty.
- Develop and publicise national security doctrines that clearly articulate the conditions under which base operations are and are not consistent with the host state's national interests and regional obligations. Such doctrines create political accountability, reduce the scope for ambiguity exploitation by base-owning states, and strengthen the host state's negotiating position in future renewals.

For the African Union and IGAD

- The African Union's Peace and Security Council should commission the development of a Model Status of Forces Agreement incorporating the four pillars identified in this article, with technical support from the African Union Commission and regional legal institutions.
- IGAD should convene a dedicated Horn of Africa Foreign Military Bases Review Process, bringing together member states hosting foreign installations to develop shared norms and mutual support mechanisms.
- Both institutions should engage with the question of how regional economic community membership can provide diplomatic cover and political leverage for individual states asserting the terms of base agreements, replicating, to the extent possible, the Gulf Cooperation Council function that underpinned Gulf states' strategic restraint.

Conclusion

The US-Israel campaign against Iran, and Iran's retaliatory strikes against Gulf base host states, have produced the most consequential live demonstration of foreign military base exposure risk in the contemporary era. The Gulf states, with their wealth, their layered defensive systems, and their sophisticated diplomatic positioning, have managed the immediate crisis, though not without significant civilian infrastructure damage and profound disruption to regional stability. African states in analogous positions of base-hosting, with far more limited defensive resources and far more asymmetric negotiating relationships, face the same structural risks with far fewer of the mitigating advantages. This article has argued that the current moment of geopolitical flux, characterised by the reshaping of Western military postures in Africa, intensifying great power competition for African base access, and growing African political agency in sovereign decision-making, represents a rare and time-limited window for African states to renegotiate the terms of their base agreements. The four pillars of a renegotiated bargain, comprehensive security guarantees, meaningful consultation rights, codified strategic autonomy, and the primacy of regional stability, are not demands for the termination of security partnerships. They are the minimum conditions for those partnerships to be genuinely mutual, genuinely protective of

African interests, and genuinely compatible with the sovereignty that African states have fought, and continue to fight, to exercise meaningfully. The window is open. The question is whether African states, individually and collectively, have the institutional capacity, the political will, and the strategic clarity to step through it, before the next conflict makes the case for them, at far greater cost.

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