

Confronting China: US Boosts Military Presence in Africa

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President Obama has instructed the Defense Establishment to pivot its forces and reorient its efforts toward Asia. Instead, the U.S. armed forces step by step get drawn into the quagmire of messy conflicts in Africa. Recently, the United States has become embroiled in conflicts in Somalia, Libya, Mali and central Africa. The presence is about 5,000 U.S. troops strong. The forces are scattered across the continent in the places like Djibouti, the Central African Republic and now – Niger.

The official reason is fighting al – Qaeda affiliates and other extremists. In a written statement provided to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Army General David M. Rodriguez, who is expected to become the next commander of the Africa Command (AFRICOM), estimated that the military needs to increase its intelligence-gathering missions in Africa by nearly 15-fold. *«I believe additional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities are necessary to protect American interests and assist our close allies and partners»*, the General wrote in the statement, which during his confirmation hearing in Congress. *«The recent crises in North Africa demonstrate the volatility of the African security environment»*, Rodriguez is cited by the Washington Post (1). According to the newspaper, *«Rodriguez said the Africa Command needs additional drones, other surveillance aircraft and more satellite imagery adding that it currently receives only half of its «stated need» for North Africa and only 7 percent of its total «requirements» for the entire continent»*.

When AFRICOM was created there were no plans to establish bases or have boots on the ground. In reality a network of small staging bases gradually comes into existence along with a forward base for special operations forces in Kenya. The US Congress has criticized the administration for not being able to rapidly respond to the September 2012 attacks on the U.S. diplomatic post in Benghazi, Libya, when the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans lost their lives. Since then, the Defense Department has intensified the steps to boost military capabilities to react on short notice in case there is a contingency in Africa. *«That is a fight we have a dog in»*, Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said during a Jan. 24 2013 taping of «This Week in Defense News».

AFRICOM – military tool of US expansion in Africa

The Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) was begun by the Pentagon in 2005 to strengthen US presence in Africa. Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger were now joined by Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, Nigeria, and Tunisia in a ring of military cooperation with the Pentagon. The Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative was transferred to the command of AFRICOM.

On 1 October 2008, AFRICOM was separated from USEUCOM and began operating on its own as a full-fledged Unified Combatant Command headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany. It is responsible for U.S. military operations and military relations with 53 African nations – an area of responsibility (AOR) covering all of Africa except Egypt (the responsibility of Central Command). The command has defense attaché offices in 38 African nations, as well as numerous subordinate commands located in Germany, Italy and the Horn of Africa. The Sixth fleet is responsible for providing naval forces in case of contingency. The Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa is ready for emergency actions. AFRICOM numbers around 2,000 assigned personnel, which includes military, civilian, contractor, and host nation employees. About 1,500 work at the command's main headquarters. Others are assigned to the command's units in England and Florida along with security cooperation officers posted at U.S. embassies and diplomatic missions in Africa to coordinate Defense Department programs within the host nation. AFRICOM has limited assigned forces and relies on the Department of Defense for resources necessary to support its missions.

The command defines its mission as follows:

“Africa Command has administrative responsibility for US military support to US government policy in Africa, to include military-to-military relationships with 53 African nations». Speaking to the International Peace Operations Association in Washington, D.C. on Oct. 27, 2008 General Kip Ward, then Commander of AFRICOM defined the command's mission as, «in concert with other US government agencies and international partners, to conduct sustained security engagements through military-to-military programs, military-sponsored activities, and other military operations as directed to promote a stable and secure African environment in support of US foreign policy.”

Dr. J. Peter Pham, a leading Washington insider and an advisor of the US State and Defense Departments, states that one AFRICOM prime objectives is *«protecting access to hydrocarbons and other strategic resources which Africa has in abundance ... a task which includes ensuring against the vulnerability of those natural riches and ensuring that no other interested third parties, such as China, India, Japan, or Russia, obtain monopolies or preferential treatment».*

Military activities

While joint military exercises between the US and South Korea hit the radar screen of global media this March, there have been two major military operations conducted by the US armed forces with the participation of the UK, France, Canada and several African states. The drills are an element of annual maneuvers targeted against terrorism in Africa.

In February Exercise Obangame Express 2013, an at-sea naval exercise focused on counter-piracy and maritime security operations, was conducted in the Gulf of Guinea. The event brought together African, European and Atlantic partner maritime services to work together, share information and hone skills to better monitor and enforce their territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. The exercise included a wide variety of training for all participating forces including at-sea ship boarding and queries, air operations, communication drills and regional information sharing. Participating countries were Belgium, Benin, Brazil, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, France, Gabon, Netherlands, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Sao Tome and Principe, Spain, Togo and the United States.

In March AFRICOM conducted Operation Flintlock, an annual exercise that has been conducted since 2005. This time it involved over 1,100 troops from twenty African, European and North American countries honing their skills in Mauritania (the village of Weizen).

Another military exercise led by the command in March was the Saharan Express 2013. The mission was to enhance maritime interaction between the US, European and African states. It involved naval forces from the U.S., France, Britain, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mauritania and Morocco. The project featured numerous training drills including ship boarding, air operations, medical familiarization, communications and regional information sharing. The training event has been organized annually since 2011. It is one of four African regional maritime exercises taking place within the framework of the «African Partnership Station (APS)», a global maritime initiative developed by the US to boost cooperation with of the armed forces of African states.

Last December the US Stars and Stripes newspaper reported on plans to create an AFRICOM rapid reaction force (2).

Speaking at George Washington University, AFRICOM commander General Carter Ham said his command is now outfitted with a new capability. *«With regard to a response force, when the command was initially formed there was a sharing arrangement with what's called the Commander's in-Extremis Force with European Command. That was a good relationship that up until the 1st of October of this year was a shared arrangement»*, Ham said. *«And now we have our own»*. The force will be permanently stationed in Fort Carson, Colorado, home to the 10th Special Forces Group. According to the Stars and Stripes, AFRICOM declined to comment further about the placement of its elite Special Forces team, whose movements are generally shrouded in secrecy. Jim Gavrilis, a security consultant, said, given the U.S. military's small footprint in Africa, it is likely that the rapid response force will deploy on rotational missions.

On March 6 Gen. Carter Ham told a Senate Committee *«A new Africa-focused Marine crisis response unit could soon be in place as part of a broader effort to beef up Africa Command's ability to confront emerging terrorism threats on the continent»*. AFRICOM is also looking to place other special operation forces in three strategic locations in southern Europe and West Africa to bolster the command's response capabilities, according to Ham. The General pointed out that AFRICOM's response capacity is gradually improving. In October, AFRICOM received its own Commander's in-Extremis Force, which is comprised of Green Berets from the Army's 10th Special Forces Group that maintains a forward presence in Europe along with the unit, headquartered in Fort Carson, Colorado (3).

In January The United States dispatched about 100 military trainers to six nations that will contribute troops to a pan-African force being prepared for deployment to Mali. The training mission in Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Togo and Ghana is the largest U.S. involvement to date in preparations for the African force, which is being assembled by the 15-nation Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS. The United States also has promised to help fly equipment and troops for the force into Mali. That effort may involve U.S. aircraft but could also be done with Nigerian, South African or outside commercial aircraft paid for by the United States.

On Jan 28, 2013 the US signed a Status-of-Forces (SOFA) Agreement with Niger. The U.S.

already has twenty-four such agreements with other African states. The U.S. Army, for instance, is launching a pilot program to deploy small Army elements to about 30 places in Africa to conduct partner-building missions and support American embassy outreach activities(4). On January 28, 2013 the government of Niger made public its consent to allow the deployment of US drone base on its territory. The facility is located in Agadez province bordering Mali, Algiers and Libya. President Obama announced the base was operational on February 21. The force is added to the US drones unit deployed in Djibouti. Mr. Obama said the 100 strong contingent armed for self-protection would support the French-led operation in neighboring Mali. Interestingly, this move comes just one month after the U.S. agreed to fly French troops and supplies into the country. According to the New York Times, «*The new drone base will join a constellation of small airstrips in recent years on the continent, including one in Ethiopia, for surveillance missions flown by drones or turboprop planes designed to look like civilian aircraft*». (5) The Pentagon has also expanded operations and construction at the only permanent U.S. base on the continent, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, which serves as a hub for counterterrorism missions in Somalia and Yemen.

China in Africa

It's an open secret AFRICOM was created to counter the growing presence of China in Africa. The Chinese African performance is a story of success. China's dynamic economy has great need for oil and other natural resources to sustain it. The country currently imports approximately 2.6 million barrels of crude per day, or about half of its total consumption. Approximately a third of its imports come from African states.

China secures long-term economic agreements for raw materials from Africa in exchange for Chinese aid and production sharing agreements and royalties. In comparison with IMF-dictated austerity measures, China offers large credits, soft loans to build roads and schools, something greatly appreciated by African countries.

In terms of development lending, as opposed to conditional lending by the World Bank, Chinese aid is rendered with no strings attached and usually spent on infrastructure projects that raise grass roots living standards. The most frequently cited example is Sinopec, a China's state oil company. It has acquired oil concessions in Angola and is rebuilding the country's transport infrastructure, hospitals and state buildings. China is viewed by African countries as a more attractive economic partner, compared to what the West has to offer.

Just a few months before the US decision to establish AFRICOM, China hosted an historic Beijing summit, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which brought nearly fifty African heads of state and ministers to Beijing in October 2006. In 2008 then Chinese President Hu Jintao announced a three-year, \$3 billion program in preferential loans and expanded aid for the African continent. The funds came on top of the \$3 billion in loans and \$2 billion in export credits announced by the Chinese government earlier. In the ensuing four years China's trade with Africa reached \$166 billion in 2011, according to Chinese statistics. African exports to China rose to \$93 billion from \$5.6 billion over the past decade. In July 2012 China offered African countries \$20 billion in loans over the next three years, double the amount pledged in the previous three-year period...

The trend is clear - Africa is becoming a theater for strategic competition between the United States and China, as both countries seek to expand their clout and secure access to resources.

Stiff competition for strategic resources like oil, gas, uranium, gold or iron is the specific feature of the situation in Africa. It's not only about fighting extremists. The mission of AFRICOM is to push China and other rivals, like Russia, for instance, out of the continent or at least to cripple their access to the resources. The war on terror is a good disguise.

Talking about the Mali and other flashpoints. These are the follow-ups of the recent mistakes. In a television interview last month, Mr. Lavrov said, «*France is fighting against those in Mali whom it had once armed in Libya against Qaddafi*».

Russia has pointed repeatedly that the ongoing unrest in North Africa testifies to the fact that the Western-supported Arab Spring has created turmoil and instability, the breeding grounds for terrorists. The US and NATO went beyond the UN resolution 1973 in Libya against Russia's and China's warnings not to do so. The NATO's intervention spurred a domino-like effect across Africa's Sahel region. Now we all face the implications. While supporting the efforts to combat terrorism in Africa, Russia has simultaneously criticized Western nations, including the USA and France, for arming the opposition in Libya. Now military skills and weapons spread across the region. The US presence in Niger may provoke further entanglement in case the facility is attacked, for instance. Like the very presence of Iraqi troops provoked attacks against the servicemen.

Military force, even when used for peacekeeping missions solely, is not the only thing the region needs. On March 1 Russia also announced the beginning of its involvement in the conflict by delivering 36 tons of aid to the country, including canned food, 45 tents, 2,000 blankets, cereals, and rice. Russia's action comes just one day after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with the U.N. Special Envoy for the Sahel, Romano Prodi about the ongoing conflict in Mali. It is expected the situation in Africa will be addressed during the BRICS summit in Durban, South Africa 26 - 27 March 2013. There is a hope the members will discuss the situation in wide perspective, perhaps coming up with proposals to positively tackle the issue of Africa's instability.

Notes

(1)

http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-14/world/37100512_1_africa-command-djibouti-west-africa

(2) <http://www.stripes.com/news/africom-announces-it-will-have-rapid-reaction-force-1.201162>

(3)

<http://www.stripes.com/news/more-crisis-response-headed-to-africom-amid-terrorism-concerns-1.210891>

(4)

<http://www.defensenews.com/article/20130130/DEFREG04/301300017/Pentagon-Increases-Focus-AFRICOM>

(5) http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/23/world/africa/in-niger-us-troops-set-up-drone-base.html?page-wanted=all&_r=0

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