

U.S. Militarism In Africa: Humanitarian Missions Or Imperialist Aggression?

Africom is spreading its activity throughout the continent

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Unbeknownst to the majority of people in the United States, the Pentagon is directing increased attention to the African continent. The formation of the United States Africa Command (Africom) in 2008 signaled this trend which had been developing for at least a decade.

This should not be surprising considering the history of the U.S. and its European antecedents. Since the mid-15th century Western European nations have been involved with Africa through the Atlantic Slave Trade and later the colonization of the continent. The profitability of the colonies of the Western hemisphere is directly related to the exploitation of African labor.

Although the official history of the U.S. prides itself on the notions of freedom of the individual, the capacity for reforms and amendments to the constitution, there is also the resistance to change embedded deeply in the fabric of political culture, law and the economic structures of society. The slave system in the U.S. was introduced by the British colonialists during the second decade of the 17th century in Virginia.

From the time of 1619 to 1865, some two-and-one-half centuries, slavery was a profitable economic system that provided the wealth and technology that sprung America to the industrial position that it occupied during the latter decades of the 19th century. By the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the so-called Spanish-American war would usher in a new era of imperialism that became increasingly dominated by the United States.

With specific reference to the economic system of slavery and its justification within the American legal system, African American historian W.E.B. DuBois wrote in his seminal work on the failure of Reconstruction in the aftermath of the civil war, that "Negro slaves in America represented the worst and lowest conditions among modern laborers." (Black Reconstruction in America, 1935)

DuBois continued pointing out that "One estimate is that the maintenance of a slave in the South cost the master about \$19 a year, which means that they were among the poorest paid laborers in the modern world. They represented in a very real sense the ultimate degradation of man (and woman). Indeed, the system was so reactionary, so utterly inconsistent with modern progress, that we simply cannot grasp it today. No matter how degraded the factory hand, he is not real estate."

Exemplifying the total degradation of the African under the slave system in the U.S. was the

infamous Dred Scott decision of 1857. DuBois recounts that “The whole legal status of slavery was enunciated in the extraordinary statement of a Chief Justice (Taney) of the United States that Negroes had always been regarded in America ‘as having no rights which a white man was bound to respect.’”

Within the sphere of the process of production under slavery in the U.S., DuBois emphasizes that “Under the competition of growing industrial organization, the slave system was indeed the source of immense profits. But for the slave owner and landlord to keep a large or even reasonable share of these profits was increasingly difficult. The price of the slave produce in the open market could be hammered down by merchants and traders acting with knowledge and collusion. And the slave owner was, therefore, continually forced to find his profits not in the high price of cotton and sugar, but in beating even further down the cost of his slave labor.”

Another historian who studied the impact of the slave system on the development of American civilization was Trinidadian C.L.R. James. He wrote in 1970 that “the triangular trade in sugar, rum and slaves in an instance of programmed accumulation of wealth such as the world has rarely seen. ‘American slavery’, says one author, ‘was unique in the sense that for symmetry and precision of outline, nothing like it had ever previously been seen.’ The element of order in the barbarism was this: the rationalization of a labor force upon which the whole process of colonization depended had the African at its most essential point. If he (or she) had not been able to work or sustain himself (or herself) or learn the language or maintain co-operation in his (or her) social life, the whole question of America as a distinct civilization could never have arisen. We might be then talking about a sort of New Zeland or perhaps Canada.” (James, *The Future in the Present*, 1980)

Yet even New Zeland and Canada could not have become capitalist states allied with imperialism without the forced subjugation and removal of the indigenous peoples of those lands. Canada, had been a slave territory under the British where the system was eliminated decades prior to the Civil War in the U.S. and consequently became a haven for runaway Africans fleeing the exploitative system to the south.

From Colonialism to the Cold War (1900-1990)

As a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade, colonialism was instituted in North America, the Caribbean and Latin America. The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803 illustrated profoundly the fragility of the slave and colonial system and more importantly the capacity of human beings, no matter how degraded, oppressed and exploited, to organize, rise up, rebel and take power from the slave masters.

Between the period of the Spanish-American War, as we referenced earlier, to the conclusion of World War II, the industrial and technological advancement of the U.S. reached historic levels. The advent of the assembly line, speculative finance and the expansion of global markets for industrial products, placed the ruling class within the U.S. in a dominant economic and political position in relationship to its European counterparts and imperial Japan.

The character of the battles fought during World War II spared the U.S. from the destruction that destroyed the economic and social fabric of Europe and Japan. War production in the U.S. and the indebtedness of Europe catapulted the ruling elite in America to a dominate position within the world capitalist system.

After 1945, it was only the Soviet Union that was in a position to effectively challenge U.S. hegemony internationally. Other socialist-oriented revolutions in Korea (1945-48), China (1949), Vietnam (1945-54) and Yugoslavia (1945) provided additional challenges to the capitalist system both militarily as well as providing an alternative model for the organization of society, the planning of a national economy and the character of international relations.

This perceived threat to U.S. dominance resulted in the so-called Cold War. This war became hot in 1950 with the beginning of the Korean War that lasted for three years and involved the People's Republic of China.

In Vietnam, the U.S. was keen to ensure French dominance which inevitably was defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. By 1961, the U.S. would send advisers to Vietnam in an effort to stop communism. In 1965, hundreds of thousands of occupation troops entered southeast Asia and remained there for a decade.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 soon became socialist-oriented and the U.S. response to this phenomenon in its so-called "backyard" almost led to nuclear war with the Soviet Union in 1962. The Cuban Revolution encouraged the U.S. to enter the Dominican Republic in 1965 in an attempt to prevent another socialist intervention.

That same year in Indonesia, the potential for the seizure of power by the Communist Party, the second largest at the time just next to China, brought about the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

With specific reference to Africa, the U.S. government after World War II paid lip service to the anti-colonial struggle, but in actuality supported the perpetuation of the status-quo. Although relationships between the U.S. administration and progressive African states were established in Ghana, Guinea, Algeria, Egypt, Tanzania and others, nonetheless, it became obvious even during the 1950s and 1960s, and was documented later, that successive Washington administrations were more concerned about containing Soviet, Chinese and Cuban influence than assisting a genuine process of de-colonization and independence.

Algeria, a former French colony that won its liberation through a protracted armed struggle between 1954-1961, sought relations with Washington. However, even under the Kennedy administration there were efforts to discourage Algiers from enhancing its cooperation with revolutionary Cuba. The invasion of Algeria by Morocco in 1963 was encouraged and engineered by the U.S. as a means of stifling and reversing the African Revolution.

In Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, a police and military coup was masterminded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the State Department. These facts came out during the revelations of the 1970s in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and the declassification of intelligence documents.

In reference to South Africa, African National Congress (ANC) leader Nelson Mandela was thrown into prison in 1962 after he had traveled to Algeria for military training provided by the late Ahmed Ben Bella of the National Liberation Front (FLN). It was the CIA operating in league with the racist apartheid regime that brought about the arrest and prosecution of Mandela who spent over 27 years in prison.

The former Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau represented a

lifeline for Lisbon. Portugal was a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and enjoyed the support of the U.S. in its more than a decade of war against the liberation movements in these former colonies.

Even after the independence of Angola in 1975, the U.S. collaborated with the racist South African Defense Forces (SADF) and the reactionary UNITA and FNLA guerrilla groups in an effort to undermine the genuine and total liberation of this oil-rich Southern African nation. It was the intervention of Cuban internationalist forces in Angola between 1975-1989 that ensured the defeat of the SADF and consequently led to the independence of Namibia. After the independence of Namibia in 1990, the apartheid regime, which benefited from hundreds of millions of dollars of U.S. corporate investment and military assistance, agreed to release Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners in South Africa and enter into serious negotiations with the liberation movements for a transfer of power.

U.S.-Africa Relations in the Post-Cold War Period

Beginning in the late 1980s, the socialist states of Eastern Europe unraveled. In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed.

Yugoslavia, which had pursued an independent socialist path, broke-up over the course of the 1990s through civil war, partition and the eventual U.S.-NATO bombings of 1999.

China, although remaining socialist, shifted its domestic and foreign policy to accommodate large-scale trade and investment with the U.S. after the death of Mao Tse-Tung in 1976 and the ascendancy of Deng-Tsao-Ping. Many of the states in Africa which had proclaimed themselves socialist began to reverse policies related to state control of economic planning and anti-imperialist foreign policy.

Yet how has these developments impacted U.S. foreign policy toward Africa? If there is no real threat of socialist influence, why has the Pentagon increased its military involvement on the continent?

Why was the U.S. Africa Command (Africom) created in 2008? Has the establishment of a Pentagon base in the Horn of Africa nation of Djibouti increased instability in East Africa that could lead to a more unstable political situation in both East and Central Africa?

The answer to these questions lies within the actual developments in Africa over the last five years. Let us examine events in several African states and the role of the U.S. and its allies in the region.

Libya: A Humanitarian War?

The 2011 war against the North African state of Libya represented the first full project of the U.S. Africa Command (Africom). Since Libya's Revolution in 1969, the U.S. had been at odds with the country and its leader Col. Muammar Gaddafi.

Libya is a former Italian colony and during World War II the U.S. moved in and began to construct the Wheelus Air Force Base. As the Cold War escalated after the War, Libya became an important outpost for the Pentagon.

When Gaddafi came to power the U.S. air base was closed and the country nationalized its oil resources. Later it was determined that Libya encompassed the largest known oil

reserves on the continent.

In the early 1980s relations between the U.S. and Libya worsened with the shooting down of Libyan planes by the U.S. Air Force in 1981. In 1986, Libya was bombed in two cities, Tripoli and Benghazi, under the Reagan administration. The country's government was accused of being behind an attack on a night club in West Germany that was frequented by U.S. troops stationed in the region.

Economic sanctions and a travel ban was imposed on Libya by the U.S. This state of affairs lasted until 2003, when on the eve of the war against Iraq, the U.S. moved to "normalize" relations with Libya in exchange for its purported disarmament of "weapons of mass destruction."

Trade increased between Libya and the U.S. as well as several Western European states. This state of affairs continued until 2009 when a Libyan was released from a Scottish prison on humanitarian grounds.

He had been convicted during the 1990s for alleged involvement in the bombing of an airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland. Of the two Libyans put on trial for this action, only one was convicted. At the time of his release the case was under appeal and may very well have been overturned.

Relations worsened between the U.S. and Libya after 2009, and by February 2011, when a rebellion erupted in the east of the country, the U.S. and NATO intervened through an arms embargo, a naval blockade and a massive bombing campaign that resulted in 26,000 sorties and nearly 10,000 airstrikes. The rebel Transitional National Council (TNC) was installed as the "legitimate" government of the country.

Approximately two million Libyans and foreign nationals residing in the country were displaced, thousands died in the war and the consequent instability engendered by the rebel group, the air campaign, naval blockade and the freezing of over \$160 billion in foreign assets has had regional implications that have spread to neighboring Mali, where a rebellion in the north of the country precipitated a military coup and the possible intervention of a regional armed force to ostensibly stabilize the situation.

Today Libya is more divided than during any period of its post-independence history with secessionist efforts in the east, increased fighting in the south and the failure of the NTC to reign in militias under a national army.

Somalia: Another War for Oil?

In Somalia in the Horn of Africa, the involvement of the U.S. has extended back at least until the late 1970s when the Carter administration encouraged the-then military government of Mohamed SiadBarre to invade the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. After Somalia's defeat at the hands of the Ethiopian military and Cuban internationalist forces then in the country to bolster its socialist orientation, the state of Somalia spun into instability and horrendous food deficits.

By 1991, the SiadBarre regime had collapsed under internal pressures and since this time there has really been no stable internationally recognized government in Somalia. In late 1992, thousands of U.S. Marines entered the country in "Operation Restore Hope," which it was claimed at the time, was designed to provide humanitarian relief from famine.

In just a few months a national uprising was launched against the U.S. and United Nations presence in Somalia resulting in the deaths of many Marines as well as thousands of Somalians. Both the U.S. and U.N. forces withdrew in 1994, not to return until the recent period.

Since 2006, the U.S. has attempted to control the situation inside the country. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) is essentially bankrolled by the U.S. and the African Union Mission to Somalia (Amisom) largely consists of U.S.-backed forces from Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti.

In October 2011, the Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) invaded the south of Somalia in a bid to crush the Al-Shabaab Islamic resistance movement which has been labeled by the U.S. as a "terrorist" organization. It turns out that this intervention, "Operation Linda Nchi," had been planned for two years between Africom, the TFG and the Kenyan government.

Despite this intervention as well, Somalia is still not stable and the humanitarian situation remains dire. The Pentagon and the CIA has deployed drones in Somalia resulting in the deaths of hundreds of nationals. These drones have fallen in displaced persons camps killing innocent civilians.

These attacks on Somalia is coupled with a formidable naval presence by the Pentagon and the European Union off the coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden, one of the most lucrative shipping lanes in the world. This presence is ostensibly geared toward fighting piracy which has been deemed a major problem in the region.

Somalia has been determined to be a major source of oil reserves. Drilling and speculation are taking place in the breakaway region of Puntland in the north by Canadian and British firms. U.S. firms claim to have purchased concessions for oil drilling and like Libya, these projects will inevitably be conducted by private corporate interests.

Kony 2012: Special Forces and Advisors to the Rescue

Perhaps the most well publicized U.S. military adventure in Africa recently has been the so-called "Invisible Children" campaign. On October 14, 2011, the Obama administration announced that 100 Pentagon Special Forces and advisors were being dispatched to four states in East and Central Africa to track down Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The LRA has been largely defeated in northern Uganda where it was founded. The remnants of the group have scattered into the Central African Republic, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Uganda is emerging as another oil producing state and has close political, military and economic ties to the U.S. The DRC is a treasure trove of strategic minerals and South Sudan is awash with oil.

Whether Kony is captured or killed the U.S. involvement in the region will continue and be enhanced. The U.S. is becoming more dependent upon oil imports from Africa, now approximately 25 percent of its overall supply from outside the country.

The Role of China

We would be remiss not to mention the growing role of China in African affairs. As I wrote in 2010, “the strongest growth in trade has taken place between Africa and Asian states, with the People’s Republic of China being the most significant. China’s trade with Africa was recorded at \$93 billion in 2008, making it the second largest partner after the U.S. In Nigeria alone, a recently signed oil cooperation agreement with China is reported to involve between \$32 billion to \$50 billion in trade and investment.” (Africa & Imperialism)

This same article continues noting a United Nations report indicating “that trade between Africa and China, had increased by 1,000 percent during the period between 2000-2008.” As of 2010, “China accounted for 11 percent of the continent’s external trade, with the bulk of transactions taking place in the sectors of primary products, including fuel and minerals.”

Conclusion

These are some of the important issues that must be evaluated when assessing U.S.-Africa relations. The source of this relationship has been economic since the Atlantic Slave Trade and the period of direct colonial rule.

With the U.S. and Europe facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, we will see enhanced efforts aimed at the capturing and domination of foreign resources and trade relations that are clearly linked to the massive re-structuring of the labor market inside the U.S.

Whether this intervention in Africa will continue on its present course depends upon political developments inside the U.S. and the level of opposition in Africa. What is clear is that until a more balanced and equitable system of trade and international relations develops, people inside the United States will continue to pay a heavy price for the dependence upon oil and other strategic resources in Africa and other parts of the world.

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