

# U.S. Military Makes First Confirmed OpenAI Purchase for War-fighting Forces

The Pentagon explored the AI software for research, but the new deal is the first by a combatant command whose mission is one of killing.

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

*Less than a year after OpenAI [quietly signaled it wanted to do business with the Pentagon](#), a procurement document obtained by [The Intercept](#) shows U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM, believes access to OpenAI's technology is "essential" for its mission.*

The [September 30 document](#) lays out AFRICOM's rationale for buying cloud computing services directly from Microsoft as part of its \$9 billion Joint Warfighting Cloud Capability contract, rather than seeking another provider on the open market.

"The USAFRICOM operates in a dynamic and evolving environment where IT plays a critical role in achieving mission objectives," the document reads, including "its vital mission in support of our African Mission Partners [and] USAFRICOM joint exercises."

The document, labeled Controlled Unclassified Information, is marked as FEDCON, indicating it is not meant to be distributed beyond government or contractors. It shows AFRICOM's request was approved by the Defense Information Systems Agency. While the price of the purchase is redacted, the approval document notes its value is less than \$15 million.

Like the rest of the Department of Defense, AFRICOM — which oversees the Pentagon's operations across Africa, including local military cooperation with U.S. allies there — has an increasing appetite for cloud computing. The Defense Department [already purchases](#) cloud computing access from Microsoft via the Joint Warfighting Cloud Capability project. This new document reflects AFRICOM's desire to bypass contracting red tape and buy immediately [Microsoft Azure cloud services](#), including OpenAI software, without considering other vendors. AFRICOM states that the "ability to support advanced AI/ML workloads is crucial. This includes services for search, natural language processing, [machine learning], and unified analytics for data processing." And according to AFRICOM, Microsoft's Azure cloud platform, which includes a suite of tools provided by OpenAI, is the only cloud provider capable of meeting its needs.

*Image: OpenAI headquarters, Pioneer Building, San Francisco (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)*



Microsoft [began](#) selling OpenAI's GPT-4 large language model to defense customers in June 2023. Earlier this year, following the revelation that OpenAI had changed its mind on military work, the company [announced](#) a cybersecurity collaboration with DARPA in January and said its tools would be used for an unspecified veteran suicide prevention initiative. In April, Microsoft [pitched the Pentagon](#) on using DALL-E, OpenAI's image generation tool, for command and control software. But the AFRICOM document marks the first confirmed purchase of OpenAI's products by a U.S. combatant command whose mission is one of killing.

OpenAI's [stated](#) corporate mission remains "to ensure that artificial general intelligence benefits all of humanity."

The document states that "OpenAI tools" are among the "unique features" offered by Microsoft "essential to ensure the cloud services provided align with USAFRICOM's mission and operational needs. ... Without access to Microsoft's integrated suite of AI tools and services, USAFRICOM would face significant challenges in analyzing and extracting actionable insights from vast amounts of data. ... This could lead to delays in decision-making, compromised situational awareness, and decreased agility in responding to dynamic and evolving threats across the African continent." Defense and intelligence agencies around the world have expressed a keen interest in using large language models to [sift through troves of intelligence](#), or rapidly transcribe and analyze [interrogation audio data](#).

Microsoft invested \$10 billion in OpenAI last year and now exercises a great deal of influence over the company, in addition to reselling its technology. In February, The Intercept and other digital news outlets [sued Microsoft and OpenAI](#) for using their journalism without permission or credit.

An OpenAI spokesperson told The Intercept, "OpenAI does not have a partnership with US Africa Command" and referred questions to Microsoft. Microsoft did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Nor did a spokesperson for AFRICOM.

"It is extremely alarming that they're explicit in OpenAI tool use for 'unified analytics for data processing' to align with USAFRICOM's mission objectives," said Heidi Khlaaf, chief AI scientist at the AI Now Institute, who has previously conducted safety evaluations for OpenAI. "Especially in stating that they believe these tools enhance efficiency, accuracy, and scalability, when in fact it has been demonstrated that these tools are highly inaccurate and consistently fabricate outputs. These claims show a concerning lack of awareness by those procuring for these technologies of the high risks these tools pose in mission-critical environments."

Since OpenAI quietly deleted the portion of its terms of service that prohibited military work

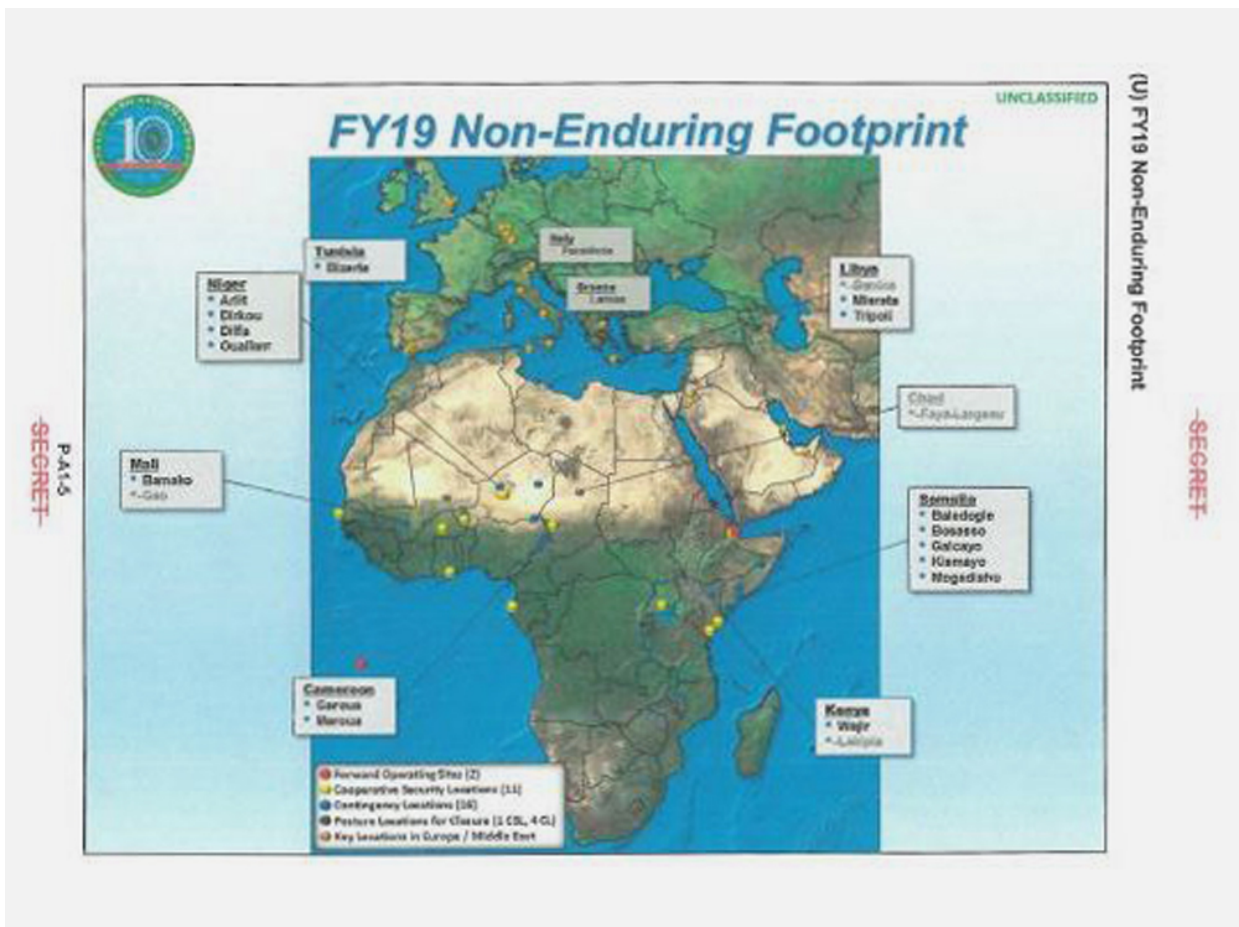
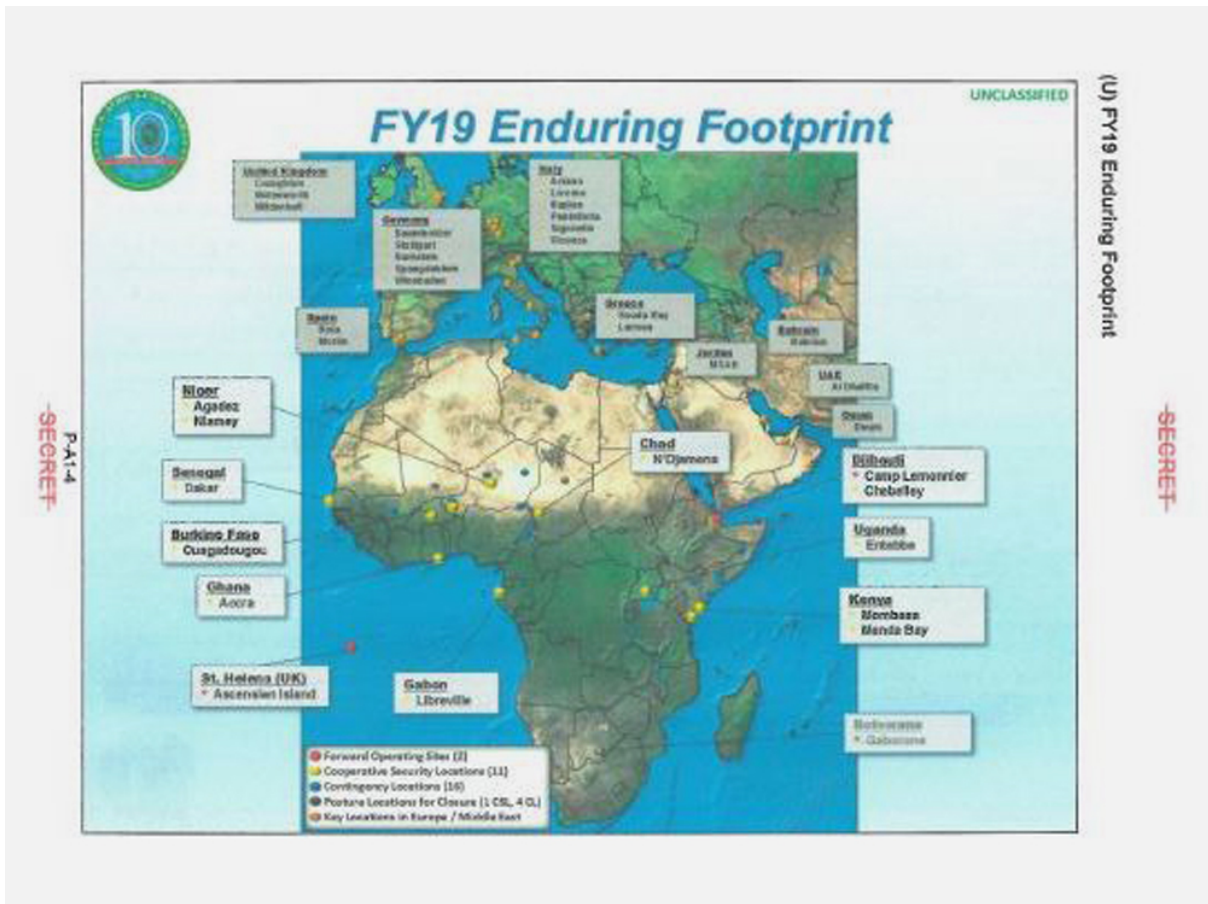
in January, the company has steadily ingratiated itself with the U.S. national security establishment, which is [eager](#) to integrate impressive but frequently [inaccurate](#) tools like ChatGPT. In [June](#), OpenAI added to its board the Trump-appointed former head of the National Security Agency, **Paul Nakasone**; the company's current head of national security partnerships is **Katrina Mulligan**, a Pentagon alum who previously worked in "Special Operations and Irregular Warfare," according to her LinkedIn profile.

On Thursday, following a White House directive ordering the Pentagon to accelerate adoption of tools like those made by OpenAI, the company published an article [outlining](#) its "approach to AI and national security." According to the post,

"The values that guide our work on national security" include "democratic values," "human rights," and "accountability," explaining, "We believe that all AI applications, especially those involving government and national security, should be subject to oversight, clear usage guidelines, and ethical standards." OpenAI's language is a clear reflection of the White House order, which forbade security and intelligence entities from using artificial intelligence in ways that "do not align with democratic values," the Washington Post [reported](#).

While the AFRICOM document contains little detail about how exactly it might use OpenAI tools, the command's regular implications in African coup d'états, civilian killings, torture, and covert warfare would seem incompatible with OpenAI's professed national security framework. Last year, AFRICOM chief **Gen. Michael Langley** told the House Armed Services Committee that his command shares "[core values](#)" with **Col. Mamady Doumbouya**, an AFRICOM trainee who overthrew the government of Guinea and declared himself its leader in 2021.

Although U.S. military activity in Africa receives relatively little attention in comparison to U.S. Central Command, which oversees American forces in the Middle East, AFRICOM's presence is both significant and the subject of frequent controversy. Despite claims of a "light footprint" on the continent, The Intercept reported in 2020 a formerly [secret AFRICOM map](#) showing "a network of 29 U.S. military bases that stretch from one side of Africa to another." Much of AFRICOM's purpose since its establishment in 2007 entails training and advising African troops, low-profile missions by Special Operations forces, and operating drone bases to counter militant groups in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa in efforts to bring security and stability to the continent. The results have been dismal. Throughout all of Africa, the State Department counted a total of just [nine terrorist attacks](#) in 2002 and 2003, the first years of U.S. counterterrorism assistance on the continent. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, a Pentagon research institution, the annual number of attacks by militant Islamist groups in Africa now tops 6,700 — a 74,344 percent increase.



Maps of U.S. “Enduring” and “Non-Enduring” bases in Africa. The Pentagon defines “enduring” bases as providing “strategic access and use to support United States security interests for the foreseeable future.” “Non-Enduring” outposts — also known as “contingency locations” — are defined as supporting



and sustaining “operations during contingencies or other operations.” Contingency locations can be categorized as initial, temporary, or semipermanent. Images: U.S. Africa Command

As violence has spiraled, at least [15 officers who benefited from U.S. security assistance](#) have been involved in [12 coups in West Africa and the greater Sahel](#) during the war on terror, including in [Niger](#) last year. (At least [five leaders](#) of that July 2023 coup received American assistance, according to a U.S. official.) U.S. allies have also been implicated in a [raft of](#) alleged [human rights abuses](#). In 2017, The Intercept [reported](#) a Cameroonian military base used by AFRICOM to stage surveillance drone flights had been used to torture military prisoners.

Dealing with data has long been a challenge for AFRICOM. After The Intercept put together a count of U.S.-trained coup leaders on the continent, for example, the command admitted it did not know how many coups its charges have conducted, nor did the command even keep a list of how many times such takeovers have happened. “AFRICOM does not maintain a database with this information,” spokesperson Kelly Cahalan told The Intercept [last year](#).

AFRICOM’s mismanagement of information has also been lethal. Following a 2018 drone strike in Somalia, AFRICOM announced it had killed “[five terrorists](#)” and destroyed one vehicle, and that “no civilians were killed in this airstrike.” A secret U.S. military investigation, obtained by The Intercept via the Freedom of Information Act, showed that despite months of “target development,” the attack on a pickup truck killed at least three, and possibly five, civilians, including Luul Dahir Mohamed and her [4-year-old daughter](#), Mariam Shilow Muse.

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*Featured image: U.S. Army Africa 1st Lt. Salvatore Buzzurro, Africa Contingency Operations Training & Assistance program military mentor, gives a Sierra Leone Armed Forces Soldiers advice on movement techniques. The SL Army has been training with the ACOTA program for two years, and this is the fifth company prepping for their peacekeeping mission in another country. Photo by U.S. Army Africa.*

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