

The Africa Pivot: America's New Battleground

by Jon Mitchell

While most foreign policy analysts and the mainstream media focus on the “Asia pivot,” signifying the strategic military shift from the Middle East to East Asia, the Obama administration has quietly and simultaneously deployed elsewhere. While the Pentagon is indeed shifting military forces to Asia, there is also a very low-key, military shift to Africa.

According to investigative journalist Nick Turse, the military's not-so-public perception of Africa is that “Africa is the battlefield of tomorrow, today.”¹ Despite Africa Command's (AFRICOM) claim of a “small footprint,” the U.S. military presence has increased and continues to expand in the face of Africa-based terrorist groups.

Described as the hub for drone operations in Africa and the Middle East, Camp Lemonnier is strategically located in Djibouti, only 500 miles from Somalia and less than 100 miles from Yemen.² The site is the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa, according to Colonel Tom Davis, AFRICOM's Director of Public Affairs. However, this representation does not account for the low-key U.S. forces operating out of other bases and posts throughout Africa.³ The Obama administration has increasingly utilized surveillance operations and Special Forces raids to capture or kill High Value Targets (HVTs) in the War on Terror. Africa has seen a surge in these strategies, which are more desirable to an American public plagued by a decade of large-scale conflicts.⁴

The military carries out an array of missions in Africa from base construction to Special Forces raids, surveillance support, and training and advisory deployments.⁵ A spokesman from AFRICOM states that a “small presence of personnel” conduct missions in “several locations.”⁶ To be more accurate, the Department of Defense (DoD) operates on various levels in approximately 49 of 54 African countries.⁷

The Pentagon is attempting to contain and combat the spread of terrorism in Africa, particularly al-Qaeda affiliates.⁸ Threats include Al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and Al-

Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁹ AFRICOM's primary mission is counter-terrorism, prompting the increase of personnel and resources that contribute to that mission.¹⁰ In addition to increased personnel and military hardware, U.S. bases have expanded and new ones are being strategically built in multiple African countries.

Camp Lemonnier itself has physically expanded and improved between 2009 and 2012, at the cost of \$390 million.¹¹ Most interestingly, \$220 million went toward a Special Operations Compound, known as "Task Force Compound."¹² On a larger scale, the Department of Defense proposed a plan to Congress with \$1.4 billion in improvement and expansion projects for Camp Lemonnier over the next 25 years.¹³

At Camp Simba, a Kenyan naval base, the Navy is constructing a runway extension to accommodate large cargo aircraft that could land and supply U.S. troops.¹⁴ Camp Simba holds approximately sixty U.S. personnel who work with Kenyan military forces and humanitarian projects.¹⁵

Smaller military sites such as Forward Operating Sites (FOS) and Cooperative Security Locations (CSL) have seen improvements and increased activity. For example, a CSL in Entebbe, Uganda¹⁶ was a rugged outpost in 2009, but has since transformed into a busy joint-base with a much larger number of helicopters and airplanes. AFRICOM would neither confirm nor deny its existence.¹⁷

However, TomDispatch came across contracting documents for a private contracting company to provide fixed-wing airlift services for the DoD in the Central African Region.¹⁸ This would allow the U.S. military to transport personnel, weapons, and supplies to multiple countries within reach of CSL Entebbe including Uganda, Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁹ A U.S. Army Africa briefing from July 2012 mentions CSL Entebbe and the contractors who flew "secret surveillance missions" in manned surveillance aircraft.²⁰

New bases and forward sites are also being built to accommodate DoD surveillance drones that support the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) function of AFRICOM's counter-terrorism objective. U.S. personnel in Africa widely support the surveillance and intelligence capacity via surveillance aircraft; however, not enough surveillance is carried out. According to Army General David Rodriguez, intelligence-gathering needs to drastically increase as AFRICOM's current surveillance capabilities only meet 7% of the necessary ISR requirements for Africa.²¹ Surveillance missions

conducted in African countries support U.S. Special Forces operations and benefit the host nations' militaries in order to fight terrorism.²²

Drone operations from Camp Lemonnier expanded so much that the DoD had to build an airport taxiway extension to handle the day-to-day drone operations, which made up 30% of flight operations at the military base.²³ However, Djibouti has experienced five drone crashes since 2011, prompting the Djiboutian government to ask that drone operations be removed from its capital's airport and sent to Chabelley, Djibouti, a more remote airstrip.²⁴ Drone flights from Camp Lemonnier ended in September 2013, and resumed in Chabelley according to U.S. defense officials.²⁵ The Djiboutian government has a positive military relationship with the U.S. and the DoD is still able to conduct drone strikes in targeted regions, although this change may affect the frequency of such operations.²⁶

Other U.S. installations have been established in Ethiopia, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Niger, and South Sudan.²⁷ Since 2007, approximately a dozen air bases have been set up.²⁸ A civilian airport in Arba Minch, Ethiopia hosts Air Force Reaper drones while the international airport in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso is home to DoD personnel, including private contractors, who conduct surveillance operations from aircraft and previously ran a fusion cell for intelligence operations.²⁹

Most recently, the Pentagon opened a new base in Niger for reconnaissance and surveillance on Islamic militants.³⁰ The base sits next to the capital's international airport in Niamey and houses approximately 100 U.S. personnel (mostly intelligence analysts, security personnel, and logistics specialists) and Air Force Predator drones,³¹ although the small U.S. base could expand to as many as 300 DoD personnel.³² The surveillance missions flown from this base will improve the quality of intelligence gathered on terrorist groups and militants in Mali, Nigeria, and Libya.

ISR accounts for only half of the U.S. counter-terrorism mission in Africa. The Pentagon has deployed military personnel to African countries for a variety of reasons. About 300 Special Forces (SF) commandos are based at Camp Lemonnier where there are plans to significantly expand the SF compound, accommodating up to 1,100 Special Forces personnel.³³ Meanwhile, 120 DoD personnel are deployed to Manda Bay, which has been used as a forward base for Navy SEALs to conduct operations in Somalia.³⁴ Special Forces teams have been also been stationed at Nzara

(South Sudan), Obo and Djema (Central Africa Republic), and Dungu (Democratic Republic of Congo).³⁵

For the past several years, Africa has seen an increase of raids and targeted kill missions by Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). In 2007, surveillance drones, AC-130 strafing runs, and special operations teams began conducting targeted killings on al-Qaeda leaders in Somalia,³⁶ but initially produced “few significant counterterrorism results.”³⁷ However, in the effort to assassinate those on the kill lists, JSOC’s AC-130s were also killing large numbers of civilians.³⁸ Surgical strikes have the potential to become successful in Africa, provided that they strictly avoid civilian casualties.

Most recently in October 2013, Special Forces conducted two simultaneous raids on known terrorist leaders in Somalia and Libya.³⁹ These raids portray a preferable option for counterterrorism operations in Africa, by allowing the U.S. to capture a terrorist leader alive and use him as an intelligence source. From drone strikes to snatch-and-grab raids by SF teams, the U.S. surgical military policy in Africa poses a more effective strategy than conventional conflict and occupation.

In addition to Special Forces groups, regular U.S. military personnel are deployed and participate in a variety of activities in Africa. According to the *Army Times*, 3,000 soldiers will be deployed to Africa in 2013.⁴⁰ Between Special Forces and regular troops, the U.S. conducts military training and security cooperation with militaries all over the continent.⁴¹ A majority of these are not temporary activities, but rather year-round operations designed to assist African nations, combat terrorism, and stabilize environments.⁴² However, the expansion of the U.S. military presence in Africa mostly focuses on counter-terrorism surveillance and operations that fall under the host nations.

Despite AFRICOM’s insistence that they only operate one base and keep a “small footprint,” the facts point towards an increased U.S. presence on the entire continent. For the past decade, the Department of Defense has strategically positioned drone and Special Forces bases throughout Africa to conduct surveillance, intelligence, and limited engagement operations against terrorist groups and militants. This stands in contrast to the large-scale military engagements and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On a continent that is rife with ethnic clashes and terrorism, this strategic approach by the Pentagon has the potential to be a very effective model. While the conventional U.S. military strategy is focused on the Asia pivot, the Obama administration has downplayed the shift to Africa and deployed JSOC and aerial intelligence to combat terrorism. This could potentially lead to blowback, should several factors come into play.

While the U.S. already conducts drone strikes in Somalia, a majority of drone operations in Africa appear to be unarmed and focused on surveillance. However, the possibility of U.S. officials choosing to arm the drones runs the risk of significant civilian casualties. In addition, the JSOC capture-or-kill raids can, at times, violate the national sovereignty where it takes place if the U.S. fails to notify or work with the host government.

The U.S. could have an effective counter-terrorism model in Africa provided that it 1) operates within international legal parameters, especially with drones, 2) works with host governments in regards to drones and HVT raids, and 3) maintains a low-visibility in foreign military assistance and Special Forces operations. The vital question that must be asked and considered is, will an increased U.S. presence reduce, or escalate terrorism in Africa?

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