

The United States - From Counter-terrorism to Great Power Competition in Africa?

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

The overseas posture of the United States in Africa is characterised by a network of ‘lily pads’, low-profile and highly secret non-permanent military facilities. Their key logistical node and the only permanent American military base on the continent is Camp Lemonnier, in Djibouti. The main aim of America’s presence is to fight terrorism; special forces operations and the use of drones have increased over the years. However, as the focus is changing towards great power economic competition with China and Russia, a reduction of American special forces in Africa is foreseen.

COUNTERING TERRORISM

Before Africa’s decolonisation in the early 1960s, the United States (US) ran its diplomatic relations with most of the countries on the continent through European colonial powers. During the Cold War, the US perceived Africa as a place for countering the Soviet Union and making the continent’s political orientation ‘pro-West’. Shortly after the Cold War, it seemed the US had lost its strategic interest in Africa. US disengagement was reinforced by the ‘Black Hawk Down’ incident, in Somalia in 1993, when two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down during a mission. The incident was a part of the Battle of Mogadishu, killing 18 American soldiers. It had a tremendous impact on both policymakers and public opinion in America and led to a period of many years when US forces were nearly absent in Africa.

The reorientation of US policies on Africa was short-lived. The 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania highlighted Africa as a source of terrorist threats. Following the ‘9/11’ attacks on US soil in 2001, which among other things strengthened concerns that terrorist organisations from Africa had escalated their activities and were now exporting terror to Europe and America, terrorism was designated as the number one threat to US security.

In 2007, the US government created United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), with headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, as the combatant command responsible for all US military activities in Africa. AFRICOM includes a forward-deployed naval component, the US Naval Forces Africa (NAVAF), with headquarters in Naples, Italy. NAVAF has been active off Africa’s west coast for more than a decade.

AFRICOM prioritises five objectives: (1) African partners contribute to regional security; (2) threats from violent-extremist organisations (VEOs) and transnational criminal organisations are reduced to a level manageable by internal security forces; (3) US access and influence are ensured; (4) AFRICOM sets the theatre by aligning forces, authorities, capabilities, footprints, and agreements; and (5) US personnel and facilities are protected.

In 2019, AFRICOM revised its campaign plan. To achieve its objectives, it emphasizes six approaches: (1) to strengthen partner networks; (2) to enhance partner capability; (3) to develop security in Somalia; (4) to contain instability in Libya; (5) to support partners in Sahel and the Lake Chad region; and (6) to set the theatre to facilitate AFRICOM’s day-to-day activities, crisis response, and contingency operations.

Camp Lemonnier

The US government, with its primary focus on the conduct and support of counter-terrorism missions, has been leasing the site of Camp Lemonnier from the Djiboutian government since 2001. The Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), established in 2002 as a part of the global war against terrorism, is still the main US military body tasked with conducting operations and training in East Africa.

Camp Lemonnier is the key logistical node for AFRICOM’s missions in Africa. As the only permanent US base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier has undergone a

series of upgrades; infrastructure has been improved and the base area has been expanded.

The CJTF-HOA comprises 2,000 primarily military personnel. Together with approximately 2,100 permanent personnel stationed in Djibouti, AFRICOM has no other forces of its own. Additional personnel are 'borrowed' by negotiating with and receiving them from the US European Command (EUCOM).

From Camp Lemonnier, the US has access to Djibouti's international airport, from where it can launch manned surveillance aircraft, transport planes, helicopters, and fighter jets. Following a number of accidents, the US moved in 2013 its unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) flights to the more remote location of Chabelley Airfield, about 10 kilometres from Camp Lemonnier.

The 'lily pad' network

When the US returned to Africa at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, its approach was to have a light footprint on the continent. In addition to Camp Lemonnier, the US armed forces have access to a number of 'lily pads', as they are euphemistically called, across the continent. These military installations, referred to by the Pentagon as cooperative security locations (CSLs), can range from relatively small 'military Shurgards' – stocked with pre-positioned materiel such as tents, satellite equipment, and water – to sites that may have access to an airstrip, launch drones, and in many other aspects resemble a military base. In other words, there are both 'permanent' locations for contingency operations and 'cold' supply depots that are activated in the event of an emergency or in connection with shorter training activities conducted nearby.

The lily pads have little or no permanent US personnel and are often co-located with a host country facility, which means that costly security upgrades are not needed, as the CSLs are already located within restricted facilities. The lily pad strategy is considered both cost-effective and less politically sensitive (both for the host country and the state actor), compared to other alternatives. The network of lily pads also enables faster evacuation of personnel.

The main activities conducted from Camp Lemonnier and the lily pads are short-term special forces deployments and training of African forces. The US is engaged in training activities with 'nearly every country on the African continent'.

Seaborne lily pads and outposts outside the African continent

In addition to the lily pads on land, US warships operating around the coast of Africa can serve as 'seaborne lily pads' for helicopters and patrol craft and participate in at-sea exercises and operations. A clear advantage of using bases outside of Africa is that it avoids reliance on the continent's uneven infrastructure. The US military also has a range of bilateral agreements on the use of twenty-nine international airports in Africa as refuelling centres.

The US has a significant maritime security programme in Africa. For example, the US leads the Combined

Maritime Forces (CMF), a 33-nation naval partnership that conducts maritime security operations in, among other places, the Gulf of Aden. The US conducts annual exercises, such as Phoenix Express, an annual exercise to promote national and regional security in northeastern Africa, and Obangame Express, an at-sea exercise to increase maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea and the region around it.

Safeguarding maritime security is an underlying strategic interest for the seaborne lily pads and at-sea exercises and operations. An example of such an interest is ensuring the oil trade from the Gulf of Guinea. Until a few years ago, the US was one of the African oil industry's primary export markets. Even though US imports from the African oil industry have fallen in recent years as domestic supply has increased, West African oil remains strategically important for US policymakers. The Gulf of Guinea crude is of high quality and provides an alternative to Persian Gulf oil. West Africa is also geographically closer, making transportation less costly than from the Middle East.

Although not geographically African territories, the UK's islands of Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean, and Ascension Island, off the west coast of Africa, serve as US forward operating locations. It is unclear, however, whether these bases are used for missions in Africa. Open sources primarily mention that Diego Garcia has been important for the Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and, most recently, the fight against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

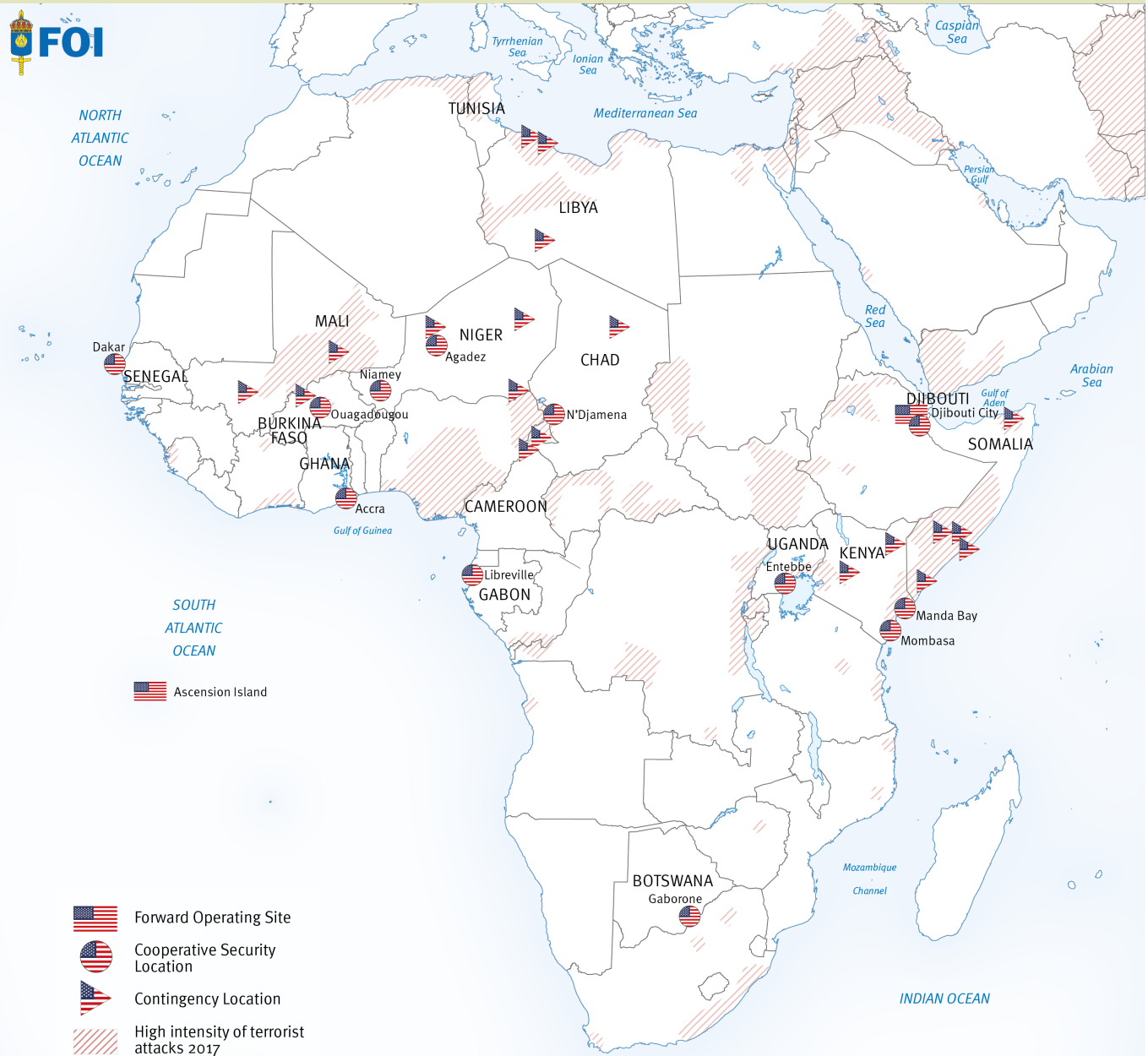
Growing numbers

Following the Department of Defence's update of the overseas basing structure, in 2004, the number of lily pads has risen. This is the case, especially in Africa, after the US ambassador and three other Americans were killed in the attack on the US mission in Benghazi, Libya. Important flexibility is considered to be generated by having many lily pads; for example, they can provide a 'backup alternative' in the event that one site is forced to close.

It is difficult to obtain information about the exact number and location of the lily pads. According to a briefing prepared in 2018 by AFRICOM scientific advisor Peter E. Teil, the list of military detachments includes 34 sites spread across the continent. Other sources estimate that in 2015 the actual number had already reached around 60. To underline exactly how low a profile many of the lily pads actually have, an interviewee playfully hinted, 'If you blink, you'll miss them'.

The exact number of potentially available locations is of less importance, since it indicates neither US combat capability in Africa, nor its commitment to being there. Compared to Europe, where the US military presence is about 65,000 (about half of those are based in Germany) – the US presence in Africa is relatively small. On the African continent – an area bigger than

Assessment of US military bases and installations in Africa



Sources: FOI, based on a 2018 briefing, 'Strategic Posture,' by a US AFRICOM science advisor, Peter E. Teil, published in The Intercept (2018); Global Terrorism Database (2018.)

China, India, the contiguous US and most of Europe combined – the US has 7,200 military personnel on any given day, according to the commander of AFRICOM, General Thomas Waldhauser. The highest concentrations are in Djibouti (roughly 4,000), Niger (roughly 800), and Somalia (roughly 500).

Drones gaining ground in the US fight against terrorism

Lately, the US has increased its use of UAVs on the African continent. In addition to the surveillance drones launched from Niger and, since 2007, from Djibouti, open sources point to Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Tunisia

(Bizerte Airbase, in Sidi Ahmed), and Uganda as possible drone sites .

Kinetic drones – in other words, drones that can undertake armed attacks – are operated from two African countries: Djibouti (Chabelley Airfield) and Niger (Niamey and Agadez Air Base 201). Drones launched from Djibouti target VEOs in Yemen and Somalia. The Agadez drone base, which is expected to become operational in 2019, will target VEOs in Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Nigeria. Libya and Somalia are the only two countries in Africa where the US has authorised the launch of deadly kinetic drone

strikes. The strikes against targets in northern Libya are conducted from Sicily (from where they cannot reach southern Libya).

POWER PROJECTION

For decades, the US could generally deploy its forces when and where it wanted. Its military bases and installations around the world, including Africa, have helped to sustain a capability for global reach and power projection. That this continues to be its aim is indicated by a summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. To achieve the aim, allies and security partners from around the world are sought, since they provide access to critical regions. This in turn supports the widespread basing and logistics system that reinforces US global reach. Although Africa is less prominent in strategic planning compared to Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, it is nevertheless a part of this capability, one that has the projection of power as its main underlying rationale.

FROM COUNTER-TERRORISM TO GREAT POWER ECONOMIC COMPETITION

In December 2018, President Trump signed the US strategy toward Africa. The main tenets of the strategy are to advance commerce with nations in the region, counter the threat of violent extremism, and ensure that US aid to Africa is efficient and effective. Safeguarding economic opportunities on the continent has a national security aspect, because of the increasing economic influence of China and Russia. According to the US National Security Advisor, John Bolton: '[China and Russia] are deliberately and aggressively targeting their investments in the region to gain a competitive advantage over the United States'.

The US strategy towards Africa is in line with the priorities outlined in the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, which emphasize the rise of China and Russia as key competitors.

AFRICOM's 2019 posture statement raised concerns that African countries, which can access financing through China's state-owned banks, often commit to contracts that can lead to debt-equity swap arrangements when debt obligations are unfulfilled. For example, there is a fear that the Djibouti government's 1.2 billion USD debt to the Chinese may eventually force them to hand over the running of the port to the Chinese, which in turn could restrict US access both to the African continent and to the Middle East.

Russia is also seen as a growing challenge. By employing oligarch-funded, quasi-mercenary military advisors, particularly in countries where leaders seek unchallenged autocratic rule, Russian interests gain access to natural

resources on favourable terms. Russia also garners additional support at the United Nations and gains more customers for its military arms sales.

In national security advisor Bolton's opinion, '... the predatory practices pursued by China and Russia stunt economic growth in Africa; threaten the financial independence of African nations; inhibit opportunities for US investment; interfere with US military operations; and pose a significant threat to US national security interests'.

In addition, AFRICOM has observed the increased engagement of non-traditional security actors, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, seeing both challenges and opportunities to its mission.

In sum, both of the recently updated US strategies demonstrate a shift from counter-terrorism back to great power competition.

A FUTURE DRAWDOWN

The death of four US servicemen in the 2017 Tongo Tongo ambush in Niger – the largest number of US military losses in Africa since the 'Black Hawk Down' incident in Somalia, in 1993 – spurred a major political debate over US military activities on the continent and placed the Trump administration at a critical crossroads. The debate made it clear that the American public would not accept casualties on African soil, not even for the fight against terrorism.

Following this debate, in November 2018, the Pentagon announced a drawdown in the forces deployed in Africa, about 7,200 in number, which would be reduced by approximately 10 per cent over the next few years. The cut would leave activities in several countries (Somalia, Djibouti, and Libya), largely untouched. In other parts of the region, including West Africa, the emphasis will shift from tactical assistance to advising, assisting, liaising, and intelligence-sharing. Drones will increasingly replace US boots on the ground, while those troops who do remain will instead be used to support the Pentagon's increased focus on countering threats from China and Russia.

Africa has always been a region with a low priority for US foreign policy, regardless of the administration in power. The plans for a drawdown are also in line with the Trump administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy, which focuses on great-power economic competition with China and Russia, rather than fighting terrorists. However, the Pentagon's move comes as China and Russia look to increase their influence in Africa.

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