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BY BINOY KAMPMARK

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Imperial Footprints in Africa: The Dismal Role of AFRICOM



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No power in history has exercised such global reach. With brutal immediacy, forces from the United States may be dispatched and deployed within hours to combat any designated adversary. From its webbed network of bases official, semi-official and undeclared, Washington's imperium can exert heft in a number of military domains with a ruthlessness the envy of any of its rivals.

In the aftermath of NATO's attack and destabilisation of Libya in 2011, France and the United States entrenched their military involvement across the Sahel. The French focused on creating G-5 Sahel spanning Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger,

including expanding or opening new bases in Gao, Mali; N'Djamena, Chad; Niamey, Niger; and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

The United States, for its part, negotiated an agreement with the government of Niger in 2015 to permit the construction of a drone base in Agadez, eventually valued at \$100 million but slated to have an annual price tag of almost \$30 million. While initially valued at \$50 million with the sole purpose of operating surveillance drones, the greedy proved to be in the ascendancy, not only increasing the cost of building the base, but adding a lethal facility to it in the form of MQ-9 Reaper drones. According to US Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa spokesperson Richard Komurek, the building effort behind the base was one of the largest undertaken by US Air Force personnel.

Such a mighty effort took place under the aegis of Africa Command (AFRICOM). When it came into existence in 2007, it was described much as you would a toy miniature. The body's spokesman, Pat Barnes, explained it as follows: "When AFRICOM was stood up, one of the key components of it standing up was we would have something called a very small footprint." Why not a bigger one? "Given the history and colonialism and things, you maybe wouldn't want to have a large standing presence on the continent." Sharp as a tack, was old Barnes.

AFRICOM's website provides its own rambling explanation for the US presence. "The creation of US African Command has advanced [a vision of working with African partners for a secure, stable and prosperous Africa] through a whole-of-government, partner-centric lens building partner capacity, disrupting violent extremists, and responding to crises." Raking through the clutter, and one finds the hegemon's agenda laid bare: Africa, through clients and proxies (partner-centric, no less), needs policing and a roving eye.

Such a milky credulous tone has not convinced various regional organisations on the continent. In 2016, the African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC) could only note its concern about "the existence of foreign military bases and establishment of new ones in some African countries, coupled with the inability of the Member States concerned to effectively monitor the movement of weapons to and from these foreign military bases."

To date, little has been done to address such concerns. Washington continues to insist that its presence is not only justified but comparatively small relative to other global engagements. Imperial – but on the petite side. The US military presence is casually described by officials in the Pentagon as minor but relevant. It is only remarked upon in passing at various press conferences and the odd publication. An example of the latter

was a piece covering the exploits of the National Guard in its flagship publication in September 2022. There, we were told of members of the Kentucky Army National Guard and its presence in the Republic of Djibouti. There are also Guard soldiers from Virginia and Tennessee.

The bulk of the thousand-member task force, however, was from Virginia, constituted by the 116th Infantry Brigade Combat team. Virginia Army Guard Lt. Col. Jim Tierney described the scope of the US deployment: “We provide to and are prepared to support pretty much most of Sub-Saharan Africa.”

Tierney’s language is instructive, an amalgam of paternalism, messianic charity and haughty self-confidence. The US imperium is not oppressive and governed by dictates but instructive and popular through example; not a traditional occupier of native savages but a large gift store with a seemingly endless supply. “Our experiences here are that the host countries that we work with really look to the United States for opportunities to partner and train.” *They* want us here – or so that false logic goes.

Behind such training, and opportunities, the violence, the bodies, the reminders of undeclared conflicts to which the US adds its daily complement, are plentiful. Across the African Sahel, US commandos have been paying with their lives even as they have taken those of others. Aerial attacks are regularly staged. Such strivings, even by the Pentagon’s own assessment, have been to little avail.

In language typical of a military accountant keen on balancing ungainly books, AFRICOM even euphemises civilian killings through its “Civilian Casualty Report” scheme. Triumphantly, it recently announced that, “In the latest quarterly civilian casualty assessment report ending Jun. 30, 2023, US Africa Command received no new reports of civilian casualties and there were no open reports carried over from previous partners.” What a relief it must be for the armchair analysts to itemise, catalogue, and examine the consequences of such a small strategic footprint.

Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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