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Obama's Scramble for Africa

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

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Here's an odd question: Is it possible that the U.S. military is present in more countries and more places now than at the height of the Cold War? It's true that the U.S. is reducing its forces and giant bases in Europe and that its troops are out of Iraq (except for that huge, militarized [embassy](#) in Baghdad). On the other hand, there's that massive [ground](#), air, and naval [build-up](#) in the Persian Gulf, the Obama administration's widely publicized "[pivot](#)" to Asia (including [troops](#) and ships), those new [drone bases](#) in the [eastern Indian Ocean](#) region, some movement back into Latin America (including a [new base](#) in Chile), and don't forget Africa, where less than a decade ago, the U.S. had almost no military presence at all. Now, as TomDispatch Associate Editor Nick Turse writes in the latest in his "[changing face of empire](#)" series, U.S. special operations forces, regular troops, private contractors, and drones are spreading across the continent with remarkable (if little noticed) rapidity.

Putting together the pieces on Africa isn't easy. For instance, only the other day it was [revealed](#) that three U.S. Army commandos in a Toyota Land Cruiser had skidded off a bridge in Mali in April. They died, all three, along with three women identified as "Moroccan prostitutes." This is how we know that U.S. special operations forces were operating in chaotic, previously democratic Mali after a coup by a [U.S.-trained captain](#) accelerated the unraveling of the country, leading more recently to its virtual dismemberment by Tuareg rebels and Islamist insurgents. Consider this a sample of what Nick Turse calls the U.S. military's "scramble for Africa" in a seamy, secretive nutshell.

So here's another question: Who decided in 2007 that a [U.S. Africa Command](#) should be set up to begin a process of turning that continent into a web of U.S. bases and other operations? Who decided that every Islamist rebel group in Africa, no matter how local or locally focused, was a threat to the U.S., calling for a military response? Certainly not the American people, who know nothing about this, who were never asked if expanding the U.S. global military mission to Africa was something they favored, who never heard the slightest debate, or even a single peep from Washington on the subject. (To catch Timothy MacBain's latest Tomcast audio interview in which Turse discusses the Pentagon's shadowy, but fast-expanding mission in Africa, click [here](#) or download it to your iPod [here](#).) *Tom*

Obama's Scramble for Africa

Secret Wars, Secret Bases, and the Pentagon's "New Spice Route" in Africa

By Nick Turse

They call it the New Spice Route, an homage to the medieval trade network that connected Europe, Africa, and Asia, even if today's "spice road" has nothing to do with cinnamon, cloves, or silks. Instead, it's a superpower's superhighway, on which trucks and ships shuttle fuel, food, and military equipment through a growing maritime and ground transportation infrastructure to a network of supply depots, tiny camps, and airfields meant to service a fast-growing U.S. military presence in Africa.

Few in the U.S. know about this superhighway, or about the dozens of training missions and joint military exercises being carried out in nations that most Americans couldn't locate on a map. Even fewer have any idea that military officials are invoking the names of Marco Polo and the Queen of Sheba as they build a bigger military footprint in Africa. It's all happening in the shadows of what in a previous imperial age was known as "the Dark Continent."

In East African ports, huge metal shipping containers arrive with the everyday necessities for a military on the make. They're then loaded onto trucks that set off down rutted roads toward dusty bases and distant outposts.

On the highway from Djibouti to Ethiopia, for example, one can see the bare outlines of this shadow war at the truck stops where local drivers take a break from their long-haul routes. The same is true in other African countries. The nodes of the network tell part of the story: Manda Bay, Garissa, and Mombasa in Kenya; Kampala and Entebbe in Uganda; Bangui and Djema in the Central African Republic; Nzara in South Sudan; Dire Dawa in Ethiopia; and the Pentagon's showpiece African base, Camp Lemonnier, in Djibouti on the coast of the Gulf of Aden, among others.

According to Pat Barnes, a spokesman for U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), Camp Lemonnier serves as the only official U.S. base on the continent. "There are more than 2,000 U.S. personnel stationed there," he told TomDispatch recently by email. "The primary AFRICOM organization at Camp Lemonnier is Combined Joint Task Force — Horn of Africa

(CJTF-HOA). CJTF-HOA's efforts are focused in East Africa and they work with partner nations to assist them in strengthening their defense capabilities."

Barnes also noted that Department of Defense personnel are assigned to U.S. embassies across Africa, including 21 individual Offices of Security Cooperation responsible for facilitating military-to-military activities with "partner nations." He characterized the forces involved as small teams carrying out pinpoint missions. Barnes did admit that in "several locations in Africa, AFRICOM has a small and temporary presence of personnel. In all cases, these military personnel are guests within host-nation facilities, and work alongside or coordinate with host-nation personnel."

Shadow Wars

In 2003, when CJTF-HOA was [first set up](#) there, it was indeed true that the only major U.S. outpost in Africa was Camp Lemonnier. In the ensuing years, in quiet and largely unnoticed ways, the Pentagon and the CIA have been spreading their forces across the continent. Today — official designations aside — the U.S. maintains a surprising number of bases in Africa. And "strengthening" African armies turns out to be a truly elastic rubric for what's going on.

Under President Obama, in fact, operations in Africa have accelerated far beyond the more limited interventions of the Bush years: last year's war in Libya; a regional drone campaign with missions run out of airports and bases in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and the Indian Ocean archipelago nation of Seychelles; a flotilla of 30 ships in that ocean supporting regional operations; a multi-pronged military and CIA campaign against militants in Somalia, including intelligence operations, training for Somali agents, a secret prison, helicopter attacks, and U.S. commando raids; a massive influx of cash for counterterrorism operations across East Africa; a possible old-fashioned air war, carried out on the sly in the region using manned aircraft; tens of millions of dollars in arms for allied mercenaries and African troops; and a special ops expeditionary force (bolstered by State Department experts) dispatched to help capture or kill Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony and his senior commanders. And this only begins to scratch the surface of Washington's fast-expanding plans and activities in the region.

To support these mushrooming missions, near-constant training operations, and alliance-building joint exercises, outposts of all sorts are sprouting continent-wide, connected by a sprawling shadow logistics network. Most American bases in Africa are still small and austere, but growing ever larger and more permanent in appearance. For example, photographs from last year of Ethiopia's Camp Gilbert, examined by TomDispatch, show a base filled with air-conditioned tents, metal shipping containers, and 55-gallon drums and other gear strapped to pallets, but also recreation facilities with TVs and videogames, and a well-appointed gym filled with stationary bikes, free weights, and other equipment.

Continental Drift

After 9/11, the U.S. military moved into three major regions in significant ways: South Asia (primarily Afghanistan), the Middle East (primarily Iraq), and the Horn of Africa. Today, the

U.S. is drawing down in Afghanistan and has largely left Iraq. Africa, however, remains a growth opportunity for the Pentagon.

The U.S. is now involved, directly and by proxy, in military and surveillance operations against an expanding list of regional enemies. They include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in North Africa; the Islamist movement Boko Haram in Nigeria; possible [al-Qaeda-linked militants](#) in post-Gadhafi Libya; Joseph Kony's murderous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the Central African Republic, Congo, and South Sudan; Mali's Islamist [Rebels of the Ansar Dine, al-Shabaab](#) in Somalia; and guerrillas from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula across the Gulf of Aden in Yemen.

A recent [investigation](#) by the *Washington Post* revealed that contractor-operated surveillance aircraft based out of Entebbe, Uganda, are scouring the territory used by Kony's LRA at the Pentagon's behest, and that 100 to 200 U.S. commandos share a base with the Kenyan military at Manda Bay. Additionally, U.S. drones are being flown out of Arba Minch airport in Ethiopia and from the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean, while [drones](#) and [F-15 fighter-bombers](#) have been operating out of Camp Lemonnier as part of the shadow wars being waged by the U.S. military and the CIA in Yemen and Somalia. Surveillance planes used for spy missions over Mali, Mauritania, and the Sahara desert are also flying missions from Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, and plans are reportedly in the works for a similar base in the newborn nation of South Sudan.

U.S. special operations forces are stationed at a string of even more shadowy forward operating posts on the continent, [including](#) one in Djema in the Central Africa Republic and others in Nzara in South Sudan and Dungu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The U.S. also has had [troops deployed](#) in Mali, despite having officially suspended military relations with that country following a coup.

According to research by TomDispatch, the U.S. Navy also has a forward operating location, manned mostly by Seabees, Civil Affairs personnel, and force-protection troops, known as Camp Gilbert in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. U.S. military documents indicate that there may be other even lower-profile U.S. facilities in the country. In addition to Camp Lemonnier, the U.S. military also maintains another hole-and-corner outpost in Djibouti — a Navy port facility that lacks even a name. AFRICOM did not respond to requests for further information on these posts before this article went to press.

Additionally, U.S. Special Operations Forces are [engaged in missions](#) against the Lord's Resistance Army from a rugged camp in Obo in the Central African Republic, but little is said about that base either. "U.S. military personnel working with regional militaries in the hunt for Joseph Kony are guests of the African security forces comprising the regional counter-LRA effort," Barnes told me. "Specifically in Obo, the troops live in a small camp and work with partner nation troops at a Ugandan facility that operates at the invitation of the government of the Central African Republic."

And that's still just part of the story. U.S. troops are also working at bases inside Uganda. Earlier this year, elite Force Recon Marines from the Special Purpose Marine Air

Ground Task Force 12 (SPMAGTF-12) trained soldiers from the Uganda People's Defense Force, which not only runs missions in the Central African Republic, but also acts as a proxy force for the U.S. in Somalia in the battle against the Islamist militants known as al-Shabaab. They now supply the majority of the troops to the African Union Mission protecting the U.S.-supported government in the Somali capital, Mogadishu.

In the spring, Marines from SPMAGTF-12 also trained soldiers from the Burundi National Defense Force (BNDF), the second-largest contingent in Somalia. [In April and May](#), members of Task Force Raptor, 3rd Squadron, 124th Cavalry Regiment, of the Texas National Guard took part in a training mission with the BNDF in Mudubugu, Burundi.

In February, SPMAGTF-12 sent trainers to Djibouti to work with an elite local army unit, while other Marines traveled to Liberia to focus on teaching riot-control techniques to Liberia's military as part of what is otherwise a State Department-directed effort to rebuild that force.

In addition, the U.S. is conducting counterterrorism training and equipping militaries in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, and Tunisia. AFRICOM also has 14 major joint-training exercises planned for 2012, including operations in Morocco, Cameroon, Gabon, Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho, Senegal, and Nigeria.

The size of U.S. forces conducting these joint exercises and training missions fluctuates, but Barnes told me that, "on an average basis, there are approximately 5,000 U.S. Military and DoD personnel working across the continent" at any one time. Next year, even more American troops are likely to be on hand as units from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, known as the "[Dagger Brigade](#)," are scheduled to deploy to the region. The roughly [3,000 soldiers](#) in the brigade will be involved in, among other activities, training missions while acquiring regional expertise. "Special Forces have a particular capability in this area, but not the capacity to fulfill the demand; and we think we will be able to fulfill the demand by using conventional forces," Colonel Andrew Dennis told a reporter about the deployment.

Air Africa

Last month, the *Washington Post* [revealed](#) that, since at least 2009, the "practice of hiring private companies to spy on huge expanses of African territory... has been a cornerstone of the U.S. military's secret activities on the continent." Dubbed Tusker Sand, the project consists of contractors flying from Entebbe airport in Uganda and a handful of other airfields. They pilot turbo-prop planes that look innocuous but are packed with sophisticated surveillance gear.

America's mercenary spies in Africa are, however, just part of the story.

While the Pentagon canceled an analogous drone surveillance program dubbed Tusker Wing, it has spent millions of dollars to upgrade the civilian airport at [Arba Minch, Ethiopia](#), to enable drone missions to be flown from it. Infrastructure to support such operations has been relatively cheap and easy to construct, but a much more daunting problem looms — one intimately connected to the New Spice Route.

"Marco Polo wasn't just an explorer," Army planner Chris Zahner [explained](#) at a conference in Djibouti last year. "[H]e was also a logistician developing logistics nodes along the Silk Road. Now let's do something similar where the Queen of Sheba traveled." Paeans to bygone luminaries aside, the reasons for pouring resources into sea and ground supply networks have less to do with history than with Africa's airport infrastructure.

Of the 3,300 airfields on the continent identified in a National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency review, the Air Force has surveyed only 303 of them and just 158 of those surveys are current. Of those airfields that have been checked out, half won't support the weight of the C-130 cargo planes that the U.S. military leans heavily on to transport troops and materiel. These limitations were driven home during Natural Fire 2010, one of that year's joint training exercises hosted by AFRICOM. When C-130s were unable to use an airfield in Gulu, Uganda, an extra \$3 million was spent instead to send in Chinook helicopters.

In addition, diplomatic clearances and airfield restrictions on U.S. military aircraft cost the Pentagon time and money, while often raising local suspicion and ire. In a recent article in the military trade publication *Army Sustainment*, Air Force Major Joseph Gaddis touts an emerging solution: outsourcing. The concept was tested last year, during another AFRICOM training operation, Atlas Drop 2011.

"Instead of using military airlift to move equipment to and from the exercise, planners used commercial freight vendors," writes Gaddis. "This provided exercise participants with door-to-door delivery service and eliminated the need for extra personnel to channel the equipment through freight and customs areas." Using mercenary cargo carriers to skirt diplomatic clearance issues and move cargo to airports that can't support U.S. C-130s is, however, just one avenue the Pentagon is pursuing to support its expanding operations in Africa.

Another is construction.

The Great Build-Up

Military contracting documents reveal plans for an investment of up to \$180 million or more in construction at Camp Lemonnier alone. Chief among the projects will be the laying of 54,500 square meters of taxiways "to support medium-load aircraft" and the construction of a 185,000 square meter Combat Aircraft Loading Area. In addition, plans are in the works to erect modular maintenance structures, hangers, and ammunition storage facilities, all needed for an expanding set of secret wars in Africa.

Other contracting documents suggest that, in the years to come, the Pentagon will be investing up to \$50 million in new projects at that base, Kenya's Camp Simba, and additional unspecified locations in Africa. Still other solicitation materials suggest future military construction in Egypt, where the Pentagon already maintains a [medical research facility](#), and still more work in Djibouti.

No less telling are contracting documents indicating a coming influx of "emergency troop housing" at Camp Lemonnier, including almost 300 additional [Containerized Living Units](#) (CLUs), stackable, air-conditioned living quarters, as well as latrines and laundry facilities.

Military documents also indicate that a nearly \$450,000 exercise facility was installed at the U.S. base in Entebbe, Uganda, last year. All of this indicates that, for the Pentagon, its African build-up has only begun.

The Scramble for Africa

In a [recent speech](#) in Arlington, Virginia, AFRICOM Commander General Carter Ham explained the reasoning behind U.S. operations on the continent: "The absolute imperative for the United States military [is] to protect America, Americans, and American interests; in our case, in my case, [to] protect us from threats that may emerge from the African continent." As an example, Ham named the Somali-based al-Shabaab as a prime threat. "Why do we care about that?" he asked rhetorically. "Well, al-Qaeda is a global enterprise... we think they very clearly do present, as an al-Qaeda affiliate... a threat to America and Americans."

Fighting *them* over there, so we don't need to fight *them* here has been a core tenet of American foreign policy for decades, especially since 9/11. But trying to apply military solutions to complex political and social problems has regularly led to unforeseen consequences. For example, last year's U.S.-supported war in Libya resulted in masses of well-armed Tuareg mercenaries, who had been fighting for Libyan autocrat Muammar Gadhafi, heading back to Mali where they helped destabilize that country. So far, the result has been a military coup by an [American-trained](#) officer; a takeover of some areas by Tuareg fighters of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, who had previously raided Libyan arms depots; and other parts of the country being seized by the irregulars of Ansar Dine, the latest al-Qaeda "affiliate" on the American radar. One military intervention, in other words, led to three major instances of blowback in a neighboring country in just a year.

With the Obama administration clearly engaged in a twenty-first century scramble for Africa, the possibility of successive waves of overlapping blowback grows exponentially. Mali may only be the beginning and there's no telling how any of it will end. In the meantime, keep your eye on Africa. The U.S. military is going to make news there for years to come.