AFRICOM and the Libya War

Countering Chinese Influence in Africa

By Emile Schepers
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U.S. participation in the war in Libya appears to be coordinated out of a former French Foreign Legion base in Djibouti, a tiny country of a half million souls at the very tip of the Horn of Africa. This is the forward base of AFRICOM, the unified command for African action set up in 2007 by former President George W. Bush and his Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who has continued in that post under President Barack Obama. Why the United States has set up such a special Africa operation, and what this portends, bears examination.

The original reason given for the creation of AFRICOM, with its main base not in Africa but in Stuttgart, Germany, was to coordinate anti-terrorism efforts in countries such as Somalia, where the collapse of organized government had led to a very unstable and dangerous situation. But although some African countries were happy to take military hardware from the United States, many of them, including especially South Africa, expressed qualms.

Other than the anti-terrorism motive, commentators have raised the issue of oil. Oil industry analysts predict that by the year 2015, the United States will be getting 25 percent of its imported oil from African sources. The biggest oil producers in Africa are Libya, with 47 billion barrels in proved reserves (and maybe lots more yet undiscovered), Nigeria (37.5 billion barrels), Angola (13.5 billion barrels), Algeria (13.4 billion barrels) and the Sudan (6.8 billion barrels). Smaller African countries, including Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, have large-scale oil production proportional to their size. Writing in 2008, Antonia Juhasz posits an oil politics motive for the creation of AFRICOM. “The concern is that, as it has in Iraq, a larger US military presence in Africa will strain the overburdened military while increasing internal hostilities, regional instability and anger at the United States,” he said, adding, “The ultimate objective of the two efforts is the same: securing big oil’s access to the region’s oil.”

Libya, Nigeria, Angola and Algeria are all member states of OPEC, the cartel of oil producing countries, whose joint actions in setting production quotas have a profound effect on the price of oil. Numerous U.S. oil companies are invested in the African oil-producing countries, including Libya. Even though leader Moammar Gadaffi’s government nationalized a lot of foreign oil facilities when it took power from King Idris in 1969, some major foreign, including U.S., oil companies have investments in Libya, in joint operations with the Libyan state. These include Marathon, Hess, Conoco, Gulf, Occidental, BP, Repasol (Spain), Eni (Italy) and Total (France) among others.

In 2009, Gadaffi started suggesting that he might nationalize the remaining foreign oil assets in Libya (AFRICOM had already been set up by that time), and he has renewed that threat since the NATO intervention began last week. But right now sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the European Union have reduced Libya's oil exports to a trickle, resulting in a worldwide jump in fuel prices. A drastic intervention leading to the removal of Gadaffi and greater freedom of operation for these oil companies might well be part of the motive for the intervention, especially on the part of major European Union countries dependent on Libya for their energy needs.

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Another reason given by some analysts for the creation of AFRICOM is as a counter to Chinese commercial advances in Africa. AFRICOM is mainly a military entity, but includes civil operations that are supposed to win the hearts and minds of Africans through development projects.

Carmel Davis, Chairman of Roger Holdings, Inc., raised this issue in a 2008 paper. To Davis, countering Chinese influence in Africa is good, because Chinese companies tend not to interfere with the existing governments of African countries in which they invest. Davis feels that this is bad; he'd rather use American commerce to bring about political changes in African countries so that they can develop in a democratic capitalist direction. Though Davis' company seems to be involved with restaurants and not petroleum, he may be onto something when he says, "The experience of China may resonate with African leaders" because of the way China has achieved massive growth without loss of power by the ruling Communist Party. Further "What China offers may also resonate: Instead of the conditionalities of aid provided by the Bretton Woods organizations [the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank] and Western governments influenced by NGOs and public opinion, China offers a market-oriented relationship with willing buyers who explicitly eschew conditionality."

In plain English, burgeoning trade with China may be seen by Africans as meeting economic needs without political interference under the pretext of "humanitarian intervention" or not. And China buys lots of African oil.