

Asia Pivot Declared, US Army Eyes Africa

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U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Africa in June-July was widely seen as evidence of the White House's broader foreign policy objectives which have included an expansion of U.S. military operations across Africa. With the forces leaving Afghanistan, the Army is looking for new missions around the world. «*As we reduce the rotational requirement to combat areas, we can use these forces to great effect in Africa*», Gen. David M. Rodriguez, the head of the Africa Command, told Congress [this year](#)... Washington has publicly proclaimed a «pivot to Asia,» a «rebalancing» of its military resources eastward, however, the Pentagon is increasingly engaged in shadowy operations elsewhere, for instance, in Africa. Officials call it «light footprint» or «small footprint» saying the military is engaged in small-scale operations there. But picking up odds and ends and piecing them together gives ground to conjecture that the continent is seen as the battlefield of tomorrow.

The «pivot» toward Asia-Pacific substantiated by the putative threat posed by a rising China will justify the need and expenditure to have strong Navy and Air Force. Large-scale Army commitment is hard to imagine in the Asia -Pacific region but expanding the «global war on terrorism» into the heart of Africa allows this service to have a pivot of its own. With combat boots on the ground, the formally declared purpose is to provide training. At that, the strike capabilities are on the rise and upgrading African militaries will no doubt foster opportunities to sell US-manufactured weapons, a benefit for U.S. defense industry.

Expanding presence

The Pentagon has begun expanding its main base on the continent and investing in air facilities, flight services and telecommunications as the U.S. military deepens its footprint in the region. Base construction, security cooperation engagements, training exercises, advisory deployments, special operations missions and a growing logistics network – all signs are there to provide undeniable evidence of expansion. The troops strength is estimated to be around 5 thousand. The forces are scattered across the continent in the places like Djibouti, the Central African Republic and now – Niger. There formal reason is countering extremists, the informal is obvious – boosting US clout as China's presence is on the rise.

According to the Washington Post, over the past two years, the Pentagon has become embroiled in conflicts in Libya, Somalia, Mali and the Central African Republic. Meantime, the Air Force is setting up a fourth African drone base, while Navy warships are increasing their missions along the coastlines of East and [West Africa](#).

In a written statement provided to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Army Gen. David M. Rodriguez, the commander of Africa Command, estimated that the U.S. military needs to

increase its intelligence-gathering and spying missions in Africa by nearly 15-fold. *«I believe additional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities are necessary to protect American interests and assist our close allies and partners», he wrote in the statement, which was released during his confirmation hearing in February. «The recent crises in North Africa demonstrate the volatility of the African security environment».* Rodriguez said the Africa Command needs additional drones, other surveillance aircraft and more satellite imagery adding that it currently receives only half of its «stated need» for North Africa and only 7 percent of its total «requirements» for the [entire continent](#).

United States Army, Africa (USARAF) is part of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), a unified combatant command with headquarters in Caserna Elderle, Vicenza, Italy. It had been called SETAF – South European Task Force – till December 2008. The change of name marked the end of the airborne chapter of the unit’s history and the beginning of its new role as the Army component of AFRICOM. The Army is supported by U.S. warships combating piracy off both East and West Africa, which have become increasingly frequent visitors to local ports. The Navy maintains a forward operating location—manned mostly by Seabees, Civil Affairs personnel, and force-protection troops – known as Camp Gilbert in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. Since 2004, US troops have been stationed at a Kenyan naval base known as Camp Simba at Manda Bay.

Infrastructure

Camp Lemonnier is situated in Djibouti, a tiny country in the Horn of Africa, a sleepy backwater on the coast of the Gulf of Aden sandwiched between northern Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. A former French Foreign Legion base, the facility hosts US Special Forces, strike jets and armed unmanned aerial vehicles. It houses about 4,000 U.S. military personnel (instructors and several hundred SOF) and civilian contractors. The base has provided a staging post for occasional special forces deployments and drone and air attacks. [According](#) to the *LA. Times*, Camp Lemonnier is going through by far the most significant expansion. In September defense officials awarded \$200 million in contracts to revamp the base’s power plants and build a multistory operations center, aircraft hangar, living quarters, gym and other facilities on a sun-scorched 20-acre site next to the tiny country’s only international airport (with which it shares a runway). The projects are part of \$1.2 billion plan over the next 25 years to transform Camp Lemonnier from a makeshift installation into an enduring 600-acre base. As the *L.A. Times* reports, *«the base has quietly evolved into what Pentagon planning documents call «the backbone» of covert missions across Africa and the Arabian Peninsula».*

There are surveillance and special operations outposts in Entebbe, Uganda and Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. Last year, an airfield was revitalized in South Sudan for Special Operations Command, Africa. This February the US announced the establishment of a new drone facility in Niger. More recently, the *New York Times* [noted](#) that the deployment of one Predator drone to Niger had expanded to encompass daily flights by one of two larger, more advanced Reaper remotely piloted aircraft, supported by 120 Air Force personnel. Additionally, the US has flown drones out of the Seychelles Islands and Ethiopia’s Arba Minch Airport. All told, according to Sam Cooks, a liaison officer with the Defense Logistics Agency, the US military now has 29 agreements to use international airports in Africa as [refueling centers](#). The Pentagon has run a regional air campaign using drones and manned aircraft out of airports and bases across the continent including Camp Lemonnier, Arba Minch airport in Ethiopia, Niamey in Niger, and the Seychelles Islands in the

Indian Ocean, while private contractor-operated surveillance aircraft have flown missions out of Entebbe, Uganda. Recently, *Foreign Policy* has reported on the existence of a possible [drone base](#) in Lamu, Kenya. The US has built a sophisticated logistics system, officially known as the AFRICOM Surface Distribution Network. It connects posts in Manda Bay, Garissa, and Mombasa in Kenya, Kampala and Entebbe in Uganda, Dire Dawa in Ethiopia, Ghana's Tema and Senegal's Dakar, as well as crucial port facilities used by the Navy's CTF-53 (Commander, Task Force 53) in Djibouti. The US maintains 10 marine gas and oil bunker locations in eight African nations, [according](#) to the Defense Logistics Agency.

Moving stand-by forces nearer

This October the U.S. deployed 200 Marines to the Naval Air Station at Sigonella, Sicily, which will eventually have a force of 1,000 Marines with the main focus on Libya only 100 miles away, actually a short hop across the Mediterranean. It proves that the US operations in Africa are growing switching from drone strikes against al-Qaida to pinpoint raids by small Special Forces teams, as seen in Somalia and Libya Oct. 5. These raids reflect a U.S. move away from the kind of risk-averse operations the Americans have been mounting with missile-firing drones to on-the-ground [raids](#) against high-value targets.

The Marines moved to Italy from Spain last month are the vanguard of a larger force dubbed Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response. It was established after the Sept. 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, in which U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed. According to U.S. security specialist David Vine, the Pentagon has spent around \$2 billion – and that's just construction costs – «shifting its European center of gravity south from Germany» and transforming Italy «into a launching pad for future wars in Africa, the Middle East and beyond.» Vine estimates there are now totally 13,000 U.S. troops in Italy at Sigonella and some 50 other facilities like Vicenza, a former Italian air force base near Venice, with the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (airborne), a rapid [response force](#).

Intensive training programs launched

Thousands of soldiers are now gearing up for missions in Africa at Fort Riley, Kansas. [According](#) to the New York Times (11), the Army is implementing a program drawing on troops from a 3,500-member brigade of the First Infantry Division to conduct more than 100 missions in Africa over the next year. The missions range from a two-man sniper team in Burundi to 350 soldiers conducting airborne and humanitarian exercises in South Africa. According to the source, the brigade has also sent a 150-member rapid-response force to Djibouti in the Horn of Africa to protect embassies in emergencies, a direct reply to the attack on the United States Mission in Benghazi, Libya, last year, which killed four Americans. Africa Command is the test case for this new Army program of regionally aligned brigades that will eventually extend to all of the Pentagon's commands worldwide, including in Europe and Latin America next year. These forces will be told in advance that their deployments will focus on parts of the world that do not have Army troops assigned to them now — creating a system in which officers and enlisted personnel would develop regional expertise, the New York Times reports.

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Critics in Africa complain Washington's approach to the continent has become increasingly militarized. Counter-terrorism policies live on the edge of international law: SOF raids and

drone strikes raise questions about the international legality of such operations and their long-term impact. In some cases U.S. military engagements in Africa have already caused further instability rather than reducing the risks for international peace and security. The divided and poorly controlled Libya is an example. The extremist groups the US is supposed to fight thrive in weak and poorly governed countries, which badly need institution building, good governance and job creation. Building up well-trained and accountable African militaries is only part of the solution. The lessons learned from Somalia, Libya, Mali, the CAR and many others, like the ongoing low-intensity war against Boko Harum in Nigeria, are all important to be learnt. Besides, stiff competition for strategic resources is the specific feature of the situation in Africa. So it's not only about fighting terrorist groups. The mission of US military is to drive rivals out of the continent or at least to limit their access to the resources and political clout. No matter all the talks going on about the times of budget constraints and sequester, the US military enhances its capability to provide global presence and carry out missions in faraway corners of the globe like Africa.

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