

Hidden Agenda behind America's War on Africa: Containing China by "Fighting Al-Qaeda"

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Harnessing Asia's growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests. Hillary Clinton

France's military intervention into Mali may at first glance appear to have little to do with the U.S. "pivot" to Asia. But as a French mission supposedly meant to bolster a U.N. sanctioned and African-led intervention has gone from ["a question of weeks"](#) to ["the total re-conquest of Mali,"](#) what may have begun as a French affair has now become a Western intervention. And this in turn has drawn wider strategic interests into the conflict. Strategic interests, it is becoming clearer, shaped by the imperatives of the U.S. Asia pivot.

Widening Intervention

The geopolitical posturing over the crisis in Mali, coming as France's intervention [fans out across the region](#), is no more evident than in the public statements coming from both London and Washington.

As British Prime Minister David Cameron [declared](#), the crisis in Mali "will require a response that is about years, even decades, rather than months." Backing up such bluster, Britain has reportedly joined France in dispatching [special commando teams](#) to Mali, in addition to [surveillance drones](#).

In Washington, the talk of a long war to be waged across the entire Sahel region of Africa has also begun. As one U.S. official speaking on the Western intervention into Mali [warned Monday](#), "It is going to take a long time and time means that it could take several years."

Such remarks mirror those made by outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"This is going to be a very serious, ongoing threat because if you look at the size of northern Mali, if you look at the topography — it's not only desert, it's caves," Clinton [remarked](#). "Sounds reminiscent. We are in for a struggle. But it is a necessary struggle. We cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe haven."

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the safe haven refrain is also pulsating through the corridors of the Pentagon.

"Some top Pentagon officials and military officers warn that without more aggressive U.S. action," the Times [reports](#), "Mali could become a haven for extremists, akin to Afghanistan before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001."

And as the American public is prepped for the opening of a new front in the unending “war on terror,” U.S. intervention accelerates.

As the *Washington Post* [reports](#), the U.S. is now offering “aerial refueling” to French warplanes, along with “planes to transport soldiers from other African nations.”

U.S. intelligence officials, meanwhile, have [reportedly](#) begun drawing up plans to provide “data to help French warplanes locate and attack militant targets.” This, as Pentagon hawks continue to push for the use of [drone strikes](#).

In fact, the *New York Times* [reports](#) the U.S. has begun “preparing plans to establish a drone base in northwest Africa to increase unarmed surveillance missions on the local affiliate of Al Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups.”

The paper, which notes the base’s likely location to be in Niger, reports the Pentagon has “not ruled out conducting missile strikes at some point if the threat worsens.”

As one American official told the *Times*, the decision to establish a permanent drone base in northern Africa “is directly related to the Mali mission, but it could also give Africom [the U.S. Military’s Africa Command] a more enduring presence.”

The very notion, though, of an al-Qaeda threat in northern Mali so dire as to require Western intervention and a permanent U.S. presence is anything but well-defined. As Blake Hounshell, managing editor of *Foreign Policy*, [notes](#): “it’s by no means clear what threat al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb...poses to the United States.”

Indeed, the very notion of al-Qaeda in Mali posing a threat to the West is predicated on the oft-repeated safe haven refrain. That is, the belief that without foreign intervention al-Qaeda will use northern Mali as a staging ground to launch attacks within Western countries.

“But,” as Stephen Walt [questions](#), “is there any real evidence that the extremists in Mali are plotting to attack France, the United States, or anyone else? Even if they were, is there good evidence that they have the will and the skill to carry out such activities, or that the consequences of a successful attack would be greater than the costs of French (and other) efforts to root them out? And is it possible that intervention in Mali might actually focus the extremists’ attention on the intervenors, instead of the central government?”

The answer to the latter question appears quite clear in the wake of the bloody hostage crisis in neighboring Algeria. Although, as French President François Hollande claimed, the retaliation for the French intervention merely [provided](#) “further evidence that my decision to intervene in Mali was justified.”

Interventions, we see, are predicated upon a rather self-fulfilling logic. For in a seemingly endless loop, interventions inevitably seem to create additional problems and crises that are then posited as both justifying the initial intervention, as well yet further interventions. In short, intervention begets intervention.

The Useful Menace

But while Western leaders dig deep to reassure themselves of the justness of their latest intervention, doubts are nonetheless increasing over the competence of the Malian army. As the *New York Times* [reports](#), despite extensive U.S. training, the Malian army has proven to

be “a weak, dysfunctional force that is as much a cause of Mali’s crisis as a potential part of the solution.”

The Western “hope” in Mali, then, as the *Economist* [argues](#), “is to kill as many as possible of the most fanatical jihadists, and to garrison the northern towns with soldiers from Mali and its neighbours, before the insurgents can regroup or bring in recruits.”

With such “hope” one understands the talk of a struggle to be measured in decades.

Indeed, even the head of the U.S. Africa Command, General Carter Ham, has acknowledged the limitations the West faces in Mali.

“Realistically,” Ham recently [remarked](#), “probably the best you can get is containment and disruption, so that al-Qaida is no longer able to control territory [there] as they do today.”

But as U.S. officials talk up the al-Qaeda threat in Mali, one can’t help but recall the assertion made by U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta back in 2011. As Panetta then [declared](#), the U.S. was “within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda.” Yet, after the West’s support of Islamists fighters in Libya and Syria, that handy al-Qaeda specter has evidently been roused sufficiently to haunt the Western mind once more.

Of course, despite all the public claims to the contrary, defeating al-Qaeda has never really been a genuine pursuit of the U.S. anyway. After all, a vanquished al-Qaeda would really denote something of a strategic setback for Washington. It would deprive the U.S. a source of proxy war foot soldiers, while also leaving Washington struggling to justify its global garrisoning. In the end then, the al-Qaeda menace — that gift that keeps on giving — is simply too useful to defeat.

Containing China

One needs look no further than the intervention into Mali to see the al-Qaeda threat bearing fruit for the West. All the attention on combating al-Qaeda in northern Mali has provided the perfect cover for the U.S. and its junior Western partners to pursue their grand strategy of containment against China. And with China increasingly out competing Western interests throughout Africa, one understands the sudden neo-colonial urge in the West.

According to Razia Khan, the regional head of research for Africa at Standard Chartered Bank, bilateral trade between Africa and China is [nearing \\$200 billion annually](#), having grown at an average rate of 33.6 percent per year over the past decade. What’s more, in the coming years Africa stands to become China’s [largest trade partner](#), surpassing both the EU and the U.S.

None of this has been lost on Washington. As the presumptive next U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, noted during his Senate confirmation hearing, the U.S. is knowingly playing from behind.

“Now with respect to China and Africa, China is all over Africa — I mean, all over Africa. And they’re buying up long-term contracts on minerals, on ... you name it,” Kerry [commented](#). “And there’re some places where we’re not in the game, folks. And I hate to say it. And we got to get in.”

In a 2010 [diplomatic cable](#) released by WikiLeaks, Johnnie Carson, U.S. assistant secretary for African Affairs, echoed Kerry's concerns. In fact, Carson went so far as to classify China as a "very aggressive and pernicious economic competitor with no morals."

Such U.S. sneering over growing Chinese investments in Africa were aired publicly during Secretary of State Clinton's visit through Africa back in August. As Clinton, in a clear jab at China [declared](#) on her trip, "Unlike other countries, 'America will stand up for democracy and universal human rights even when it might be easier to look the other way and keep the resources flowing.'"

(The [rights violations](#) of the U.S.-trained Malian army puts just the latest lie to such righteous declarations.)

In response to Clinton's jab, China's state-run Xinhua news agency [shot back](#) that Clinton's trip was "aimed at least partly at discrediting China's engagement with the continent and curbing China's influence there."

And it is with such a fear of U.S. containment in mind that Beijing has come to interpret France's intervention into Mali as a gateway for further Western interventions. As He Wenping of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [warns](#), "French forces' involvement in Mali will provide the case for legalization of a new interventionism in Africa."

And indeed it will, just as the West's Libyan romp, costing China [\\$20 billion in investments](#), helped set the stage for the current intervention into Mali. For in order for the U.S. to harness Asia's (read China's) growth and dynamism — and thus cement [America's Pacific Century](#) — the U.S. must come to also harness the growth and dynamism of Africa.

The U.S. containment of China, then, requires a pivot of sorts to Africa. Only the African pivot appears set to fall under the banner of that ever-malleable "war on terror."

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