

Pentagon Adds Africa to Global Battleground with China and Russia

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General Stephen Townsend, commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), and General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of U.S. Central Command, are scheduled to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 22. The testimony, both open and closed, will address the proposed 2022 National Defense Authorization Act which is reported to include a total of \$753 billion for the Pentagon’s operations around the world.

The last time AFRICOM’s Townsend addressed that committee was in January of last year, when he spoke in depth of his command’s, and more broadly the U.S.’s overall, strategy toward Africa.

Commanders of the six geographical unified combatant commands the Pentagon employs to divide up the world – Africa Command, Central Command, European Command, Indo-Pacific Command, Northern Command and Southern Command – are duty-bound to appear before the Senate Armed Services Committee and its equivalent in the House of Representatives to solicit funding and so must give an account of themselves and their commands. (General Townsend also appeared before the House Armed Services Committee in March of 2020 with Central Command’s General McKenzie in a hearing on *National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and Africa*.)

[In his testimony last year](#) Townsend’s comments not only laid out AFRICOM’s perspective and plans for the world’s second-most populous continent but prefigured what has become the U.S.’s central global strategy, which is now coming fully into its own with the Biden-Harris administration: that the U.S. is in competition with – in fact is in conflict with – China and Russia, individually and jointly, in every part of the world. From Africa to [the Arctic](#), from Europe to South America, from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. And in most every category, military and civilian. Trade and finance, ownership of foreign debt, mineral and other resources, energy and energy transit, port and rail and road construction projects, foreign investments in the private and public sectors, diplomatic relations with the other nations of the world, control of shipping lanes and maritime choke points, international arms sales, military training of other nations’ armed forces, communications and cyber security, democracy and human rights and their alleged subversion, information (ours) and disinformation (theirs), almost *ad infinitum*.

Townsend identified three security threats in Africa, to Africa itself and to the U.S. and its allies and, grandiosely, the world: in his order, China, Russia and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) of the al-Shabaab and other varieties the U.S. has been waging war and counterinsurgency war against in Somalia, Mali, the Central African Republic, Congo (Kinshasa), South Sudan, Uganda and elsewhere over the past twenty years. However, now the emphasis has been shifted away from those wars as, in the commander's words, AFRICOM "must orient the bulk of our efforts against China and Russia even as we counter VEOs that threaten America."

His comments, excerpts of which appear below, have recently been echoed by [European Command commander General Tod Wolters](#) (who is also NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe), [Secretary of State Antony Blinken](#) and [NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg](#) *inter alia* in regard to what Washington and its military and political allies in Europe and elsewhere have collectively identified as the global challenge of China and Russia.

Townsend's presentation last year, in a section called Africa and National Security, contained unadulterated geopolitics that evoke the writings of Halford Mackinder in defining Africa as a global crossroads where "Africa watches over strategic choke points and sea lines of communication, including the Mediterranean Sea and the Strait of Gibraltar on NATO's southern flank, the Red Sea and the Bab al Mandeb strait, and the Mozambique Channel."

The reference to NATO's southern flank is neither fortuitous nor peripheral. As every country in Europe except Russia (and the tiny island nation of Cyprus) is a NATO member or partner, and as every North African country except Libya (for the moment) is a member of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue military partnership, Africa is now NATO's southern flank as Russia is its eastern one; by NATO's expansion toward both locations.

The waterways mentioned above, he added, are essential to the functioning of not only AFRICOM but all U.S. unified combatant commands throughout the world and are vital to "African, U.S., and global prosperity."

He immediately moved on to a discussion of Global Power Competition, which begins with this paragraph:

"China and Russia have long recognized the strategic and economic importance of Africa, and continue to seize opportunities to expand their influence across the continent. The National Defense Strategy directs us to prioritize great power competition with China and Russia due to the 'magnitude of the threats they post to U.S. security and prosperity today and the potential for those threats to increase in the future.'"

Again, the threats supposedly presented by China and Russia – inevitably coupled – to Africa (and to the world in Africa) are inseparable from the alleged threat the duo poses to the U.S. and its allies and partners in every other part of the world. Referred to as "malign actors," China and Russia were accused of "coercive and exploitative activities" which "undermine and threaten" the stability of African nations.

Anyone familiar with the history of Africa over the past five hundred years would have to be astonished by that claim. That Washington, which has not only coerced and exploited most

of Africa since the end of World War II and played a hand in several violent coups and wars, direct (as that against Libya a decade ago) and proxy, would accuse China and Russia in the above regard is beyond presumption. Beyond reason. Perhaps beyond sanity.

The commander went on to accuse China of disguising military penetration of Africa behind the construction of ports (“These Chinese seaports are not genuine commercial ports”) and other infrastructure projects, specifically in Djibouti where China established a naval base four years ago. Elsewhere Townsend spoke of there being 6,000 U.S. in Africa at any given time, half of those at the Pentagon’s Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti where the U.S. has been for twenty years. He evidently saw no contradiction in his statements.

That the commander of AFRICOM, whose area of responsibility includes all of Africa’s 54 nations except for Egypt (which remains in that of U.S. Central Command), would accuse China of posing a military threat to Africa and the world by opening a small naval base in minuscule Djibouti (population: 973,000) is beyond any sensible person’s ability to comprehend.

He also castigated China and Russia for selling arms to African nations, with Russia reportedly being the largest arms dealer, not mentioning that Russia, as successor state to the Soviet Union, inherited military relations with nations from Egypt to Angola and Ethiopia among dozens of others on the continent. One of the purposes of inaugurating AFRICOM in 2008 was to dominate – monopolize – the arms trade there with the sales of “NATO interoperable” weaponry.

In general, in an exercise that goes beyond mere irony, Townsend declared “it is clear that China prioritizes Africa and Russia sees an opportunity to gain a strong position on NATO’s southern flank.”

As Russia is encroaching on NATO’s eastern flank simply by remaining where it is.

Regarding NATO and Africa, before the beginning of its post-Cold War expansion into Central and Eastern Europe NATO’s members included every European colonial, imperial and settler nation in Africa over the last half-millennium: Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Turkey.

Townsend didn’t neglect any part of the contingent in conjuring up the China-Russia threat. North Africa, where Russia “continues to harvest benefits from the instability in Libya,” the Horn of Africa with China in Djibouti and the rest of Africa as well: “China and Russia are in a position of advantage in central and southern Africa. Russia is testing its playbook for malign activity in the Central African Republic.” In Mozambique, Russia is doubly villainous in “provid[ing] second-rate counterterrorism assistance in the hopes of buying oil and gas concessions.”

The AFRICOM chief summed up Pentagon concerns over Africa – and by implication every other part of the globe – in declaring that “longterm global power competition with China and Russia and the need to limit the harmful influence of malign actors in the region is of utmost importance.”

Because “if the U.S. steps back from Africa” – and Europe and the Middle East and Central Asia and Southern Asia and East Asia and the South Pacific and the rest of Oceania and South and Central America and [the Arctic](#) and the Antarctic, but these areas aren’t in

AFRICOM's area of responsibility - "too far, China and Russia will fill the void to our detriment."

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