

The new American imperialism in Africa

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In pursuit of its “long war” on terrorism and alleged terrorism, the US military is expanding into Africa’s “arc of instability” – and striking secret pacts with regional powers like South Africa.

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AMERICA MUSCLES INTO “FRENCH TERRITORY”

Former colonial power France maintained the largest foreign military presence in Africa since most countries attained sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s. But France reduced its armed presence on the continent by two thirds at the end of the last century, though it continues to intervene in a muscular and controversial fashion. For example, under a 1961 “mutual defence” pact, French forces were allowed to be permanently stationed in Ivory Coast: the 500-strong 43rd Marine Infantry Battalion is based at Port Bouet next to the Abidjan airport.

When the civil war erupted there in September 2002, France added a “stabilisation force”, now numbering some 4,000 under Operation Licorne, which was augmented in 2003 by 1,500 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) “peacekeepers” drawn from Senegal, Ghana, Benin, Togo and Nigeria. In January this year, the United Nations extended the mandate of Operation Licorne until December.

But piggybacking off the French military presence in Africa are a series of new foreign military and policing initiatives by the United States and the European Union. It appears the US has devised a new Monroe Doctrine for Africa (the term has become a synonym for the doctrine of US interventions in what it saw as its Latin American “back yard”).

Under the George W Bush regime’s “War on Terror” doctrine, the US has designated a swathe of territory that curves across the globe from Colombia and Venezuela in South America, through Africa’s Maghreb, Sahara and Sahel regions into the Middle East and Central Asia as the “arc of instability” where both real and supposed terrorists may find refuge and training.

In Africa, which falls under the US military’s European Command (EUCOM), the US has struck agreements with France to share its military bases. For example: there is now a US Marine Corps base in Djibouti at the French base of Camp Lemonnier with more than 1,800 Marines stationed there, allegedly for “counter-terrorism” operations in the horn of Africa, the Middle East and East Africa – as well as controlling the Red Sea shipping lanes.

But the US presence involves more than piggybacking off French bases. In 2003, US intelligence operatives began training spies for four unnamed North African countries – believed to be Morocco and Egypt and perhaps also Algeria and Tunisia.

It is also conducting training of the armed forces of countries such as Chad and in September last year [2005], Bush told the United Nations Security Council that the US would, over the next five years, train 40,000 “African peace-keepers” to “preserve justice and order in Africa”. The US Embassy in Pretoria said at the time that the US had already trained 20,000 “peace-keepers” in 12 African countries in the use of “non-lethal equipment”.

And now, while the US is downscaling and dismantling military bases in Germany and South Korea, it is relocating these military resources to Africa and the Middle East in order to “combat terrorism” and “protect oil resources”.

In Africa, new US bases are being built in Djibouti, Uganda, Senegal, and São Tomé & Príncipe. These “jumping-off points” will station small permanent forces, but with the ability to launch major regional military adventures, according to the US-based Associated Press. An existing US base at Entebbe, Uganda, under the one-party regime of US ally Yoweri Museveni, already “covers” East Africa and the Great Lakes region. At Dakar in Senegal, the US is busy upgrading an airfield.

SOUTH AFRICA SECRETLY JOINS THE “WAR ON TERROR”

Governments with whom the US has concluded military pacts include Gabon, Mauritania, Rwanda, Guinea and South Africa. The US also has a “second Guantanamo” in the Indian Ocean where alleged terror suspects kidnapped in Africa, the Middle East or Asia can be detained and interrogated without trial: a detention camp, refuelling point and bomber base situated on the British-colonised Chagos Archipelago island of Diego Garcia, an island from which the indigenous inhabitants were forcibly removed to Mauritius.

In South Africa’s case, while it is unlikely there will ever be US bases established because the strength of the country’s military, the SANDF, makes that unnecessary, in 2005, the country quietly signed on to the US’s Africa Contingency Operations Training Assistance (ACOTA) programme which is aimed at integrating African armed forces into US strategic (read: imperialist) objectives.

South Africa, by signing on to ACOTA as its 13th African member, effectively joined the American “War on Terror”. ACOTA started life as a “humanitarian” programme run by EUCOM out of Stuttgart, Germany, in 1996. After the 9–11 attacks, the Pentagon reorganised ACOTA and gave it more teeth.

Today, its makeup is more obviously aggressive rather than defensive. According to Pierre Abromovici, writing in the July 2004 edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique* about rumours that South Africa was preparing to sign ACOTA — a full year before it did so — “ACOTA includes offensive training, particularly for regular infantry units and small units modelled on special forces... In Washington, the talk is no longer of non-lethal weapons... the emphasis is on ‘offensive’ co-operation”.

The real nature of ACOTA is perhaps indicated by the career of the man heading it up, Colonel Nestor Pino-Marina, “a Cuban exile who took part in the 1961 failed US landing in the Bay of Pigs,” Abromovici wrote. “He is also a former special forces officer who served in Vietnam and Laos. During the Reagan era he belonged to the Inter-American Defence Board, and, in the 1960s, he took part in clandestine operations against the Sandanistas. He was accused of involvement in drug-trafficking to fund arms sent to Central America” to prop up pro-Washington right-wing dictatorships.

Clearly, Pino-Marina is a fervent “anti-communist” — whether that means opposing rebellious States or popular insurrections. He also sits on the executive of a strange outfit within the US military called the Cuban-American Military council, which aims at installing itself as the government of Cuba should the US ever achieve a forcible “regime-change” there.

The career of the US ambassador who concluded the ACOTA pact with South Africa is also an indicator of US intentions. Jendayi Fraser, now Bush's senior advisor on Africa, had no diplomatic experience. Instead, she once served as a politico-military planner with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Department of Defence and as senior director for African affairs at the National Security Council. According to Fraser's online biography, she "worked on African security issues with the State Department's international military education training programmes".

IS THERE A MURDEROUS "SCHOOL OF THE AFRICAS"?

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Founded in 1946 in Panama, the School of the Americas has trained some 60,000 Latin American soldiers, including notorious neo-Nazi Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer, infamous Panamanian dictator and drug czar Manuel Noriega, Argentine dictators Leopoldo Galtieri and Roberto Viola whose regime murdered 30,000 people between 1976 and 1983, numerous death-squad killers, right up to Efrain Vasquez and Ramirez Poveda who staged a failed US-backed coup in Venezuela in 2002.

Over the decades, graduates of the School have murdered and tortured hundreds of thousands of people across Latin America, specifically targeting trade union leaders, grassroots activists, students, guerrilla units, and political opponents. The murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero of Nicaragua in 1980 and the "El Mozote" massacre of 767 villagers in El Salvador in 1981 were committed by graduates of the School. And yet the School of the Americas Watch, an organisation trying to shut WHINSEC down, is on an FBI "anti-terrorism" watch-list.

So Africa should be concerned if the African Centre for Strategic Studies has similar objectives, even if the School of the Americas Watch cannot confirm these fears. And there is more: we've all heard of the "Standby Force" being devised by the African Union (AU), a coalition of Africa's authoritarian neo-liberal regimes. But the AU has also set up, under the patronage of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (which also covers North America, Russia and Central Asia), the African Centre for the Study and Research of Terrorism.

The Centre is based in Algiers, Algeria, at the heart of a murderous regime that has itself "disappeared" some 3,000 people between 1992 and 2003 (according to Amnesty International: equivalent to the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, but ignored by the African left). The Centre's director, Abdelhamid Boubazine told me that it would not only be a think-tank and trainer of "anti-terrorism" judges, but that it would also have teeth, providing training in "specific armed intervention" in support of the continent's regimes.

Anneli Botha, the senior researcher on terrorism at the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies, said, however, that only 10% of terrorist attacks in Africa were on armed forces, and only 6% on state figures and institutions, though the latter were "focussed". She warned that a major cause of African terrorism was "a growing void between government and security forces on the one hand and local communities on the other". Caught in the grip of misery and poverty, many people are recruited into rebel armies, even though few of these offer any sort of real solution.

The Centre in Algiers operates under the AU's Algiers Convention on Terrorism, which is notoriously vague on what defines terrorism, opening the door for a wide range of non-governmental, protest, grassroots, civic, and militant organisations to be targeted for elimination by the new counter-terrorism forces. It would be naïve to think that bourgeois democracy – which passed South Africa's equally vaguely-defined Protection of Constitutional Democracy from Terrorism and Other Related Activities Act into law last year – will protect the working class, peasantry and poor from state terrorism.

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