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America's Empire of African Bases

By Tom Engelhardt
November 17, 2015

As I've written elsewhere, what Chalmers Johnson called America's "empire of bases" was "not so much our little secret as a secret we kept even from ourselves" – at least until Johnson broke the silence and his book *Blowback* became a bestseller in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In those years, however, if (like Johnson) you actually wanted to know about the way the U.S. garrisoned the world, you could profitably start simply by reading the Pentagon's tabulations of its global garrisons, ranging from military bases the size of small American towns to what were then starting to be called "lily pads," which were small sites in potential global hot spots stocked with pre-positioned materiel and ready for instant occupation. It was all there on the record for those who cared to know. Well, perhaps not quite *all* there, but enough of it certainly to get a sense of what the "American Raj" (as Johnson called it) looked like from Europe to Asia, Latin America to the Persian Gulf.

And it was impressive, that empire of bases, once you took it in. It represented a garrisoning of the globe unprecedented in the history of empires. That we Americans didn't generally know much about it was, in a sense, a matter of choice, a matter, you might say, of self-blinding behavior. To hazard a guess: as a people, we were uncomfortable enough with the idea of ourselves as a global imperial power that we preferred not to know what "we" were doing, or at least not to acknowledge what we had become, even though every year hundreds of thousands of Americans, military personnel and civilians alike, lived on, worked on, or cycled through those bases. In this context, it was startling how seldom they were part of our everyday news cycle. For

those in other countries, they often loomed large indeed as the local face of the United States, but you'd never know that if your source of news was the mainstream media here.

That, of course, hasn't changed. What has changed is Washington's attitude toward the public record. Its latest basing moves are taking place enveloped in a blanket of secrecy, which means that even if you want to know, it's increasingly tough to find out. Washington's latest garrisoning strategy is based on a new premise: a "small footprint," meaning a tiny-bases, rapid-deployment, special-ops and drone-heavy way of war that's being put into place across Africa in the twenty-first century, as *TomDispatch*'s Nick Turse lays out today. While the U.S. has always pursued parts of its imperial strategy in "the shadows," to use a phrase from my Cold War childhood, in this new strategy everyday basing, too, is disappearing into those shadows, which is why Turse's latest piece on the subject is a small reportorial triumph of time and effort.

For this site in these last years, Turse has regularly revealed much that has been out of sight when it comes to Washington's expanding military focus on Africa, including the cascading number of U.S. military missions across that continent, a similar spike in missions to train proxy forces there, and soaring deployments of U.S. Special Operations forces – that secret military-within-the-military of 70,000 that now thrives solely in a world of shadows. It took a year of his efforts, but today he finishes off his portrait of the garrisoning of a whole continent in a new way with a look at the basing policies of U.S. Africa Command. It's a piece that couldn't be more important or hard-won, and it offers us our first look at how a continent is being prepared for what Turse, in his latest book, has called "tomorrow's battlefield." ~ *Tom*

Does Eleven Plus One Equal Sixty? AFRICOM's New Math, the US Base Bonanza, and "Scarier" Times Ahead in Africa
By Nick Turse

In the shadows of what was once called the "dark continent," a scramble has come and gone. If you heard nothing about it, that was by design. But look hard enough and – north to south, east to west – you'll find the fruits of that effort: a network of bases, compounds, and other sites whose sum total exceeds the number of nations on the continent. For a military that has stumbled from Iraq to Afghanistan and suffered setbacks from Libya to Syria, it's a rare can-do triumph. In remote locales, behind fences and beyond the gaze of prying eyes, the U.S. military has built an extensive archipelago of African outposts, transforming the continent, experts say, into a laboratory for a new kind of war.

So how many U.S. military bases are there in Africa? It's a simple question with a simple answer. For years, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) gave a stock response: one. Camp Lemonnier in the tiny, sun-bleached nation of Djibouti was America's only acknowledged "base" on the continent. It wasn't true, of course, because there were camps, compounds, installations, and facilities elsewhere, but the military leaned hard on semantics.

Take a look at the Pentagon's official list of bases, however, and the number grows. The 2015 report on the Department of Defense's global property portfolio lists Camp Lemonnier and three other deep-rooted sites on or near the continent: U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 3, a medical research facility in Cairo, Egypt, that was established in 1946; Ascension Auxiliary

Airfield, a spacecraft tracking station and airfield located 1,000 miles off the coast of West Africa that has been used by the U.S. since 1957; and warehouses at the airport and seaport in Mombasa, Kenya, that were built in the 1980s.

That's only the beginning, not the end of the matter. For years, various reporters have shed light on hush-hush outposts – most of them built, upgraded, or expanded since 9/11 – dotting the continent, including so-called cooperative security locations (CSLs). Earlier this year, AFRICOM commander General David Rodriguez disclosed that there were actually 11 such sites. Again, devoted AFRICOM-watchers knew that this, too, was just the start of a larger story, but when I asked Africa Command for a list of bases, camps and other sites, as I periodically have done, I was treated like a sap.

"In all, AFRICOM has access to 11 CSLs across Africa. Of course, we have one major military facility on the continent: Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti," Anthony Falvo, AFRICOM's Public Affairs chief, told me. Falvo was peddling numbers that both he and I know perfectly well are, at best, misleading. "It's one of the most troubling aspects of our military policy in Africa, and overseas generally, that the military can't be, and seems totally resistant to being, honest and transparent about what it's doing," says David Vine, author of *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*.

Research by *TomDispatch* indicates that in recent years the U.S. military has, in fact, developed a remarkably extensive network of more than 60 outposts and access points in Africa. Some are currently being utilized, some are held in reserve, and some may be shuttered. These bases, camps, compounds, port facilities, fuel bunkers, and other sites can be found in at least 34 countries – more than 60% of the nations on the continent – many of them corrupt, repressive states with poor human rights records. The U.S. also operates "Offices of Security Cooperation and Defense Attaché Offices in approximately 38 [African] nations," according to Falvo, and has struck close to 30 agreements to use international airports in Africa as refueling centers.

There is no reason to believe that even this represents a complete accounting of America's growing archipelago of African outposts. Although it's possible that a few sites are being counted twice due to AFRICOM's failure to provide basic information or clarification, the list *TomDispatch* has developed indicates that the U.S. military has created a network of bases that goes far beyond what AFRICOM has disclosed to the American public, let alone to Africans.

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U.S. military outposts, port facilities, and other areas of access in Africa, 2002-2015 (Nick Turse/TomDispatch, 2015)

AFRICOM's Base Bonanza

When AFRICOM became an independent command in 2008, Camp Lemonnier was reportedly still one of the few American outposts on the continent. In the years since, the U.S. has embarked on nothing short of a building boom – even if the command is loath to refer to it in those terms.

As a result, it's now able to carry out increasing numbers of overt and covert missions, from training exercises to drone assassinations.

"AFRICOM, as a new command, is basically a laboratory for a different kind of warfare and a different way of posturing forces," says Richard Reeve, the director of the Sustainable Security Programme at the Oxford Research Group, a London-based think tank. "Apart from Djibouti, there's no significant stockpiling of troops, equipment, or even aircraft. There are a myriad of 'lily pads' or small forward operating bases… so you can spread out even a small number of forces over a very large area and concentrate those forces quite quickly when necessary."

Indeed, U.S. staging areas, cooperative security locations, forward operating locations (FOLs), and other outposts – many of them involved in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities and Special Operations missions – have been built (or built up) in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Senegal, the Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, and Uganda. A 2011 report by Lauren Ploch, an analyst in African affairs with the Congressional Research Service, also mentioned U.S. military access to locations in Algeria, Botswana, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, and Zambia. AFRICOM failed to respond to scores of requests by this reporter for further information about its outposts and related matters, but an analysis of open source information, documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, and other records show a persistent, enduring, and growing U.S. presence on the continent.

"A cooperative security location is just a small location where we can come in… It would be what you would call a very austere location with a couple of warehouses that has things like: tents, water, and things like that," explained AFRICOM's Rodriguez. As he implies, the military doesn't consider CSLs to be "bases," but whatever they might be called, they are more than merely a few tents and cases of bottled water.

Designed to accommodate about 200 personnel, with runways suitable for C-130 transport aircraft, the sites are primed for conversion from temporary, bare-bones facilities into something more enduring. At least three of them in Senegal, Ghana, and Gabon are apparently designed to facilitate faster deployment for a rapid reaction unit with a mouthful of a moniker: Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response-Africa (SPMAGTF-CR-AF). Its forces are based in Morón, Spain, and Sigonella, Italy, but are focused on Africa. They rely heavily on MV-22 Ospreys, tilt-rotor aircraft that can take-off, land, and hover like helicopters, but fly with the speed and fuel efficiency of a turboprop plane.

This combination of manpower, access, and technology has come to be known in the military by the moniker "New Normal." Birthed in the wake of the September 2012 attack in Benghazi, Libya, that killed U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, the New Normal effectively allows the U.S. military quick access 400 miles inland from any CSL or, as Richard Reeve notes, gives it "a reach that extends to just about every country in West and Central Africa."

The concept was field-tested as South Sudan plunged into civil war and 160 Marines and sailors from Morón were forward deployed to Djibouti in late 2013. Within hours, a contingent from

that force was sent to Uganda and, in early 2014, in conjunction with another rapid reaction unit, dispatched to South Sudan to evacuate 20 people from the American embassy in Juba. Earlier this year, SPMAGTF-CR-AF ran trials at its African staging areas including the CSL in Libreville, Gabon, deploying nearly 200 Marines and sailors along with four Ospreys, two C-130s, and more than 150,000 pounds of materiel.

A similar test run was carried out at the Senegal CSL located at Dakar-Ouakam Air Base, which can also host 200 Marines and the support personnel necessary to sustain and transport them. "What the CSL offers is the ability to forward-stage our forces to respond to any type of crisis," Lorenzo Armijo, an operations officer with SPMAGTF-CR-AF, told a military reporter. "That crisis can range in the scope of military operations from embassy reinforcement to providing humanitarian assistance."

Another CSL, mentioned in a July 2012 briefing by U.S. Army Africa, is located in Entebbe, Uganda. From there, according to a *Washington Post* investigation, U.S. contractors have flown surveillance missions using innocuous-looking turboprop airplanes. "The AFRICOM strategy is to have a very light touch, a light footprint, but nevertheless facilitate special forces operations or ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] detachments over a very wide area," Reeve says. "To do that they don't need very much basing infrastructure, they need an agreement to use a location, basic facilities on the ground, a stockpile of fuel, but they also can rely on private contractors to maintain a number of facilities so there aren't U.S. troops on the ground."

Click here to see a larger version

U.S. Army Africa briefing slide from 2012 detailing work at the Entebbe CSL

The Outpost Archipelago

AFRICOM ignored my requests for further information on CSLs and for the designations of other outposts on the continent, but according to a 2014 article in *Army Sustainment* on "Overcoming Logistics Challenges in East Africa," there are also "at least nine forward operating locations, or FOLs." A 2007 Defense Department news release referred to an FOL in Charichcho, Ethiopia. The U.S. military also utilizes "Forward Operating Location Kasenyi" in Kampala, Uganda. A 2010 report by the Government Accountability Office mentioned forward operating locations in Isiolo and Manda Bay, both in Kenya.

Camp Simba in Manda Bay has, in fact, seen significant expansion in recent years. In 2013, Navy Seabees, for example, worked 24-hour shifts to extend its runway to enable larger aircraft like C-130s to land there, while other projects were initiated to accommodate greater numbers of troops in the future, including increased fuel and potable water storage, and more latrines. The base serves as a home away from home for Navy personnel and Army Green Berets among other U.S. troops and, as recently revealed at the *Intercept*, plays an integral role in the secret drone assassination program aimed at militants in neighboring Somalia as well as in Yemen.

Drones have played an increasingly large role in this post-9/11 build-up in Africa. MQ-1 Predators have, for instance, been based in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, while their newer, larger,

more far-ranging cousins, MQ-9 Reapers, have been flown out of Seychelles International Airport. As of June 2012, according to the *Intercept*, two contractor-operated drones, one Predator and one Reaper, were based in Arba Minch, Ethiopia, while a detachment with one Scan Eagle (a low-cost drone used by the Navy) and a remotely piloted helicopter known as an MQ-8 Fire Scout operated off the coast of East Africa. The U.S. also recently began setting up a base in Cameroon for unarmed Predators to be used in the battle against Boko Haram militants.

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U.S. Army Africa briefing slide from 2013 obtained by TomDispatch *via the Freedom of Information Act*

In February 2013, the U.S. also began flying Predator drones out of Niger's capital, Niamey. A year later, Captain Rick Cook, then chief of U.S. Africa Command's Engineer Division, mentioned the potential for a new "base-like facility" that would be "semi-permanent" and "capable of air operations" in that country. That September, the *Washington Post*'s Craig Whitlock exposed plans to base drones at a second location there, Agadez. Within days, the U.S. Embassy in Niamey announced that AFRICOM was, indeed, "assessing the possibility of establishing a temporary, expeditionary contingency support location in Agadez, Niger."

Earlier this year, Captain Rodney Worden of AFRICOM's Logistics and Support Division mentioned "a partnering and capacity-building project… for the Niger Air Force and Armed Forces in concert with USAFRICOM and [U.S.] Air Forces Africa to construct a runway and associated work/life support area for airfield operations." And when the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 was introduced in April, embedded in it was a $50 million request for the construction of an "airfield and base camp at Agadez, Niger… to support operations in western Africa." When Congress recently passed the annual defense policy bill, that sum was authorized.

According to Brigadier General Donald Bolduc, the head of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa, there is also a team of Special Operations forces currently "living right next to" local troops in Diffa, Niger. A 2013 military briefing slide, obtained by *TomDispatch* via the Freedom of Information Act, indicates a "U.S. presence" as well in Ouallam, Niger, and at both Bamako and Kidal in neighboring Mali. Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, a country that borders both of those nations, plays host to a Special Operations Forces Liaison Element Team, a Joint Special Operations Air Detachment, and the Trans-Sahara Short Take-Off and Landing Airlift Support initiative which, according to official documents, facilitates "high-risk activities" carried out by elite forces from Joint Special Operations Task Force-Trans Sahara.

On the other side of the continent in Somalia, elite U.S. forces are operating from small compounds in Kismayo and Baledogle, according to reporting by *Foreign Policy*. Neighboring Ethiopia has similarly been a prime locale for American outposts, including Camp Gilbert in Dire Dawa, contingency operating locations at both Hurso and Bilate, and facilities used by a 40-man team based in Bara. So-called Combined Operations Fusion Centers were set up in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan as part of an effort to destroy Joseph Kony and his murderous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). *Washington Post* investigations have revealed

that U.S. forces have also been based in Djema, Sam Ouandja, and Obo, in the Central African Republic as part of that effort. There has recently been new construction by Navy Seabees at Obo to increase the camp's capacity as well as to install the infrastructure for a satellite dish.

There are other locations that, while not necessarily outposts, nonetheless form critical nodes in the U.S. base network on the continent. These include 10 marine gas and oil bunkers located at ports in eight African nations. Additionally, AFRICOM acknowledges an agreement to use Léopold Sédar Senghor International Airport in Senegal for refueling as well as for the "transportation of teams participating in security cooperation activities." A similar deal is in place for the use of Kitgum Airport in Kitgum, Uganda, and Addis Ababa Bole International Airport in Ethiopia. All told, according to the Defense Logistics Agency, the U.S. military has struck 29 agreements to use airports as refueling centers in 27 African countries.

Not all U.S. bases in Africa have seen continuous use in these years. After the American-backed military overthrew the government of Mauritania in 2008, for example, the U.S. suspended an airborne surveillance program based in its capital, Nouakchott. Following a coup in Mali by a U.S.-trained officer, the United States suspended military relations with the government and a spartan U.S. compound near the town of Gao was apparently overrun by rebel forces.

Most of the new outposts on that continent, however, seem to be putting down roots. As *TomDispatch* regular and basing expert David Vine suggests, "The danger of the strategy in which you see U.S. bases popping up increasingly around the continent is that once bases get established they become very difficult to close. Once they generate momentum, within Congress and in terms of funding, they have a tendency to expand."

To supply its troops in East Africa, AFRICOM has also built a sophisticated logistics system. It's officially known as the Surface Distribution Network, but colloquially referred to as the "new spice route." It connects Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. These hubs are, in turn, part of a transportation and logistics network that includes bases located in Rota, Spain; Aruba in the Lesser Antilles; Souda Bay, Greece; and a forward operating site on Britain's Ascension Island in the South Atlantic.

Germany's Ramstein Air Base, headquarters of U.S. Air Forces Europe and one of the largest American military bases outside the United States, is another key site. As the *Intercept* reported earlier this year, it serves as "the high-tech heart of America's drone program" for the Greater Middle East and Africa. Germany is also host to AFRICOM's headquarters, located at Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart-Moehringen, itself a site reportedly integral to drone operations in Africa.

In addition to hosting a contingent of the Marines and sailors of Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response-Africa, Sigonella Naval Air Station in Sicily, Italy, is another important logistics facility for African operations. The second-busiest military air station in Europe, Sigonella is a key hub for drones covering Africa, serving as a base for MQ-1 Predators and RQ-4B Global Hawk surveillance drones.

The Crown Jewels

Back on the continent, the undisputed crown jewel in the U.S. archipelago of bases is indeed still Camp Lemonnier. To quote Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, it is "a hub with lots of spokes out there on the continent and in the region." Sharing a runway with Djibouti's Ambouli International Airport, the sprawling compound is the headquarters of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa and is home to the East Africa Response Force, another regional quick-reaction unit. The camp, which also serves as the forward headquarters for Task Force 48-4, a hush-hush counterterrorism unit targeting militants in East Africa and Yemen, has seen personnel stationed there jump by more than 400% since 2002.

In the same period, Camp Lemonnier has expanded from 88 acres to nearly 600 acres and is in the midst of a years-long building boom for which more than $600 million has already been awarded or allocated. In late 2013, for example, B.L. Harbert International, an Alabama-based construction company, was awarded a $150 million contract by the Navy for "the P-688 Forward Operating Base at Camp Lemonnier." According to a corporate press release, "the site is approximately 20 acres in size, and will contain 11 primary structures and ancillary facilities required to support current and emerging operational missions throughout the region."

In 2014, the Navy completed construction of a $750,000 secure facility for Special Operations Command Forward-East Africa (SOCFWD-EA). It is one of three similar teams on the continent – the others being SOCFWD-Central Africa and SOCFWD-North and West Africa – which, according to the military, "shape and coordinate special operations forces security cooperation and engagement in support of theater special operations command, geographic combatant command, and country team goals and objectives."

In 2012, according to secret documents recently revealed by the *Intercept*, 10 Predator drones and four Reaper drones were based at Camp Lemonnier, along with six U-28As (a single-engine aircraft that conducts surveillance for special operations forces) and two P-3 Orions (a four-engine turboprop surveillance aircraft). There were also eight F-15E Strike Eagles, heavily armed, manned fighter jets. By August 2012, an average of 16 drones and four fighters were taking off or landing at the base each day.

The next year, in the wake of a number of drone crashes and turmoil involving Djiboutian air traffic controllers, drone operations were moved to a more remote site located about six miles away. Djibouti's Chabelley Airfield, which has seen significant construction of late and has a much lower profile than Camp Lemonnier, now serves as a key base for America's regional drone campaign. Dan Gettinger, the co-founder and co-director of the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College, recently told the *Intercept* that the operations run from the site were "JSOC [Joint Special Operations Command] and CIA-led missions for the most part," explaining that they were likely focused on counterterrorism strikes in Somalia and Yemen, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities, as well as support for the Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen.

A Scarier Future

Over many months, AFRICOM repeatedly ignored even basic questions from this reporter about America's sweeping archipelago of bases. In practical terms, that means there is no way to know

with complete certainty how many of the more than 60 bases, bunkers, outposts, and areas of access are currently being used by U.S. forces or how many additional sites may exist. What does seem clear is that the number of bases and other sites, however defined, is increasing, mirroring the rise in the number of U.S. troops, special operations deployments, and missions in Africa.

“There’s going to be a network of small bases with maybe a couple of medium-altitude, long-endurance drones at each one, so that anywhere on the continent is always within range,” says the Oxford Research Group’s Richard Reeve when I ask him for a forecast of the future. In many ways, he notes, this has already begun everywhere but in southern Africa, not currently seen by the U.S. military as a high-risk area.

The Obama administration, Reeve explains, has made use of humanitarian rhetoric as a cover for expansion on the continent. He points in particular to the deployment of forces against the Lord’s Resistance Army in Central Africa, the build-up of forces near Lake Chad in the effort against Boko Haram, and the post-Benghazi New Normal concept as examples. “But, in practice, what is all of this going to be used for?” he wonders. After all, the enhanced infrastructure and increased capabilities that today may be viewed by the White House as an insurance policy against another Benghazi can easily be repurposed in the future for different types of military interventions.

“Where does this go post-Obama?” Reeve asks rhetorically, noting that the rise of AFRICOM and the proliferation of small outposts have been “in line with the Obama doctrine.” He draws attention to the president’s embrace of a lighter-footprint brand of warfare, specifically a reliance on Special Operations forces and drones. This may, Reeve adds, just be a prelude to something larger and potentially more dangerous.

“Where would Hillary take this?” he asks, referencing the hawkish Democratic primary frontrunner, Hillary Clinton. “Or any of the Republican potentials?” He points to the George W. Bush administration as an example and raises the question of what it might have done back in the early 2000s if AFRICOM’s infrastructure had already been in place. Such a thought experiment, he suggests, could offer clues to what the future might hold now that the continent is dotted with American outposts, drone bases, and compounds for elite teams of Special Operations forces. “I think,” Reeve says, “that we could be looking at something a bit scarier in Africa.”