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Washington's Commandos Without Borders

By Tom Engelhardt
December 18, 2016

When Donald Trump enters the Oval Office, awaiting him will not only be his own private air assassination corps (those CIA drones that take out terror suspects globally from a White House "kill list"), but his own private and remarkably secret military. Ever since John F. Kennedy first made the Green Berets into figures of military glamour, there's always been something alluring to presidents about the U.S. military's elite special ops forces.

Still, that was then, this is now. In the twenty-first century, the Special Operations Command, which oversees those elite forces cocooned within the regular military, has gained ever more power to act in ever more independent and secretive ways. In those same years, the country's elite troops, including those Green Berets, the Navy SEALs, and the Army's Delta Force, have grown to staggering proportions, while ever more money has poured into their coffers. There are now an estimated 70,000 of them – a crew larger than the actual armies of some reasonably sizeable countries – and from trainers to raiders, advisers to hunter-killers, they now operate yearly in an overwhelming majority of the nations on this planet. Moreover, they generally do so in remarkable secrecy and (as once might have been said of the CIA) their most secretive part, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), responsible for the killing of Osama bin Laden, is in essence the president's private army.

In these last years, President Obama, who gained a reputation for being chary of war, has nonetheless taken on with evident relish both those special ops forces and the drone assassins, while embracing what *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius recently termed the role of

"covert commander in chief." Now, in these last weeks of his presidency, his administration has given JSOC new powers to "track, plan, and potentially launch attacks on terrorist cells around the globe" and to do so "outside conventional conflict zones" and via "a new multiagency intelligence and action force." As a result, whatever this new task force may do, it won't, as in the past, have to deal with regional military commands and their commanders at all. Its only responsibility will be to the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and assumedly the White House; even within the military, that is, it will gain a new patina of secrecy and power (while evidently poaching on territory that once was considered the CIA's alone, no small thing at a moment when President-elect Trump is not exactly enamored with that agency).

One of the strangest aspects of the growth of America's special ops forces and their global missions is how little attention those special operators get in the media (unless they want the publicity). The very growth of an enormous secret military, a remarkable development in our American world and a particularly ominous one for the Trumpian years to come, is seldom discussed (no less debated). And all of this, the firepower now available to a president and the potential ability of a commander in chief to wage a global campaign of assassination and make war just about anywhere on Earth, personally and privately, will now be inherited by a man to whom such powers are likely to have real appeal.

In this context, I admit to a certain pride that, thanks to Nick Turse, the exception to the above has been *TomDispatch*. In these years, due to Turse's work at this website, you could follow, up close and personal, the growing power and operational abilities of America's special operations forces. This was especially true, as with his piece today, of how they have moved, big time, onto a continent that may indeed, in the military's own phrase, be tomorrow's battlefield and yet that we hear next to nothing about. ~ *Tom*

America's Elite Troops Partner With African Forces But Pursue US Aims By Nick Turse

Al-Qaeda doesn't care about borders. Neither does the Islamic State or Boko Haram. Brigadier General Donald Bolduc thinks the same way.

"[T]errorists, criminals, and non-state actors aren't bound by arbitrary borders," the commander of Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA) told an interviewer early this fall. "That said, everything we do is not organized around recognizing traditional borders. In fact, our whole command philosophy is about enabling cross-border solutions, implementing multi-national, collective actions and empowering African partner nations to work across borders to solve problems using a regional approach."

A SOCAFRICA planning document obtained by *TomDispatch* offers a window onto the scope of these "multi-national, collective actions" carried out by America's most elite troops in Africa. The declassified but heavily redacted secret report, covering the years 2012-2017 and acquired via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), details nearly 20 programs and activities – from training exercises to security cooperation engagements – utilized by SOCAFRICA across the continent. This wide array of low-profile missions, in addition to named operations and quasi-

wars, attests to the growing influence and sprawling nature of U.S. Special Operations forces (SOF) in Africa.

How U.S. military engagement will proceed under the Trump administration remains to be seen. The president-elect has said or tweeted little about Africa in recent years (aside from long trading in baseless claims that the current president was born there). Given his choice for national security adviser, Michael Flynn – a former director of intelligence for Joint Special Operations Command who believes that the United States is in a "world war" with Islamic militants – there is good reason to believe that Special Operations Command Africa will continue its border-busting missions across that continent. That, in turn, means that Africa is likely to remain crucial to America's nameless global war on terror.

Publicly, the command claims that it conducts its operations to "promote regional stability and prosperity," while Bolduc emphasizes that its missions are geared toward serving the needs of African allies. The FOIA files make clear, however, that U.S. interests are the command's principal and primary concern – a policy in keeping with the America First mindset and mandate of incoming commander-in-chief Donald J. Trump – and that support to "partner nations" is prioritized to suit American, not African, needs and policy goals.

Shades of Gray

Bolduc is fond of saying that his troops – Navy SEALs and Army Green Berets, among others – operate in the "gray zone," or what he calls "the spectrum of conflict between war and peace." Another of his favored stock phrases is: "In Africa, we are not the kinetic solution" – that is, not pulling triggers and dropping bombs. He also regularly takes pains to say that "we are not at war in Africa – but our African partners certainly are."

That is not entirely true.

Earlier this month, in fact, a White House report made it clear, for instance, that "the United States is currently using military force" in Somalia. At about the same moment, the *New York Times* revealed an imminent Obama administration plan to deem al-Shabab "to be part of the armed conflict that Congress authorized against the perpetrators of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, according to senior American officials," strengthening President-elect Donald Trump's authority to carry out missions there in 2017 and beyond.

As part of its long-fought shadow war against al-Shabab militants, the U.S. has carried out commando raids and drone assassinations there (with the latter markedly increasing in 2015-2016). On December 5th, President Obama issued his latest biannual "war powers" letter to Congress which noted that the military had not only "conducted strikes in defense of U.S. forces" there, but also in defense of local allied troops. The president also acknowledged that U.S. personnel "occasionally accompany regional forces, including Somali and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces, during counterterrorism operations."

Obama's war powers letter also mentioned American deployments in Cameroon, Djibouti, and Niger, efforts aimed at countering Joseph Kony's murderous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in

Central Africa, a long-running mission by military observers in Egypt, and a continuing deployment of forces supporting "the security of U.S. citizens and property" in rapidly deteriorating South Sudan.

The president offered only two sentences on U.S. military activities in Libya, although a long-running special ops and drone campaign there has been joined by a full-scale American air war, dubbed Operation Odyssey Lightning, against Islamic State militants, especially those in the city of Sirte. Since August 1st, in fact, the United States has carried out nearly 500 air strikes in Libya, according to figures supplied by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

Odyssey Lightning is, in fact, no outlier. While the "primary named operations" involving America's elite forces in Africa have been redacted from the declassified secret files in *TomDispatch's* possession, a November 2015 briefing by Bolduc, obtained via a separate FOIA request, reveals that his command was then involved in seven such operations on the continent. These likely included at least some of the following: Enduring Freedom-Horn of Africa, Octave Shield, and/or Juniper Garret, all aimed at East Africa; New Normal, an effort to secure U.S. embassies and assets around the continent; Juniper Micron, a U.S.-backed French and African mission to stabilize Mali (following a 2012 coup there by a U.S.-trained officer and the chaos that followed); Observant Compass, the long-running effort to decimate the Lord's Resistance Army (which recently retired AFRICOM chief General David Rodriguez derided as expensive and strategically unimportant); and Juniper Shield, a wide-ranging effort (formerly known as Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara) aimed at Algeria, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Tunisia, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. A 2015 briefing document by SOCAFRICA's parent unit, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), also lists an ongoing "gray zone" conflict in Uganda.

On any given day, between 1,500 and 1,700 American special operators and support personnel are deployed somewhere on the continent. Over the course of a year they conduct missions in more than 20 countries. According to Bolduc's November 2015 briefing, Special Operations Command Africa carries out 78 separate "mission sets." These include activities that range from enhancing "partner capability and capacity" to the sharing of intelligence.

Mission Creep

Most of what Bolduc's troops do involves working alongside and mentoring local allies. SOCAFRICA's showcase effort, for instance, is Flintlock, an annual training exercise in Northwest Africa involving elite American, European, and African forces, which provides the command with a plethora of publicity. More than 1,700 military personnel from 30-plus nations took part in Flintlock 2016. Next year, according to Bolduc, the exercise is expected "to grow to include SOF from more countries, [as well as] more interagency partners."

While the information has been redacted, the SOCAFRICA strategic planning document – produced in 2012 and scheduled to be fully declassified in 2037 – indicates the existence of one or more other training exercises. Bolduc recently mentioned two: Silent Warrior and Epic Guardian. In the past, the command has also taken part in exercises like Silver Eagle 10 and

Eastern Piper 12. (U.S. Africa Command did not respond to requests for comment on these exercises or other questions related to this article.)

Such exercises are, however, just a small part of the SOCAFRICA story. Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) missions are a larger one. Officially authorized to enable U.S. special operators to "practice skills needed to conduct a variety of missions, including foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, and counterterrorism," JCETs actually serve as a backdoor method of expanding U.S. military influence and contacts in Africa, since they allow for "incidental-training benefits" to "accrue to the foreign friendly forces at no cost." As a result, JCETs play an important role in forging and sustaining military relationships across the continent. Just how many of these missions the U.S. conducts in Africa is apparently unknown – even to the military commands involved. As *TomDispatch* reported earlier this year, according to SOCOM, the U.S. conducted 19 JCETs in 2012, 20 in 2013, and 20, again, in 2014. AFRICOM, however, claims that there were nine JCETs in 2012, 18 in 2013, and 26 in 2014.

Whatever the true number, JCETs are a crucial cog in the SOCAFRICA machine. "During a JCET, exercise or training event, a special forces unit might train a partner force in a particular tactical skill and can quickly ascertain if the training audience has adopted the capability," explained Brigadier General Bolduc. "Trainers can objectively measure competency, then exercise... that particular skill until it becomes a routine."

In addition, SOCAFRICA also utilizes a confusing tangle of State Department and Pentagon programs and activities, aimed at local allies that operate under a crazy quilt of funding schemes, monikers, and acronyms. These include deployments of Mobile Training Teams, Joint Planning Advisory Teams, Joint Military Education Teams, Civil Military Support Elements, as well as Military Information Support Teams that engage in what once was called psychological operations, or psyops – that is, programs designed to "inform and influence foreign target audiences as appropriately authorized."

Special Operations Command Africa also utilizes an almost mind-numbing panoply of "security cooperation programs" and other training activities including Section 1207(n) (also known as the Transitional Authorities for East Africa and Yemen, which provides equipment, training, and other aid to the militaries of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Yemen "to conduct counter-terrorism operations against al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda affiliates, and al-Shabab" and "enhance the capacity of national military forces participating in the African Union Mission in Somalia"); the Global Security Contingency Fund (designed to enhance the "capabilities of a country's national military forces, and other national security forces that conduct border and maritime security, internal defense, and counterterrorism operations"); the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (or PREACT, designed to build counterterror capacities and foster military and law enforcement efforts in East African countries, including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda); and, among others, the Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Partnership, the Global Peace Operations Initiative, the Special Operations to Combat Terrorism, the Combatting Terrorism Fellowship, and another known as Counter-Narcotic Terrorism.

Like Africa's terror groups and Bolduc's special ops troops, the almost 20 initiatives utilized by SOCAFRICA – a sprawling mass of programs that overlie and intersect with each other – have a

border-busting quality to them. What they don't have is clear records of success. A 2013 RAND Corporation analysis called such capacity-building programs "a tangled web, with holes, overlaps, and confusions." A 2014 RAND study analyzing U.S. security cooperation (SC) found that there "was no statistically significant correlation between SC and change in countries' fragility in Africa or the Middle East." A 2016 RAND report on "defense institution building" in Africa noted a "poor understanding of partner interests" by the U.S. military.

"We're supporting African military professionalization and capability-building efforts, we're supporting development and governance via civil affairs and military information support operations teams," Bolduc insisted publicly. "[A]ll programs must be useful to the partner nation (not the foreign agenda) and necessary to advance the partner nations' capabilities. If they don't pass this simple test... we need to focus on programs that do meet the African partner nation's needs."

The 2012 SOCAFRICA strategic planning document obtained by *TomDispatch* reveals, however, that Special Operations Command Africa's primary aim is not fostering African development, governance, or military professionalization. "SOCAFRICA's foremost objective is the prevention of an attack against America or American interests," according to the declassified secret report. In other words, a "foreign agenda," not the needs of African partner nations, is what's driving the elite force's border-busting missions.

American Aims vs. African Needs

Special Operations Command spokesman Ken McGraw cautioned that because SOCAFRICA and AFRICOM have both changed commanders since the 2012 document was issued, it was likely out of date. "I recommend you contact SOCAFRICA," he advised. That command failed to respond to multiple requests for information or comment. There are, however, no indications that it has actually altered its "foremost objective," while Bolduc's public comments suggest that the U.S. military's engagement in the region is going strong.

"Our partners and [forward deployed U.S. personnel] recognize the arbitrary nature of borders and understand the only way to combat modern-day threats like ISIS, AQIM [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb], Boko Haram, and myriad others is to leverage the capabilities of SOF professionals working in concert," said Bolduc. "Borders may be notional and don't protect a country from the spread of violent extremism... but neither do oceans, mountains... or distance."

In reality, however, oceans and distance have kept most Americans safe from terrorist organizations like AQIM and Boko Haram. The same cannot be said for those who live in the nations menaced by these groups. In Africa, terrorist organizations and attacks have spiked alongside the increase in U.S. Special Operations missions there. In 2006, the percentage of forward-stationed special operators on the continent hovered at 1% of total globally deployed SOF forces. By 2014, that number had hit 10% – a jump of 900% in less than a decade. During that same span, according to information from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland, terror incidents in Africa increased precipitously – from just over 100 per year to nearly 2,400 annually. During the same

period, the number of transnational terrorist organizations and illicit groups operating on the continent jumped from one to, according to Bolduc's reckoning, nearly 50.

Correlation may not equal causation, but SOCAFRICA's efforts have coincided with significantly worsening terrorist violence and the growth and spread of terror groups. And it shouldn't be a surprise. While Bolduc publicly talks up the needs of African nations, his border-busting commandos operate under a distinctive America-first mandate and a mindset firmly in keeping with that of the incoming commander-in-chief. "My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people and American security above all else. It has to be first," Donald Trump said earlier this year in a major foreign policy speech. Kicking off his victory tour earlier this month, the president-elect echoed this theme. "From now on, it's going to be America first. Okay? America first. We're going to put ourselves first," he told a crowd in Cincinnati, Ohio.

In Africa, the most elite troops soon to be under his command have, in fact, been operating this way for years. "[W]e will prioritize and focus our operational efforts in those areas where the threat[s] to United States interests are most grave," says the formerly secret SOCAFRICA document. "Protecting America, Americans, and American interests is our overarching objective and must be reflected in everything we do."