Washington’s Expansionist Policy in Africa

In recent decades, the African continent has been the target of USA’s expansionist policy, which ramped up after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the time, the United States of America turned towards Africa, a continent rich in natural resources and of strategic importance. Donald Trump’s political course helped consolidate this policy by the pivot away from Asia (the focus of Barack Obama’s administration) to Africa.

The United States is particularly interested, from an economic perspective, in the continent’s natural resources including, first and foremost, Africa’s fossil fuels and raw materials (such as rare-earth minerals) that are critically important for military and civilian digital technologies. South Africa alone is in 6th place based on the size of its rare-earth element (REE) deposits. In addition, a stable supply of minerals, such as cobalt, manganese and chromium, from Africa is becoming critically important for the United States recently.

With the view of aligning US trade and economic policy with that of African countries, the US Congress approved the establishment of the United States-sub-Saharan Africa Trade and Economic Cooperation Forum. As a result, the head of the US Department of State has to hold annual sessions at the ministerial level and the US President organizes periodic meetings with leaders of African countries to discuss specific issues of cooperation. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), enacted in 2000 as part of broader legislation on trade and development, plays a special role in the scheme. By passing the AGOA, the U.S. Congress acknowledged that nations in sub-Saharan Africa are rich in natural and human resources, and have an enormous economic potential, which is why the region is of a long-term political and strategic interest to the United States.

In order to reinforce its position in Africa, the United States is increasingly focused on using its political and military leverage. For the first time since 1945, the USA established a new regional command, the United States Africa
Command (AFRICOM), in 2007 whose area of responsibility covers the territory of 53 countries. AFRICOM’s mission encompasses devising a strategy for conducting operations on the African continent and training military forces of African nations loyal to Washington. One of the key tasks of the United States Africa Command is to protect and secure the continent’s natural resources and the means of their transportation. According to The Guardian, 7,500 American soldiers are part of the United States Africa Command at present. These servicemen operate in practically all African nations (in 2017, there were 6,000 of them).

Therefore, the United States is the only nation in the world that has, as part of its armed forces, a separate command for Africa, which, with the aid of American weapons, lends support to Washington’s expansionist policy. Even colonial powers, such as France and Great Britain, which are still attempting to oversee various processes in a substantial number of African nations, chose not to make such an overt move.

The most effective means of wielding greater power and control over the region are military assistance programs put in place by the Pentagon in the African nations that the United States has military and political interest in. Some of the more prominent military aid schemes include the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education & Training (IMET) programs. Over the course of its existence, IMET has transformed into a truly effective and functional means of spreading US ideology, thus making a substantial contribution to the rise of pro-U.S. lobby groups within military and political elites of many African nations. The US Department of Defense allocates, on a regular basis, tens of millions of US dollars towards the implementation of programs that provide assistance with antiterrorism efforts of, and the purchase of weapons for, servicemen of countries in the Sahel, such as Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. In addition to programs aimed at certain countries and regions, the U.S. Department of Defense routinely allocates substantial funds for specific initiatives, i.e. training military personnel of especially selected “partner” nations (Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Senegal and Botswana).

These days, Washington is engaged in approximately 100 military operations in Africa. And many of these are staged in countries that are not considered to be combat zones by the US government. In the past six years alone, American servicemen have taken part in special operations in territories of 13 African nations.

The growth in US military presence is unprecedented: based on the number of American special operations units in Africa (which increased 17-fold in the last 10 years), the continent takes second place after the Middle East.

Although data about the vast network of US military bases worldwide (for instance, in Europe and Asia) is available for the most part, Washington has made a substantial effort to classify information about such facilities in Africa. A number of media outlets have reported that there are 34 bases for US special operations forces (SOF) on the continent. However, AFRICOM’s secret internal documents, obtained by TomDispatch thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, reveal a different story (and open our eyes to): a constantly growing network of US military bases in Africa. According to the information disclosed, the number of locations where American troops are stationed increased to 46, this number includes 15 permanent bases that allow the United States to engage in hot-zones in Africa. USA’s growing number of military bases in Africa is crucially important for this nation because of Washington’s ever-expanding conflicts in the Middle East, which include wars involving Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

However, according to The Intercept, as “US military efforts in Africa have soared,” “key indicators of security and stability on the continent have plummeted.” In addition, “America’s behavior simply cannot be categorized as altruistic because its overly militarized post-9/11 foreign policy actually correlates to an increase of violence on the continent rather than deterrence,” Temi Ibirogba, the Program and Research Associate for the Africa Program at the Center for International Policy, has said in an interview with The Intercept. “American officials seem to have the false perception that American foreign policy is loved and welcomed by Africans, but it’s really the Chinese who are winning there at the moment,” she added.

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