

Pentagon's "Footprint" Growing in Africa

By Jim Lobe | May 12, 2003

Africa appears to be getting more attention from the Pentagon as the U.S. military makes major geostrategic shifts in its global deployments. While the Defense Department has made no formal announcements about U.S. plans to acquire base rights on the African mainland, other moves suggest that interest toward that end is growing.

On May 8, the Pentagon announced that a U.S. counter-terrorism warship, the USS Mt. Whitney, is returning home from its tour off the coast of the Horn of Africa, but not before leaving its command personnel and equipment at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, which has acted as the main U.S. base for counter-terrorist activities off-shore and in the region since after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The Mt. Whitney's departure means that Camp Lemonier will now be home to 1,800 U.S. troops, sailors, fliers, and civilian personnel at a highly strategic point sandwiched between Ethiopia and Somalia and just across the Red Sea from Yemen.

The announcement followed little-noticed remarks last week by NATO Supreme Commander, U.S. General James Jones, that Washington plans to boost its troop presence in West Africa, a troubled region that now provides more than 15% of all U.S. oil imports, a percentage slated to rise to 25% within 12 years. "The carrier battle groups of the future and the expeditionary strike groups of the future may not spend six months in the Med[iterranean Sea], but I'll bet they'll spend half the time going down the west coast of Africa," Jones told a Defense Writers Group breakfast in late April. While he did not discuss the vast reserves of West African oil off-shore, Jones said the region included "large, ungoverned areas ... that are clearly the new routes of narco-trafficking, terrorists' training, and hotbeds of instability," which Washington and its NATO partners will have to address.

Terrorism and Oil

Both moves "capture exactly what the main interests of the administration in Africa are at the moment," according to Daniel Volman, director of the African Security Research Project. "They're very concerned about terrorism and Islamic fundamentalists in East Africa and the Horn, and they're clearly very interested in access to African oil." The new developments also come amid reports of plans for major changes in U.S. deployments around Eurasia in

the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and President George W. Bush's administration's adoption of a far more ambitious global military strategy centered on preventing the rise of any possible regional rival in strategic parts of the Eurasian landmass.

The purpose of the new deployments is both to reduce the U.S. military "footprint" in countries where the U.S. military presence has become a political burden for host governments, and to reposition U.S. forces globally for more rapid deployment to likely trouble spots, especially Central Asia, the Gulf, and East Asia. The Pentagon is particularly interested in getting access to facilities throughout the region where it can pre-position weapons and supplies, rather than having to rely on their transport from more distant bases.

The administration has already announced it intends to withdraw virtually all of its 8,000 uniformed personnel from Saudi Arabia after 12 years of basing its Gulf air operations there, and will move much of it to Qatar's Al-Udeid Air Base. The Pentagon also plans to reduce forces in Kuwait, the launching pad for its invasion of Iraq, although it will retain its use of naval facilities in nearby Bahrain. In another country where hosting the U.S. military has become politically problematic—Turkey—Washington has already withdrawn virtually all of its forces at the Incirlik Air base in the southwest, which was used as the base for patrolling Iraq's northern "no-fly" zone from 1991 until last month.

There have been persistent reports that the Pentagon hopes to use as many as four army and air bases in Iraq, although Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has denied them. But Washington appears intent on retaining access to bases in Central Asia, notably Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, which it used during the war in Afghanistan.

In Europe, it appears virtually certain that Washington will soon be withdrawing most of the 60,000 troops from bases in Germany that they have occupied for more than



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half a century. Romania and Bulgaria have offered much cheaper deals for bases that will be closer to the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Gulf sub-regions.

Washington may also shift and possibly boost the 100,000 active-duty personnel who are currently stationed in the western Pacific, primarily in South Korea and Japan.

Until now, U.S. interest in East Africa and the Horn has been confined mainly to its proximity to the Arabian Gulf and particularly to Yemen, from which the al Qaeda terrorist group has historically recruited heavily. Yemen has also been the site of several attacks against U.S. and other western targets, including the suicide bombing of the USS Cole, which killed 17 sailors in October 2000. In addition, Washington has been concerned about infiltration into the Horn, particularly in Somalia, of al Qaeda militants after the Afghanistan campaign.

The Mt. Whitney has acted as the headquarters for the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), which will now move to Camp Lemonier. The camp, a former French base, has been home to hundreds of U.S. military and intelligence personnel, including Special Operations Forces since shortly after the 9/11 attacks.

“The movement of the CJTF-HOA headquarters ashore does not signal any change in focus for coalition counter-terrorism operations in the Horn of Africa, but rather represents a logical ‘next step’ in the progress of CJTF-HOA operations,” the Pentagon said. It added that the group’s mission “is, and will continue to be, to detect, disrupt, and defeat transnational terrorism in conjunction with coalition partners across the Horn of Africa region.” It

said the mission was not tied to “a fixed period of time” and that Washington has already made improvements in the facilities there and may be intending to use it as a permanent base of operations. Jones noted that the administration also has access rights to naval facilities in nearby Mombasa, Kenya, but Djibouti may be preferable “because it may be more politically reliable.”

In West Africa, Jones said NATO is planning to deploy a prototype quick-reaction force of between 2,000 and 3,000 units, including air, ground, and sea forces, as early as October. He did not say where such a base would be sited. Volman considered the fact that he spoke about carrier battle groups especially significant. “That would be much bigger than anything they’ve done before,” he said, adding that it may also require more permanent facilities than have been available in the past. The tiny country of Sao Tome e Principe offered to host a U.S. navy base last year, but Washington has not yet acted on the invitation.

Aside from Nigeria, the major oil producers in West Africa include Angola, Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea, where Washington plans to re-open its embassy only eight years after it closed it. In the meantime, major deposits of oil have been found off its coast, and U.S. companies have gained by far the largest share of concessions to exploit them. The Gulf of Guinea, which runs along the coast, is believed to hold as much as 30 billion barrels of reserves.

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