

The origins of AFRICOM: the Obama administration, the Sahara-Sahel and US Militarization of Africa

A forum with Daniel Volman & Jeremy Keenan

Introduction by Stephen Chan

AFRICOM brings together three separate US military commands. Militarization of Africa is being co-ordinated by AFRICOM. It was established by President George Bush, following the war on terror and to serve other US interests. AFRICOM will also reflect on new doctrines of counterinsurgency and that means militarization as well as taking on developmental functions too.

I will make three brief points. My first point is based on the War on Terror and prosecution of US interests – the way I look at what happened in Ethiopia and Somalia, for instance. Ethiopians initiated an action which took them into Mogadishu. I see that as a great disaster. This action was cleared by Washington, which

seemed to be oblivious to the long standing enmities and military actions that have taken place between the two countries over the years. They were oblivious also to the fact that the Ethiopian army still functions along Warsaw pact lines, which means their attack on Mogadishu was always going to take place ‘tank first’ to destroy huge sections of the city. What it has done is to form a hardened cadre in southern areas of Somalia of more fundamental Islamic groups. In other words, it has created a rod with which to beat people’s backs rather than solved any of the new problems of the poor in terms of the normal enunciation of US interests.

My second point is on development. If this is going to have a developmental function, what on earth is that

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going to be? The US military is not a developmental agency. There are many others involved in developmental work who are better equipped to do this, even if it is not perfect. The US military will add nothing to the developmental desk, certainly not in terms of civil engineering projects. For instance, there will be nothing that could rival Chinese projects in terms of civil engineering projects.

My last point is about the outsourcing of logistical supplies and materials. I hope it makes use of African contractors instead of simply using American ones and I hope that there will not be a reliance on security agencies like Blackwater.

Is AFRICOM here to stay? I'm afraid it is just like EU-COM: here to stay. Will it do any good? I will leave that to our speakers. Will the Africans have their say? I hope so.

The debate will be led by two speakers. The first is Daniel Volman and then Jeremy Keenan.

Daniel Volman is the director of the African Security Research Project in Washington DC, a member of the board of directors of the US Association of Concerned African Scholars (ACAS) and is a specialist on US security policy in Africa. He has been working on this field now for some three decades.

Jeremy Keenan will be known to a number of you as a professorial research associate here at SOAS. He is an anthropologist and an authority on the Sahara. He has written a number of articles and books in recent years on US approaches to counter terrorism in Africa. Jeremy has asked me to apologise for him: he may have to present sitting down as the years he spent tramping around the Sahara carrying his supplies has done some 'interesting things' to his back.

Contribution by Daniel Volman

I want to thank Stephen, SOAS and the Royal Africa Society for organising and hosting this event. I am going to be talking in fairly general terms about AFRICOM-leaving as much time as possible for Q&A. I have written extensively on the subject for last thirty years. If you need facts, figures and data, you can go to my website. I will leave my business cards on the desk. If you want to follow up on this you can contact me directly.

As you probably know the US inaugurated a new regional combatant command officially over a year ago in Oct 1 2008. But the process of creation actually goes back about ten or twelve years and reflects the dramatic escalation of US military involvement in the African continent. It is hard to get figures on military activity, but the estimate has risen over the last ten years from about \$100-200 million a year to current level of \$1 billion and a half a year. This does not involve separate funding, which is delivered through the US Department of State for private military contractors operating in Africa as part of AFRICOM and US military involvement in the continent as Steven was discussing.

What is responsible for the growing US military involvement began in the late 1990s? There are two major perceptions of US foreign policy makers. One was that the US was becoming increasingly dependent on resources, particularly oil, coming from the African continent. For example, today the US imports more oil from Africa than it does from the entire Middle East. The US still imports more from the Western hemisphere — Mexico, Canada, Columbia, Venezuela and Ecuador — which has a lot to do with explaining US policy these days towards Latin America and disputes with the Chavez regime. But, after that Africa is the next most important source of imported oil. Nigeria and Angola are now the US's 5th and 6th largest suppliers of US oil imports. American policy makers began to see this happening in the late 1990s.

Another thing that they figured out was the growing involvement of al Qaeda and armed Islamic groups in Africa, particularly with the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania which took place in 1998.

I want to emphasis that these developments began before the Bush administration. This whole process began in the second term of the administration of William Clinton and has continued under the administration of the current president, Barak Obama. So it is not a partisan political issue in the US. Instead it represents a bi-partisan consensus amongst the political elite, that Africa is of growing military importance to the US and therefore requires a growing level of military involvement on the continent and that is what has led to the creation of the new African command.

Prior to the creation of AFRICOM, as Steven mentioned, US military activities in Africa, which until the

1990s were relatively minimal, were actually handled by separate Commands. Like most American military activities in Africa they were conducted through European Command because for the most part the US thought they could rely on their European allies to handle any crisis with their own forces. The US was busy pursuing its global rivalry with the Soviet Union, engaged in the Korean or Vietnam war or in other various military projects in Latin America, as well as forming new relations with Asia. They felt Africa could safely be left in the hands of European allies. But that began to change in the late 1990s: Africa was now of direct importance to the US national security policy.

What is the AFRICOM mission? US policy makers have gone to great lengths to obscure and, to put it bluntly, deceive people about what AFRICOM is for. They talk a lot about African peace keeping operations, humanitarian relief operations and the like, but the people directly appointed to run AFRICOM, General William Ward, commander of AFRICOM, and his deputy director Vice Admiral Robert Moeller, are under no illusions about what their primary mission is. When they were first appointed and confirmed to office it never occurred to them not to tell the truth. And so in the statement they made in 2008, they talked about US interests in oil and concerns about terrorism in Africa. Since that time they have been pulled to one side and told not to be so honest about Africa in public. They are now going much more closely to the official line on AFRICOM, which is to demonstrate a benign US interest in Africa. This is the line which has been most prominently proclaimed by the deputy Secretary of Defence for Africa, Theresa Whelan who held office until the turn of this year and was the highest ranking person in the defence department. She was charged with responsibility of creating AFRICOM. In public she never said anything about the true mission of AFRICOM, but unfortunately other members of the military didn't know that they weren't supposed to blow the cover. So, they actually quoted in their own publication statements that she made in a briefing to European command where all she talked about was oil, resources, terrorism, lines of communications access to bases etc. So, people who actually run military activities in Africa, although they will now be much more careful in public not to say these things, were never under any illusion as to what their primary missions were.

What is AFRICOM actually doing in Africa to fulfil these

missions? Well, first of all, it's carrying out a whole series of activities which are designed to strengthen the ability of key African regimes to stay in power, through arm sales and providing military training programmes by American military personnel travelling to Africa and training African military forces. There are also American military training programmes that bring African military officers to the US for training, as well as various other security assistance programmes to strengthen the military capability of, first of all, regimes – usually oppressive undemocratic regimes – which control countries which are primary sources of oil and other resources. I am thinking countries like Nigeria, Algeria, Angola, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, (the list of major oil producing countries is fairly long), as well as countries which have been willing and able to serve as proxies for the US on the global war on terror, particularly Kenya and Ethiopia. With regards to Somalia it is a primary area of concern for America. In North Africa, countries like Algeria, Chad, Mali and Niger are known as the Trans Sahara Counter-Terrorism region with regards to the perceived threat of terrorism.

But professional military officers who run US military activities in Africa know that this is a strategy which is likely to fail over time. You can only keep these regimes in power for so long, as they tend to collapse with the growing movement of democratisation in Africa or simply fragment and self destruct, which is a primary concern for the Pentagon. The day may come when the US may have to use its own forces to intervene directly in Africa. It is the same trajectory as we have seen in the Middle East under the US Central Command, which was established in essentially the same way in 1979. Central Command was created to fulfil the pledge made by President Jimmy Carter that the United States would be willing to use military force if necessary to protect the free flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf. And the pledge that has been known as the Carter doctrine has been the basis of US military involvement in the Middle East ever since. Central command started out as a small headquarters based in Florida. It had no control over or command of troops, but as I am sure you are all well aware it's now running two major wars in the Middle East and major military bases in the region.

AFRICOM is essentially following the same trajectory. In addition to the assistance already mentioned, there has been a dramatic build up of US naval forces off the coast of Africa, particularly off the oil rich coast of

Guinea and also off the coast of Somalia. The US has established, essentially as part of Central Command, a base on the African continent in Djibouti, which originally focused on US involvement in the Middle East but is becoming increasingly focused over time on the Horn of Africa and East Africa. It's the base from which the US launches military strikes into Somalia, for example. In addition the US has concluded what are known as 'access agreements'. It's understood that it's not desirable for the US to build a lot of expensive highly visible military bases around Africa. Rather, what they need is access to as many local military facilities as possible. The US therefore concluded these base access agreements with governments right across the continent, because it has no way of knowing which part of Africa it might have to intervene in directly. What the US needs is access to as many different bases as possible. And, when asked if it has a base in Botswana or Ghana, it will say 'no we don't have bases in those countries'. And technically these people are telling the truth, but what they aren't obviously going on to explain is that we have already reached agreements with governments in those countries, in that anytime we want to we can use their military bases. The US has the capability to set up very large military bases literally in a matter of 24-48 hours and that's essentially what happens when an American president visits an African country. They take along a US military base with them and establish it for the duration of the trip and then remove it when they leave. They bring in thousands and thousands of marines for security, they bring in whole stock piles of military equipment and other supplies. They bring in their own power generating system because they know they can't rely on local power grids; they bring along sophisticated communication equipment systems because they need to communicate back and forth with Washington. In addition to that they have begun doing contingency planning and other preparations for direct military intervention in Africa. It's not because of the fact that they want to do this, but they understand that the time is coming when they are going to get the order to do this.

One important example of this was at what is known as a war games scenario, which was conducted by the US Army War College in May 2008. They had never done these scenarios for Africa before, but it was part of the build up to the inauguration of AFRICOM. In spring 2008 they did a total of four scenarios, with two of them for Africa. One of those was Somalia, although we don't know very much about that because

the people involved in it didn't have much to say in public about it. But the people who were involved in the Nigeria scenario were so disturbed by the prospects they were facing that they went very public with a lot of detailed information about those scenarios. First of all the scenario was set in the year 2013, five years from now, and what it anticipated was that all oil supplies coming in from Nigeria would be coming to an end. That would mean that the US would lose access to roughly 10% of its oil imports. A lot of oil would still be coming to the US, but the loss of 10% of America's total oil imports would thoroughly disrupt the US economy. People would go to their gas station and there would be no gasoline. People would go to their stores and there would be no food because it's all brought in on trucks. More and more of it is brought in to the US on ships. The US depends on access to petroleum, so they understood the implications if that happened. What they were thinking in terms of was not that the disruption was caused by MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) or insurgent movements in Nigeria, but by the fragmentation and destruction of the Nigerian government, which they considered was bent on committing suicide. What they anticipated was that the government would fragment, with the situation degenerating into a struggle for control of the oil resources and various elements of the Nigerian government. The Nigerian military would start fighting for control of the Niger delta and that is what would bring Nigeria's oil production to a halt, at which point the president of the US would essentially have two options, in their point of view. They explored all alternatives, such as getting the South Africans to intervene, or maybe the CIA could find a way to reach a resolution, but they eventually concluded that there were really only two options. One is that the President of the United States could get up in front of the American people and say there's no gasoline at the gas stations and there's nothing I can do about it, which would of course be political suicide for any President. The only other alternative they could see was for the US to send 20,000 American troops into the Niger Delta in the hope that somehow they could get the oil flowing again. But these guys are not stupid people; they know that this is an impossible mission for the military. There's no way that the military could get the oil flowing again—it would be impossible to protect with military force. But they could see that under these circumstances there would be irresistible pressure on any American president to send American troops to Nigeria.

In my opinion, this is why they went very public about this kind of information. They were really hoping, by alerting the American public about what was coming, that somehow pressure could be brought to bear on whoever is running the US whenever that happens to make sure that they never got that order, because they really understand how futile and crazy such a military adventure would be. They don't want to think about it, they don't want to be engaged in direct military interventions at that time. They can see that day coming.

That brings us to what has changed or not changed since President Obama came into office. He came into office, elected just after the official inaugurations of African Command. All the evidence I see is that he has essentially decided to continue on the same trajectory established under the Clinton and Bush administration. In his budget proposal for the fiscal year 2010, which began in Oct 2009, he asked for more money for arms to be sent to African regimes, more money for military training, more money for the operations of AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, more money for bases in Djibouti, more money for the naval operations off the oil rich coast of Guinea. And that was in addition to everything else that was contained in the budget. When Secretary of State Hilary Clinton went to Africa and made a tour of African countries, it was significant that virtually every single country she toured was a primary recipient of military assistance; countries like Kenya, South Africa, Angola, Nigeria. In addition, after discussions with Nigeria and the Nigerian military, she stated that the Obama administration would do whatever it could to fulfil its pledges within the budget request. She came out and said, in addition to everything we have promised to the Nigerians, if they have any more requests for military equipment to be used specifically in the Niger Delta, the US would be perfectly willing to provide that. It gives you a sense of how the trajectory is going to be continued and the dangers it poses for Africa, but also for the US as well because of all its military activity. In my opinion, first of all, this kind of military activity puts oil resources in jeopardy and strengthens the threat of terrorism. That's what the people at the Pentagon understand. So, beyond that, it will inevitably lead to the day when the US will be forced to go into combat in Africa and take responsibility for the young men and women under their command, which they take very seriously. They don't want to see them coming back in body bags from a disastrous military intervention they foresee happening in countries like Nigeria.

Contribution given by Jeremy Keenan

I want to start by welcoming Daniel to this country and to say how much I appreciate him as a colleague and a scholar of immense stature in Washington. I have shared several platforms with him, but this is the first time over here, so I give him a big welcome.

However, I fear that today might be the parting of the ways. That is not because I disagree with anything he says. On the contrary, I support his work totally. Rather, it is because I have been replaced from contributing to a new book, which both Daniel and I were contributing to, about AFRICOM. Its title is US strategy in Africa, AFRICOM, Terrorism and Security Challenges in Africa, being published by Routledge. On Monday, three days ago, I had some interesting telephone calls from their editor, basically telling me that my chapter was being withdrawn from the book. After a little beating around the bush we decided that this was political censorship. I was told I was being replaced by General 'Kip' Ward (Head of Africom), so at least I have been replaced by a General and also a Colonel, Col Kelly Langdorf. So, you have a General and a Colonel replacing a Professor of SOAS, which is probably about the right equivalence.

I see that Daniel is still left in as a contributor to the book and has clearly been approved, which makes me wonder what I have written that warrants censorship? Of course, the result of being censored is that the chapter will be around the world like chocolate cakes and will be read by 'millions' more than if it had been in a fairly boring textbook! My answer to the question of why I have been censored is that I provide a bit more explanation as to why AFRICOM was established, which, as Daniel has correctly said, was really all about the US oil crisis. But it also had to do with problems that America had in 2002 and 2003 with the War on Terror, which the US was using at that time to legitimise its military engagement in Africa.

It is all very well to use the pretext of the global War on Terror to secure Africa, but with the exceptions of the bombings of the two US Embassies in East Africa in 1998 that Daniel mentioned, there has been very little terrorism in Africa as a whole — certainly not in the regions where the oil is! However on the other side of the continent, what I might call the 'oil side', we get, beginning in 2002 and 2003, the fabrication of terrorism, centred on Algeria but then spreading across the

Sahel and eventually linking in 2005 with Nigeria. The way in which this terrorism was fabricated is a very long narrative, which I don't have time to go into here except to say that I have written two volumes on it. The first volume, *The Dark Sahara: America's war on terror in Africa*, is here and you can buy it tonight. That whole long narrative was conducted by the Algerian secret military intelligence services — the DRS. It was conducted and orchestrated by the DRS, but with the knowledge and collusion of the US. In essence, they took 32 Europeans hostage and claimed it to be the work of Islamic extremists. They took the hostages through southern Algeria and then into Mali, the Sahel.

It was this operation that provided the pretext for the launch of a new front on the War on Terror in Africa: the Sahara-Sahelian front. How do I know the details of this? The simple answer is because I was there. I was in contact with every single party involved in the operation, including the Algerian intelligence and police services, the gendarmerie and military, as well as the hostages (after their release!), as well as people in the US at the Pentagon and the State Department who have corroborated key elements of what I am saying. Much of this corroboration is in my second volume, *The Dying Sahara*, coming out in Spring.

What was the US up to? It was part of an operation some of you may know of already, namely the Pro-active Pre-emptive Operations Group, known as the P2OG, or 'Pee-Twos' as some people call it. This was basically a secret, covert programme which was proposed by the Defence Science Board, a think-tank for the Pentagon, in June 2002 to infiltrate, flush out or even fabricate terrorism. The P2OG documents found their way into the public domain a few months later and were subsequently corroborated by Seymour Hersh in the US, and more recently by Nafeez Ahmed who wrote about it in the *New Internationalist* last month. The first 'pilot' test of the P2OG was here in the Algerian Sahara and Sahel in 2002 and 2003. So, we have this very duplicitous, highly criminal background of fabricated terrorism to legitimise a new front on the War on Terror in Africa and hence the US's militarisation of the continent. You will find countless reports of it if you dig into the media, especially into those stories that are focused on the vast, 'ungoverned' areas of Africa: Mali, Niger and Southern Algeria where this narrative took place.

I will move on now into the Obama era. If we take the few months running up to Obama's election, there was a certain fear amongst AFRICOM people. With a new President coming into office, there was an anxiety amongst AFRICOM personnel that AFRICOM might get cut or even disbanded altogether. There was therefore a feeling during 2008 amongst certain elements of AFRICOM that they needed to deliver some sort of military success, because they hadn't really done that. They needed to prove that they were correct in their assessment of the War on Terror and on the threats facing the continent. So, they did two things. One was to attack the Lords Resistance Army, which was a complete shambles — a disaster.

The second was on the counter terrorism front, where we have seen over the last twelve months a remarkable parallel with, almost a complete re-run of what I have just glossed over, namely the 2003 hostage takings in Algeria and Mali. What is interesting is that the people who have taken 'westerners' hostage this year (there were eight in three groups, with one of them, a British tourist, being murdered) were the same people who took the hostages in 2003. Although the name has changed from GSPC (Groupe salafise pour le prédication et le combat) to AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb), it is essentially the same organisation, heavily infiltrated by the Algerian secret intelligence service (DRS [Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité, Department of Intelligence and Security, i.e., military intelligence]) and with its key leaders (emirs) linked to the DRS. In fact, the murder of the British hostage, Edwin Dyer, in May 2008 was undertaken by the second-in-command (Abdelhamed abou Zaïd) of the 2003 operation. So, the last twelve months has seen an almost complete replay of the 2003 operation. And, once again, the US has used these new hostage-takings to justify its presence in Africa and AFRICOM's intervention in the Sahel region by saying that Al Qaeda is expanding in Niger, Mali and southern Algeria. The details of all this are in *The Dying Sahara*.

This latest scenario of 'terrorist' activities has been acted out in this part of the Sahara for other specific reasons: it contains the world's second largest uranium deposits, and is a fundamental resources for France, supplying its electricity industry, which is 80 percent nuclear, with its uranium. It is also the region which will carry the central section of the proposed Trans-Saharan gas pipeline (TSGP) from Nigeria to Algeria. In other words, the nexus of where all this supposed Al

Qaeda activity is going on is actually one of the most important strategic energy locations in the world today. It is therefore interesting to note, but perhaps not surprising, that this latest batch of hostage-taking has drawn the UK's counter terrorism people into the area, along with those of France and Spain, all of whom have major vested interests in these resources. A couple of months or so ago, we even had Scotland Yard opening a new office on North West Africa! I have been in correspondence with London mayor, Boris Johnson, asking him what the London police are doing in Timbuktu, but he has not yet come back to me with a satisfactory answer.

The last question I would like to comment on is whether President Obama actually knows what is being done in his name in Africa. I don't think so. One reason for that is because he has massive problems on the home front. No matter how important Africa might be to America's future, it is not going to be high on his agenda while he is faces so many domestic problems. My second reason is perhaps more important. I put the

question: Who is advising him? His National Security Advisor, appointed by Obama himself, is General James Jones: smart, intelligent and touted as a future presidential candidate. General Jones was SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander for Europe) and head of US EUCOM (US European Command). The terrorism of 2002-2003 that I have mentioned above and which was fabricated in Algeria took place on General Jones's watch. It is extremely unlikely that such a delicate operation would have been undertaken without his knowledge, especially as top US generals actually visited the area. I know, because I was there at the time of their visit. Now that General Jones is the NSA to President Obama, it is unlikely that he will blow the whistle on the peccadilloes of his past.

I would therefore like to give Obama the benefit of the doubt, certainly at the international level. America, as Daniel has said, is clearly continuing the AFRICOM policies of this predecessor, but I would put a question mark on whether Obama has actually been fully briefed on what is being done.