

US expands covert military surveillance in Africa

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The Obama administration is expanding its intelligence operations in sub-Saharan Africa, according to a lengthy report in the *Washington Post*. The increased surveillance is part of rapidly expanding military operations in Africa that are being carried out under the pretext of the “war on terror,” but are directed in large part at countering rising Chinese economic connections on the resource-rich continent.

The focus of the *Post*’s report was on aerial surveillance programs used to gather intelligence on local militant groups. The vast majority of these operations are being run by private companies, which are responsible for supplying pilots, sensor operators, intelligence analysts, mechanics, and linguists.

According to the report, about a dozen airbases have been developed in Africa since 2007. These bases are generally small additions to existing airfields in various African countries and are used to run small aircraft, disguised as private planes, and equipped with discreet surveillance equipment. Permission for these operations is usually granted by the local government in exchange for the US sharing the intelligence it gathers.

The program targets a wide variety of different groups on the pretext of combating terrorism. These include the loose affiliation of Tuareg secessionists and Islamists in Northern Mali, the Lord’s Resistance Army in Central Africa, and al-Shabab in Southern Somalia. Although humanitarian concerns and the threat of global terrorism are being used to justify these operations, they in reality comprise part of a new Scramble for Africa, as the US and Europe compete over the area’s natural resources and seek to minimize Chinese influence.

In particular, the *Post* report cited two targets of growing interest on the part of the US military: Boko

Haram in Nigeria, and the Lord’s Resistance Army’s operations in Sudan and South Sudan. In the case of Nigeria, which provides over 8 percent of the United States’ crude oil, the economic motivation for “anti-terrorism” is particularly clear.

Since the very beginning of AFRICOM’s operations, the US has been preparing plans for possible military intervention in Nigeria. In 2008, the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania conducted a series of “wargame scenarios” concerning possible interventions for AFRICOM, and estimated that it would take 20,000 troops to control the Niger Delta oilfields. At a February 18, 2008 AFRICOM conference, Vice Admiral Robert T. Moeller stated that the guiding principle of AFRICOM was to protect “the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market.”

Only a month later, the first commander of AFRICOM, General William Ward, declared that due to the US’s increasing reliance on African oil, the “number one theater-wide goal” would be combating terrorism. Although the US did not intervene militarily, the political significance of AFRICOM’s preparations could be seen when millions of Nigerian workers participated in a general strike against president Goodluck Jonathan’s end to fuel subsidies. Jonathan used a series of bombings claimed by Boko Haram to institute martial law and suppress the growing strike movement.

In the case of the Lord’s Resistance Army, the argument for “humanitarian intervention” is used to provide a similar cover for economic aims. According to *The Post*, AFRICOM is seeking a base in South Sudan that would both support the hunt for the LRA’s leader Kony and allow the US greater influence in the growing conflict between Sudan and South Sudan.

At the center of the Sudanese conflict are

disagreements over oil revenues. Since South Sudan gained independence in 2011 it has been in continuous conflict with Sudan over control of oil fields in the border region and the fees to be paid to Sudan, whose pipelines are the only conduit available to export its oil. In April, while Sudan and South Sudan were engaged in regular border skirmishes, South Sudanese president, Salva Kiir, traveled to China in an attempt to gather support for construction of an alternate pipeline through Kenya.

China is a major investor in both Sudanese and South Sudanese oil infrastructure. Through an increased military presence, the US government hopes to offset Chinese economic influence. Last year in her tour of Africa, US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said, “We don’t want to see a new colonialism in Africa,” in reference to Chinese influence on the continent.

Ultimately the aerial surveillance programs will be used to lay the groundwork for future military intervention. Last October, Obama deployed 100 military advisors to central Africa in order to work toward “the removal of Joseph Kony.” In Somalia, drones and special forces strikes are also being used to the same bloody effect as in Pakistan, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Although the surveillance program in West and Central Africa is currently unarmed, several officials quoted in the *Post* emphasized the potential to expand the program.

According to the report, AFRICOM already had plans for a drone program against the LRA, but it was canceled without explanation. Recently, however, the Senate Armed Forces Committee authorized \$50 million to expand surveillance operations in Africa and emphasized the need for aircraft that can “loiter over areas of interest for extended periods of time,” i.e., drones. One anonymous US military official told the *Post* that if they wanted to fly drones “I’m certain we could get the access and overflight [permission] that is necessary to do that.”



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