

US secures drone base in Northwest Africa

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Washington has secured an agreement with the government of Niger to establish a US military base in the Northwest African country, which borders Mali. The agreement comes in the midst of the French intervention in Mali, employing ground troops and warplanes.

The deal, first reported Monday by the *New York Times*, citing unnamed US officials, would clear the way for the Pentagon to set up a base for drone flights over the entire region.

While US officials and the media have placed the base agreement in the context of the French war in Mali, it is evident that Washington had been negotiating with the Niger government well before the advance of Islamist militias toward southern Mali triggered the French intervention on January 11. It appears more the case that the recent Mali events have served as a pretext for an already planned US militarization of the region.

For several months there has been a drumbeat in the media and official circles about Africa being the “new front” in the war on terror, along with reports that AFRICOM (Africa Command), the US military command set up for operations in Africa, was seeking to establish bases on the continent and deploy for the first time a combat brigade on African soil.

The deal reached with the Niger government is a status of forces agreement of the kind demanded by the Pentagon wherever US forces are deployed. It grants blanket immunity to American troops for any crimes committed on the country’s soil.

According to the *Times*, it is anticipated that some 300 US troops and private contractors will be stationed at the Niger base. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday that there are already some 50 US military personnel deployed in Niger.

The US had previously set up drone bases in Ethiopia and Djibouti, the tiny semi-colonial African territory at the junction of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, where the US and France jointly operate Camp Lemonnier, the site of a 2,000-member American special operations task force. These bases, together with secret air fields in the

Arab peninsula, have been used to carry out drone missile strikes and assassinations in Somalia and Yemen. However, they are some 3,000 miles away from Mali.

Washington has also deployed turboprop spy planes flying from secret fields in Burkina Faso and Mauritania, as the *Washington Post* reported last year, based on secret US diplomatic cables made public by WikiLeaks as well as military contracting documents. US officials, however, have reported that these spy flights have proven less than effective in terms of intelligence gathering over Mali and other parts of Northwest Africa.

“For now, officials say they envision flying only unarmed surveillance drones from the [Niger] base, though they have not ruled out conducting missile strikes at some point if the threat worsens,” the *Times* reported Tuesday.

This seems hardly credible. While drones may well be used to collect intelligence on potential targets that would be handed off to the French for execution, there is little doubt that the Obama administration intends to spread its drone killing spree to Northwest Africa.

This was implicitly threatened by US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta following the hostage siege at the gas facility in Algeria earlier this month. “We have a responsibility to go after Al Qaeda wherever they are,” Panetta stated, adding that the US was “going after” it in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia—all the scene of continuous drone missile strikes—and would act to deny Al Qaeda a “base for operations in North Africa and Mali.”

As the *Wall Street Journal* noted, the moves toward a permanent base in Niger “show the extent to which the US and France are girding for what could be an open-ended campaign against the militants in North and West Africa.”

Indeed, one of the top US State Department officials in charge of Africa warned Monday that the present offensive in Mali “could take years.”

“This is only the first phase,” Don Yamamoto, the principal deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs, told the Associated Press. “I think people should

not be into the illusion that it is going to be quick,” he added. “It’s going to take a long time and time means that it could take several years ... you got do it right.”

Yamamoto noted that Washington has already begun training and equipping troops from Niger, Chad, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Togo and will transport them to Mali for use in an African proxy force. AFRICOM has also announced that it is backing the French intervention by providing military transport planes to move French troops and weaponry and by flying refueling missions for French warplanes.

The US State Department official also told the AP the following: “A lot of the rebel groups that are now fighting in the region were under Gaddafi’s troops. They were trained for over a decade. You have rebel groups that are well trained and well armed and very aggressive. And so if you have any problems in governance in the country, that would allow these extremist groups to come and that’s what happened in Mali.”

This is a grossly distorted and self-serving presentation of the events in Mali. The reality is that the crisis was precipitated by the US-NATO war for regime-change that ended in Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s assassination. The bringing down of the Libyan regime served to destabilize the entire region. It sent Tuaregs, a nomadic population that is present in Libya, Mali, Niger and elsewhere in the region, fleeing to Mali under conditions in which US-backed “rebels” were hunting down and killing black people in Libya.

The Tuaregs, who had fought on the side of Gaddafi, brought with them large quantities of weapons, reigniting a revolt that has erupted at least four times since Mali’s independence in 1960. Entire Tuareg units of the Malian army went over to the rebels.

However, better armed and better funded Islamists, affiliated with Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, entered northern Mali and gained control of large swathes of territory. These were the very forces that the US and NATO has backed and armed in Libya, utilizing them as a proxy ground force in the war to topple Gaddafi.

Yamamoto’s remarks strongly suggest that US imperialism is intervening in Mali not merely to drive out or destroy its erstwhile allies, the Islamists (the same forces that it is still backing in Syria), but also to crush the Tuareg revolt.

Given that the same Tuareg population exists to the east in Niger, the US intervention has the potential of spreading this revolt and igniting a bitter ethnic-based transnational civil war.

Underlying Washington’s incendiary activities in Northwest Africa are not, fundamentally, concerns about a supposed terrorist threat, but rather the determination of US imperialism, like its French counterpart, to lay hold of the region’s strategically vital energy and mineral wealth.

The US is flexing its military muscle under conditions where it has been outstripped in terms of trade and investment by its ascendant rival in the region, China.

As the secret diplomatic cables disclosed by WikiLeaks made clear, China’s economic activities have been a central preoccupation of the US spies and diplomats assigned to Niamey, the capital of Niger.

As one such cable to Washington warned: “China is building a major portfolio in Niger’s resource sectors and will probably replace France as Niger’s top foreign investor when projects under construction are fully operational. Chinese investments include oil and gas production, refining, uranium mining, and infrastructure. There are no current examples of US-China collaboration in Niger.”

The move to militarize Africa’s Sahel region is part and parcel of the Obama administration’s so-called “pivot” to Asia, based on a steady escalation of Washington’s confrontation with China. This extends to Africa, where the attempt to militarily assert US dominance over resource-rich territories in which China has developed significant economic interests has the potential of contributing to a far wider war.



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