

100429 Obama expands military involvement in Africa

Daniel Volman



[*cc US Army*](#)

Upon replacing George W. Bush as US president, hopes were high that Barack Obama would oversee sweeping change in relation to US military policy. The escalation of US militarisation in relation to Africa reflects the centrality of counter-insurgency to current White House policy, writes Daniel Volman. The US is keen to avoid direct intervention by building up local capacity to root out terrorist threats, Volman observes. Or, as one senior US military officer put it, '[W]e don't want to see our guys going in and getting wacked ... We want Africans to go in.'

When Barack Obama took office as president of the United States in January 2009, it was widely expected that he would dramatically change, or even reverse, the militarised and unilateral security policy that had been pursued by the George W. Bush administration toward Africa, as well as toward other parts of the world.

After one year in office however, it is clear that the Obama administration is following essentially the same policy that has guided US military policy toward Africa for more than a decade. Indeed, the Obama administration is seeking to expand US military activities on the continent even further.

In its 2011 budget request for security assistance programmes for Africa, the Obama administration is asking for US\$38 million for the Foreign Military Financing programme to pay for US arms sales to African countries.

The Obama administration is also asking for US\$21 million for the International Military Education and Training programme to bring African military officers to the United States, and US\$24.4 million for anti-terrorism assistance programmes in Africa.

The Obama administration has also taken a number of other steps to expand US military involvement in Africa.

In June 2009, administration officials revealed that President Obama had approved a programme to supply at least 40 tonnes of weaponry and provide training to the forces of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia through several intermediaries, including Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya and France.

In September 2009, Obama authorised a US Special Forces operation in Somalia that killed Saleh Ali Nabhan, an alleged al-Qaida operative who was accused of being involved in the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, as well as other al-Qaida operations in east Africa.

In October 2009, the Obama administration announced a major new security assistance package for Mali – valued at US\$4.5 to US\$5.0 million – that included 37 Land Cruiser pick-up trucks, communications equipment, replacement parts, clothing and other individual equipment and which was intended to enhance Mali's ability to transport and communicate with internal security forces throughout the country and control its borders.

Although ostensibly intended to help Mali deal with potential threats from AQIM (al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb), it is more likely to be used against Tuareg insurgent forces.

In December 2009, US military officials confirmed that the Pentagon was considering the creation of a 1,000-strong Marine rapid deployment force for the new US Africa Command (AFRICOM) based in Europe, which could be used to intervene in African hotspots.

In February 2010, in his testimony before a hearing by the Africa Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Johnnie Carson declared: 'We seek to enhance Nigeria's role as a US partner on regional security, but we also seek to bolster its ability to combat violent extremism within its borders.'

Also in February 2010, US Special Forces troops began a US\$30 million, eight-month-long training programme for a 1,000-man infantry battalion of the army of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) at the US-refurbished base in Kisangani.

Speaking before a Senate Armed Service Committee hearing in March 2010 about this training programme, General William Ward, the commander of AFRICOM, stated 'should it prove successful, there's potential that it could be expanded to other battalions as well'.

During the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Ward also discussed AFRICOM's continuing participation in Ugandan military operations in the DRC against the Lord's Resistance Army. Despite the failure of 'Operation Lightning Thunder', launched by Ugandan troops in December 2008 with the help of AFRICOM (including planning assistance, equipment and financial backing), Ward declared, 'I think our support to those ongoing efforts is important support.'

And in March 2010, US officials revealed that the Obama administration was considering using surveillance drones to provide intelligence to TFG troops in Somalia for their planned offensive against al-Shabaab. According to these officials, the Pentagon may also launch air strikes into Somalia and send US Special Forces troops into the country, as it has done in the past.

This growing US military involvement in Africa reflects the fact that counter-insurgency has once again become one of the main elements of US security strategy.

This is clearly evident in the new Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) released by the Pentagon in February.

According to the QDR, 'US forces will work with the military forces of partner nations to strengthen their capacity for internal security, and will coordinate those activities with those of other US government agencies as they work to strengthen civilian capacities, thus denying terrorists and insurgents safe havens. For reasons of political legitimacy as well as sheer economic necessity, there is no substitute for professional, motivated local security forces protecting populations threatened by insurgents and terrorists in their midst.'

As the QDR makes clear, this is intended to avoid the need for direct US military intervention: 'Efforts that use smaller numbers of US forces and emphasize host-nation leadership are generally preferable to large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns. By emphasizing host-nation leadership and employing modest numbers of US forces, the United States can sometimes obviate the need for larger-scale counterinsurgency campaigns.'

Or, as a senior US military officer assigned to AFRICOM was quoted as saying in a recent article in the US Air University's Strategic Studies Quarterly: '[W]e don't want to see our guys going in and getting wacked ... We want Africans to go in.'

Thus, the QDR goes on to say, 'US forces are working in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Colombia, and elsewhere to provide training, equipment, and advice to their host-country counterparts on how to better seek out and dismantle terrorist and insurgent networks while providing security to populations that have been intimidated by violent elements in their midst.'

Furthermore, the United States will also continue to expand and improve the network of local military bases that are available to US troops under base access agreements.

The resurgence of Vietnam War-era counter-insurgency doctrine as a principal tenet of US security policy therefore has led to a major escalation of US military involvement in Africa by the Obama administration, something that seems likely to continue in the years ahead.

- Daniel Volman is the director of the [African Security Research Project](#) in Washington DC and a member of the board of directors of the [Association of Concerned Africa Scholars](#). He is a specialist on US military policy in Africa and African security issues and has been conducting research and writing on these issues for more than 30 years.
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