



Foreign Forces in Africa

OE Watch Commentary: The presence of foreign militaries in Africa has changed since 2000. Back then, as the accompanying article relates, it was mostly France supplying units along with a few from the US and what the article's author describes as "niche deployments," such as UN forces. That scene has changed dramatically. Although China made the headlines for opening a military base not far from US forces deployed in Djibouti, less publicized is that small but strategic Djibouti also hosts bases and/or units from France, Italy, Japan, and Germany. Both India and Saudi Arabia are also considering opening bases there. As for Russia, it wanted to partner with the Chinese base but could not, so it is now believed to be in talks with Sudan for a place of its own.

The scramble is not just for Djibouti. Following the opening of its base in Eritrea, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is now in the process of establishing one in Somaliland, a portion of northwestern Somalia that has declared itself independent, but which no other country formally recognizes. India has facilities in Madagascar and Mauritius and besides contemplating a Djibouti base, has been considering a deeper presence in the Seychelles. And, there are still the French, who while they may no longer be the near monopoly foreign power in Africa they were in 2000, currently maintain a significant presence in Africa, especially in the Sahel. France, with its long history of involvement in Africa, is described in the article as remaining that continent's key foreign power.

As for the reasons behind the growing presence of foreign military powers in Africa, the article emphasizes three: insecurity in several regions, self-interest, and conflict among countries outside of Africa. With regards to insecurity, the European nations and the US are focused on attacking Islamist extremists. However, the article adds that they are also pursuing their own business interests, citing their growing commercial presence on the continent as perhaps an indication that this is the case.

More complex is the reason for the growing presence of Middle Eastern militaries in Africa. It is possibly related to international posturing between the two factions - which includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain on one side and on the other, Qatar - embroiled in the Gulf crisis. Somalia has so far managed to stay neutral in the Gulf crisis even though it hosts bases from Turkey, which sides with Qatar, and the UAE, which opposes Qatar. Meanwhile, the UAE's Eritrea base is part of its joint campaign with Saudi Arabia against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, just across the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Against this backdrop there are warnings that African countries could be sucked in as proxies for the conflict among these Middle Eastern countries.

The African Union (AU) finds itself not in control of most of these ventures as the majority are through bilateral agreements between the host countries and foreign governments. Even though the AU may want to at least monitor these militaries to ensure they are not harming African interests, it lacks both a mandate and the capability to do so. Indeed, it is doubtful, as the article states, that the AU even knows the scale of military expansion in Africa, a situation especially true in places such as Libya and Somalia, where numerous foreign militaries are involved. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

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The American flag being raised over Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti.

Source: US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Regina L. Brown, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Navy_070911-N-3285B-157_Storekeeper_1st_Class_David_Trimble_and_Religious_Program_Specialist_1st_Class_Wayne_George_raise_a_flag_over_Camp_Lemonier.jpg, Public Domain.

Source: Peter Fabricius, "AU Summit 30: Should Africa Worry About a Growing Foreign Military Presence?" *Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)*, 25 January 2018. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/au-summit-30-should-africa-worry-about-a-growing-foreign-military-presence>

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Yann Bedzigui, a researcher in the ISS Peace and Security Research Programme in Addis Ababa, says, 'The issue of foreign military bases has been a source of concern for many member states of the Peace and Security Council (PSC). However it is a complicated issue. Hosting a foreign military base is a sovereign decision. Since the PSC and the AU in general have tended to emphasize sovereignty above all, its leverage is quite limited.'

[Institute for Security Studies'] Leijenaar believes the AU would like to keep control of foreign military activity or at least play some coordinating role, and have an intelligence overview of all such military activities on the continent. 'But they just don't have the capacity to do that, for one thing,' she says.