

U.S. Imperialism and Africa's "Perfect Storm"

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On December 24, 2019, the New York Times reported that U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper was weighing a reduction in troop levels in West Africa. Although the numbers involved were small, this news was met with official outcry and unleashed a fierce policy debate on the wisdom of such a drawdown. Military and elected officials have pushed back on the notion of a troop reduction as a "retreat" and a missed opportunity to counter both China's regional influence and terrorism. In fact, by the military establishment's own definition, "counter-terror" across the continent has failed: Attacks by militant groups have been sharply rising and have increased with foreign intervention. And devastating strikes by the United States have continued unabated: Somalia, for example, was the target of an unprecedented level of attacks in early 2020 alone.¹

For the anti-imperialist left, in the abstract, troop withdrawals would be a welcome development. Many in Africa have long opposed the latest round of militarization on the continent, in particular the launch of the U.S. Army Command for Africa (AFRICOM) in 2007, which the African Union refused to house on their soil. Opposition to a widened military presence is a feature of the African left, both to the outright viciousness of drone warfare and to "boots on the ground," as well as to the substantial aid provided to "their" governments' defense forces. As Jean Nanga argues, "While proclaiming its opposition to the installation of new foreign military bases in Africa, the African Union counted on the financial support of the United States and the European Union for the organization of this army, which was supposed to enable Africa to resolve itself its security problems ... making Africa a terrain of experimentation and publicity of their new instruments of death."² The stakes are high for us to understand these policy shifts as an adjustment to U.S. imperialism but by no means a break from it: The human toll of these "instruments of death" and their related crises threaten catastrophe on a massive scale, all the more so in the context of global pandemic.

In reality, any reduction in U.S. forces in West Africa will be more than compensated for by an expanded presence elsewhere on the continent and globally. The leaked plans for a troop drawdown are consistent with a 2018 shift in U.S. global imperial strategy, from "counter-terror" to a focus on "peer competitors," chiefly China but also Russia and other powers. Then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis summed up the new "posture" as follows: "To those who would threaten America's experiment in democracy: If you challenge us, it will be your longest and worst day. ... We will

continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists, but great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”³ Thus, tactical shifts in troop levels—rather than a cause for celebration—are an expression of great power competition, one that will only intensify in this latest chapter of the “new scramble for Africa.” In the context of what Richard Wolff has described as a “COVID-triggered crisis,”⁴ the return of interimperial rivalries—and the social and ecological fallout—breaks open urgent questions of U.S. objectives in Africa and how the left must confront them.

The New Scramble for Africa

The African continent is an arena today of competition and conflict. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, primary commodity prices exploded, driven in no small part by the Chinese economic boom and a period of very rapid industrial growth. This boom drove an acceleration in extraction across Africa by multinationals from the Global North as well as by “rising powers” such as China, Russia, and India. From the oil fields of Nigeria to the copper mines in Zambia, from cobalt and coltan exploitation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the platinum mines of South Africa, this wave of extraction dramatically transformed the African continent. Unprecedented rates of economic growth and accelerated foreign investment have been accompanied by increased deindustrialization, class inequality, ecological devastation, and militarization. This recent history has been described as the “new scramble for Africa,” one reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Great Power partition and the rush for colonies, markets, and raw materials. The aims of today’s imperial scramble echo many of the objectives of the prior era: the drive for commodities, economic advantage, containment of peer rivals, and the use of military might to shore up political alliances and maintain “stability.” Past colonial powers continue to wield influence in their former colonies; for example, as described by Jean Batou, France views its “credibility” in North and West Africa as key to an expansionist economic perspective into “new” regions of the continent.⁵ Yet history does not merely repeat itself, and imperialism in Africa today has its own unique dynamics, not least of which result from new African ruling classes. As Nanga explains, “Africa is continuing its (capitalist) social-historical vocation to be a field of economic competition for the old and new powers of economic globalization, especially with regard to the supply of raw materials, even though there is now the participation of private African capital in the circuits of neoliberal globalization.”

Investment and trade between African nations and their partners have risen sharply over the past two decades. Washington has long had economic ties to the continent: U.S.-based companies in oil production (such as Exxon and Chevron), agribusiness, mining, power generation, and telecommunications represent some of their key interests in Africa. The rates of investment and construction by Chinese firms on the continent have been exceptionally dramatic, increasing by over 600 percent since 2005, exceeding \$300 billion in that period alone.⁶ According to the Brookings Institute, China leads all nations with regards to foreign direct investment in Africa, followed by France, then the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.⁷ China surpassed the United States in 2009 as the continent’s largest trading partner, with over a third of Chinese oil coming from Africa.⁸ As the Intercept reports, “Trade between China and Africa has risen from \$765 million to more than \$170 billion in the last 40 years, and 39 of 54 African nations have now signed on to Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative—a trillion-dollar plan to link infrastructure and trade via a vast new network of roads, rail lines, ports, and pipelines across Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa.”⁹

Russia’s trade with Africa has tripled between 2009 and 2017 alone. Russia’s role is dwarfed by China’s; for example, its volume of trade is a tiny fraction of that between the continent and China or the United States. But Russia has been able to forge political allegiances where Washington has faltered, such as in the Central African Republic, Sudan, Eritrea, and Somaliland. Russian arms

dealers are among the most active on the continent.¹⁰ In other words, as Tamás Gerócs writes, Russia's widening reach in Africa is an expression of both geopolitical ambitions and the need for markets and goods in the face of European Union sanctions.¹¹

Capitalism is fundamentally rooted in competition and conflict, and the expansionist dynamics on the African continent today are also an expression of a global interimperial rivalry between, above all, China and the United States. The U.S. foreign policy establishment recognizes that China's investment in Africa is a long-term, strategic priority, one that it has been pursuing on a range of fronts and from which it will not easily retreat. U.S. imperialism in Africa likewise has long-term objectives to support the interests of its corporate classes and to cultivate the policy tools to do so. Those aims have historically relied heavily on International Monetary Fund- and World Bank-driven neoliberal economic policies of austerity, debt, and terms of trade privileging the United States, and the fostering of allied African ruling classes. As these policies spill over into crises across Africa, the U.S. approach has rested on further austerity and military might, with devastating results.

A Militarized Continent

Given these accelerating tensions between great powers, the 2018 U.S. "posture shift" and its significant strategic turn toward addressing "peer competitor challenges" comes as no surprise. For the Defense Department, the concern is the "gradual erosion of overmatch," meaning that China is leveling the imperial playing field. In particular, this concern is likely spurred by the 2017 opening of China's army base in Djibouti in the strategically crucial Horn of Africa region at the Gulf of Aden, with close proximity to the Middle East and the Suez Canal as well as adjacent to Washington's own main Africa base of Camp Lemonier. A government report revealed that "[Defense Department] officials told us how China and Russia are presenting growing security challenges on the continent. China, in particular, is expanding its presence throughout Africa, both economically and militarily, and starting to surpass the United States in terms of economic aid, information, and military assistance in many countries in Africa."¹²

The United States has long been the world's preeminent military power, placing a high value on its ability to project imperial force anywhere on the globe. This priority has of course come at great cost in human terms. As Rev. William Barber and Phyllis Bennis have pointed out, the United States has spent over \$6 trillion on wars since the turn of the millennium, with 800,000 lives lost.¹³ Over the last three years, U.S. defense spending has jumped by more than \$139 billion.¹⁴ Africa is no exception, and the United States now has approximately 6,000 to 7,000 troops on the continent, not counting private contractors. Outposts and military facilities span the majority of African nations, from small airfields and "capacity-building" training camps for African troops to larger installations.

President Barack Obama vastly expanded military operations in Africa, and the increase in attacks continues under President Donald Trump. Major targets include Somalia, the Sahel, and Libya. Libya, for one, is a site of major instability as well as a corridor for refugees from other parts of the continent; its significant oil resources have transformed the country into a battleground for oil and infrastructure contracts between European nations, Russia, China, and the United States. Department of Defense strategists seem particularly concerned about perceived Russian intervention on NATO's southern flank, where Moscow's paramilitary forces support the Libyan National Army (LNA), in opposition to the UN- and (nominally) U.S.-backed Government National Accord (GNA)—though the Trump administration bizarrely gave its blessing to an attack by the LNA on the GNA, exacerbating the chaos.¹⁵

Horn of Africa trade routes, with their proximity to the Middle East, are among the most geostrategically and economically critical on the globe. Characterized by the Nairobi-based HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies as "one of the most terror-prone regions in the world,"

the “Red Sea currently carries more than 10 percent of global sea-borne trade, feeding the demand for oil and gas in the west and North America (from the Gulf region) and facilitating the flow of goods between Europe and the Asia Pacific.”¹⁶ In its war on the Al-Shabab militants, the United States conducted more air strikes in Somalia in 2019 than in any previous year. Samar Al-Bulushi’s analysis of the 13-year war in Somalia explains the widening scope of U.S. and African Union intervention, and the key collaboration of African states. Al-Bulushi wrote that while “initial rules of engagement permitted the use of force only when necessary, [African Union troops] gradually assumed an offensive role, engaging in counterinsurgency and counter-terror operations. ... Support from the United States has been instrumental in emboldening the Kenyan military to engage in its own ‘war on terror’ at home and abroad.”¹⁷

According to Amnesty International, the United States has carried out hundreds of military strikes in Somalia, yet has only acknowledged one instance of so-called “civilian deaths.”¹⁸ As Allegra Harpootlian writes at the anti-war Tom Dispatch website,

Almost as alarming as the rate of civilian casualties from drone and other air strikes in the Obama years was the lack of information provided about them. ... Soon after President Trump took office, his administration began to quietly dismantle the safeguards Obama had just created. His administration would subsequently expand the battlefields on which drones would be used, ease combat rules in Somalia intended to protect civilians, rescind most aspects of Obama’s executive orders, and stop publishing civilian casualty data entirely, while telling the public even less about the program. Not surprisingly, drone strikes across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa would rise and a lot more civilians would start dying from them.¹⁹

Both the United States and France are heavily involved in counter-terrorism in what are called the G5 countries: the Sahel nations of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad. The United States recently opened the Agadez base in Niger, West Africa, in a region currently experiencing a surge in attacks by al-Qaida, Islamic State in Greater Sahara, and others, especially in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. France’s major military initiative in the Sahel is Operation Barkhane, and approximately 4,500 French troops currently serve on the continent alongside thousands of G5-nation troops. Protests against the former colonial power’s presence compelled France to shore up the G5 coalition at a January convening where President Emmanuel Macron claimed that “France is not there, contrary to what’s heard sometimes, for neo-colonialist, imperialist, or economic reasons. We’re there for our collective security and the region.”²⁰

In spring 2020, a European counter-terror campaign called Takuba—with 11 countries contributing troops—was launched. As Ndongo Samba Sylla points out, military policy allows for expanded “monetary colonialism” and ambitions of expanding the euro-pegged West African currency the CFA franc (now renamed the eco) beyond its former colonies.²¹ Much like the United States, France relies on African partnerships to further its own aims and thwart imperial competitors. Thus, as Batou describes, it is “doing all it can to avoid resurrecting the image of France as the ‘gendarme of Africa,’ especially in a context where emerging countries can take advantage of their noncolonial past.”²² All told, the entire Sahel region is highly militarized; according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, including those of the United States, the EU, the UN, and an array of regional contingents, the area currently hosts 25,000 troops.²³

Displacement and Ecological Crisis

Militarization has compounded already-existing social contradictions. Warfare has fueled a wide refugee crisis, and the number of internally displaced persons in the Sahel has almost tripled from January 2019 to March 2020.²⁴ Over a decade into the war in Somalia, approximately 5.2 million people require humanitarian assistance.²⁵ The rising commodification of land in Africa, meanwhile,

has exacerbated land grabs and the displacement of rural communities. In countries such as Ethiopia, governments have signed agreements with multinationals for access to communal land; the Gulf states, vulnerable to food shortages, have actively pursued these “deals” as have U.S. agribusinesses and other multinationals. Mining and drilling likewise threaten communities with eviction, and activists across the continent have mobilized in protest, such as the South African campaign under the banner of “the right to say no.” These movements have often been met with harsh repression, such as the 2016 assassination of well-known leader Sikhosiphi “Bazooka” Rhadebe, who led a years-long struggle with the Amadiba Crisis Committee to stop opencast mining in South Africa’s Eastern Cape.²⁶

As a number of reports have made clear, incidents of terror have risen under conditions of war and displacement. Yet for the major powers in Africa today, such terrible costs in human terms are viewed primarily as threats to stability: problems in the competitive drive for extraction and capital accumulation, that is, for the broader imperial project in Africa itself. Nonetheless, Washington continues to funnel large amounts of military aid to key African “security allies,” such as Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria. For example, the Nigerian government’s U.S.-supported war on Boko Haram and the people of northern Nigeria has escalated terror attacks. As a Socialist Workers League (Nigeria) editorial describes,

There are generalized concerns about the level of insecurity including Boko Haram. ... We should recognize that insecurity and crime are a symptom of inequality, poverty, and high-level corruption. Insecurity cannot be dealt with separately. The money for the Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in camps in and around [the northern city of] Maiduguru is being stolen. Is it any wonder then that young men continue to join Boko Haram rather than just sitting around in the camps, watching their families starve to death?²⁷

Militarism, environmental destruction, and climate change are also inextricably linked. As elsewhere on the globe, civil wars have exacerbated environmental devastation. Likewise, the drive for extraction—and the resulting climate change—have deprived people of access to natural resources, displaced them from their land, and polluted their waterways. All of these dynamics create conditions for further conflict and militarized intervention at the hand of the state. Nnimmo Bassey of the Nigerian ecological think tank Home of Mother Earth Foundation writes extensively of these interrelationships. Again, in the case of Boko Haram, as he writes, “The occupation of the [Sambisa] forest by the insurgents clearly posed threats beyond those on the human population. Their activities posed direct threats to the trees, wildlife, and general biodiversity. Military action to flush out the insurgents from the forest has obviously inflicted harm on the forest ecosystem.”²⁸

Yet the origins of Boko Haram itself lie at least in part with the massive water loss in Lake Chad, which has decreased approximately 95 percent in size since the 1960s; Bassey estimates that at least 50 percent of the water supply loss is due to climate change.²⁹ Farmers and pastoralists have been displaced on a large scale, a major driver in the rise of insurgency. As an official of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification describes,

In much of northern Nigeria, Muslim herders are in competition with Christian farmers for dwindling water supplies. The so-called religious fight is actually about access to vital resources. It is not just about Boko Haram, in the Sahel belt; you will see almost the same challenge in Mali and in Sudan. Furthermore, men who were or would have been gainfully employed as farmers, fishermen, fish sellers, and pastoralists have now been conscripted into Boko Haram.³⁰

Mahmood Mamdani’s *Saviors and Survivors* (Pantheon, 2009) provides a similar explanation about the land-based conflicts underpinning the regional war in Darfur, Sudan.

Again, such crises pose a challenge to U.S. imperial interests where they undermine stability and disadvantage U.S. interests in Africa relative to competitors. A recent strategy document reported that “USAFRICOM has also identified extreme weather as an ‘emergent challenge’ to Africa’s security. For example, thousands of Somalis were displaced this quarter by floods. Displacement, food insecurity, and destruction of livelihoods due to natural events can create conditions that foster the growth of violent extremism.”³¹ The rationale for the construction of a U.S. drone base in Agadez, in central Niger, was precisely on the basis of these regional “security threats.” But according to the Department of Defense’s own figures, 2.9 million people in the Lake Chad basin require emergency assistance, yet the region received a mere \$400 million in U.S. humanitarian funding in the last fiscal year.³² Military intervention at the expense of aid will vastly compound the current human rights disaster.

Pandemic, Debt, and the Oil Price Meltdown

The imperial and neoliberal agenda of security, “stability,” and capital accumulation have meant the undermining of programs to meet human need. The contradictions of the forty-year global neoliberal agenda of cuts to social programs and privatization are particularly sharp in Africa, and the current pandemic has already exposed these dynamics on a devastating scale. Although at the time of this writing, in spring 2020, confirmed cases of COVID-19 were relatively low in much of Africa, the systemic crises outlined above have created the potential for catastrophic poverty, economic crisis, repression, and militarization.

African nations have long been saddled with immense debt loads as the end-product of neoliberal structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The vast amounts of debt repayments required under these schemes have distorted national budgets so that, in most African countries, payments on foreign debt exceed spending on health care. Oxfam reports, for example, that Ghana spends 11 times more on servicing its debt than on health; continentwide, there are 2.8 doctors and 11 nurses for every 10,000 people, compared with 33.8 and 80.6, respectively, in Europe. Yet the pandemic crisis is half of a “double whammy,” the other half a worldwide oil price collapse that caused a number of African economies to slow down before the pandemic hit, as commodity prices dropped to historic lows and 113 countries worldwide faced IMF-dictated austerity.³³

In African nations heavily reliant on oil exports, such as Angola, Nigeria, and Ghana, forecasted revenue for 2020 assumed oil prices at approximately \$55 per barrel. Global prices at roughly half that mark spell catastrophe for African budgets; Angola, for example, declared a state of emergency due to these economic conditions as early as March.³⁴ This picture is magnified by the vastly disproportionate reliance on extraction for export revenue and foreign exchange earnings in African oil-producing states, relative to other sectors of their economies. For some nations, such as South Sudan, oil revenue accounts for up to 98 percent of the country’s foreign exchange revenue. Overall, oil comprises roughly 50 percent of sub-Saharan African exports. The Health of Mother Earth Foundation describes current conditions:

The news from South Sudan ... hits one painfully below the belt. A visit to the displaced people camps etches memories that cannot be easily erased. ... And to this, you add COVID-19. As if they did not have enough in their plate. They had a long war, then a long civil war. It has been misery upon misery. They have oil but for what? Recently we conducted a study on access to potable water in Juba and found that [the] majority of the people do not have water that is safe for consumption. You may wish that we could wash our hands with crude. ... The situation in the oil field communities here is indeed comparable to the situation in the Niger Delta. The difference may be one of scale, but the ecological damage is overshadowed only by the scars of open violence.³⁵

All told, this many-headed catastrophe spells deep economic crisis for the nations of Africa. The World Bank reported in spring 2020 that

COVID-19 will cost the region between \$37 billion and \$79 billion in output losses for 2020 due to a combination of effects. ... The COVID-19 crisis also has the potential to spark a food security crisis in Africa, with agricultural production potentially contracting between 2.6 percent in an optimistic scenario and up to 7 percent if there are trade blockages. Food imports would decline substantially (as much as 25 percent or as little as 13 percent).³⁶

The World Bank now predicts an economic contraction of 5.1 percent;³⁷ given that African nations experienced growth rates in this range in the recent past, this is a drop of huge proportions.

The question of how these and related crises are resolved is fundamentally one of the balance of class forces: the ability of the great powers and “their” capitalist classes to pursue their aims in Africa regardless of the social, economic, and environmental costs. Recent history provides a small clue: The Ebola crisis of 2014-2016, centered in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, was characterized by the UN as “a threat to international peace and security.” Tellingly, the U.S. response, under the Obama administration, was to militarize a public health crisis, opting to send soldiers to West Africa over doctors. The strength of forces from below to challenge this agenda and impose new ones in the interest of the vast majority will determine how this crisis will be resolved.

As with the left worldwide, the African left is confronting profound questions in this nightmarish “perfect storm” of public health disaster, war, and economic meltdown. The Southern African People’s Solidarity Network Secretariat, for one, has called for a debt moratorium, stating,

Capitalist globalization implanted within the legacy of colonialism, neocolonialism, and elite-driven cronyism has locked Southern Africa into a multidimensional economic, social, and ecological crisis and has rendered the region ripe for another social catastrophe. The COVID-19 pandemic is that long-predicted catastrophe. ... The state of health in Southern Africa is rooted in the region’s history of underdevelopment and domination. Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by the IMF and World Bank eroded the initial post-independence gains in building a public health system responsive to the needs of the majority. In the face of harsh economic conditions, health budgets, and the budgets critical to the social determinants of health, were cut, as governments adopted neoliberal programs of austerity.³⁸

Of necessity, social movements and working-class organizations will be compelled to take on rising levels of repression in the fight for survival and for justice. As Gacheke Gachihi puts it, “Ordinary people are struggling to cope with the repressive measures which are inherently violent, disorganized, and dehumanizing as the state tries to curb the spread of infections from the developed world. Yet, with limited resources and a corrupt and illegitimate state, the challenges are enormous.”³⁹ Likewise, as the South Africa-based *Amandla!* magazine describes, rising levels of clashes with police and the army open up the possibility of “a generalized Marikana-like explosion.” Of necessity, the left must build a “movement that can act as a counter-power to the neoliberal state and the ruling and self-serving elites. The battle must be joined now over how the world emerges from this crisis.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

Today, the U.S. ruling class will not easily cede its preeminence as an economic and military power to its peer competitors—China in particular—in Africa or elsewhere around the globe, and a minor adjustment in troop levels belies that broader agenda. As Washington’s imperial project continues to run up against those of its rivals, the particular contours of the crisis in Africa will continue to be

revealed and new dimensions will continue to arise. The vicious and racist treatment of Africans in Guangzhou, China, under COVID lockdown has created a diplomatic crisis between African state leaders and the Chinese government, throwing a wrench into the works of its cultivated foreign policy of recent years. Wading into the dispute, the United States leaned on the long-standing trope of “concern” for Africa’s exploitation at the hands of China; a State Department official called the incident “a sad reminder of how hollow the PRC-Africa relationship really is.”⁴¹ Thus, while actual levels of U.S. investment and trade with Africa may remain lower than China’s, Washington has no intention of giving military or economic ground to its rivals on the continent so as to facilitate their rise on the world stage.

But as we have seen, the majority in Africa will pay the price for the U.S. agenda: war, displacement, devastation, and alliances with African ruling classes who exploit and immiserate their own working classes. As Femi Aborisade has pointed out, the current crisis is not uniform, and what he calls a “hunger virus” follows close at the heels of the coronavirus.⁴² As conditions worldwide approach Depression-era levels—in the Global North and the Global South—the class conclusions will be unavoidable. The left must urgently take up the calls from Africa to drop the debt and demilitarize the continent, to stop the land displacement and pollution caused by multinationals. To confront their imperialism, ours must be the global project of solidarity.

Notes

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