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America's Move in Niger

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When scholars, African governments, and civil society leaders said the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD) new regional command for Africa, AFRICOM, would lead to new military bases across the continent, the President of the United States called the analyses "[baloney](#)". A Department of Defense spokesperson even described the concerns about bases in Africa as "paranoid rhetoric." But this week, [the U.S. announced that it had signed a new Status of Forces Agreement with the government of Niger](#). Though its stated goal is to increase regional coordination and information sharing, the Agreement represents part of an ongoing expansion of the American military presence in Africa and a public shift in AFRICOM's missions.

Mali's Islamic rebellion to the north provided an important rationale for the Agreement, although Nigeria's Boko Haram movement to the south surely also figured into the decision. Niger has thus been geographically sandwiched between two violent Islamic rebellions. AFRICOM was already flying surveillance flights over the region and had [established a base of operations](#) for contractors to operate out of Burkina Faso. With a new military base in Niger, the DOD will now be able to launch drone flights that can cover more territory over much longer periods of time. Drones have become a core component of the American strategic toolkit in countries such as Pakistan, where targeted bombings inspire anti-Americanism, and opposition by the government has brought the counter-terrorism alliance with the U.S. to new lows.

Africans have at least two reasons to be skeptical about any assurances that AFRICOM is not headed down a slippery slope of militarization. First, AFRICOM was launched with sweeping proclamations about how it was going to be was a different kind of military command, engaging in development and humanitarian activities.^[1] But when a massive humanitarian crisis hit east Africa in 2011 and half a million people were at risk of starvation, it was instead focused on a decidedly traditional kinetic mission: bombing Libya. As General Carter Ham [explained to Congress](#) in the fall of 2011, AFRICOM shifted its mission to do targeting "pretty quickly" in order to take the lead on bombing.

Second, AFRICOM also argued in an aggressive public relations campaign that its critics were conflating the question of where to headquarter the command with building new military bases in Africa. After a [largely negative African reaction](#) over 18 months that I studied through content analysis, President George W. Bush announced that AFRICOM would remain headquartered in Germany. Even that wasn't entirely accurate, since the DOD wrote to Congress that it planned to resume the search for a headquarters. General William Ward and other officials [argued](#) that by equating the Command with the expansion of military bases, Africans misunderstood AFRICOM'S basic purpose. In 2011, the Africa Command's website said it was "not actively seeking any other headquarters locations." Ward's successor at the Command, General Carter Ham repeated this message in a speech at the [African Center for Strategic Studies](#) in Washington, DC in June 2012.

Regardless of the headquarters issue, Africans have been watching the U.S. military expand into Africa for years. In 2002, the DOD asked Eritrea to host a base in the port of Assab. President Isaias Afewerki declined because he did not want to turn Eritreans "into mere tools in the hands of the Western military command." He later explained that that is precisely what happened to countries that agreed to host "special units in the name of combating terrorism".^[2] In Djibouti, the U.S. military base has been a departure point for drones, a supply point for CIA agents providing surface-to-air missiles and cash to Somali warlords, and a standby facility in case the agents get into trouble.^[3] In May 2012, the US announced a \$1.4 billion expansion of this military base.

In Ethiopia, even as the government declared "we don't entertain foreign military bases in Ethiopia," the U.S. Air Force was flying surveillance drones to Somalia out of a [new secret base](#). And in Seychelles, the DOD built one its largest military bases, Diego Garcia. The U.S. Navy and the Air Force said in 2009 that the base was hosting drones used to monitor the movements of pirates near the tiny island nation. However, [leaked diplomatic cables](#) later revealed that the U.S. officials were planning to arm the Reaper drones, even as they strategized with President James Michel about what to tell the public, and even as they put the drones on display for journalists in order to reassure citizens.

With all of this in mind, West Africans should therefore be cautious about the assurances that drones launched from Niger will remain unarmed. When asked about ground troops or “combat aircraft” at a press conference this week, [the Pentagon would not rule them out](#). African and American interests may align on key security issues, but General Ham told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in October 2011 that AFRICOM is ultimately a military command that is about protecting Americans, America, and American interests. The change in mission, and the establishment of new bases despite a public relations campaign that emphasized otherwise, generate stark credibility problems for diplomats working for multilateralism and civilians committed to development in Africa.

Nigerian politicians who believe American drones will help give them an intelligence edge over the Boko Haram insurgency should also be wary of this slippery slope. And U.S. foreign policy needs to make sure that diplomacy, development, and democracy come first for the Nigeriens.

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[1] See for example, Sean McFate, 2008. ‘U.S. Africa Command: A New Strategic Paradigm?’ *Military Review*: 10-21.

[2] See ‘Eritrean President Reveals US Request for Base,’ *Gulf News*, 23 April 2010.

[3] See also ‘Back to Mogadishu — Quietly.’ *Army Times*, 21 November 2011.

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