

Tanzania oil find stokes debate over mandate of US Africa Command - Kenyan paper

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Last week, Tanzania announced that it had hit commercially viable oil deposits along its coast. This comes just over one year after Uganda struck its own black gold in the west. And suddenly rumours of Americans calling on the region are rife. There are speculations that United States is planning increased presence in the region by creating a military command to be based in either east Africa or South Africa.

The Tanzanian oil find stoked further debate over the mandate of the recently created US Africa Command (Africom), an American military frontier outpost in Africa set to come into effect in September next year.

The mandate of the command is expected to be much more than "to kill or capture Al-Qa'idah fighters," according to a story published last Monday by defence writers Thomas PM Barnett and Bryan Christie based at the Pentagon, the US defence HQs.

The story provided fresh insights into why the US is moving in earnest to put in place Africom to check China's growing economic and military clout in East Africa.

Political antennae in the West have pricked oil prospectors' hopes in the past two years that before 2020, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia and chaotic Somalia would have had a clear picture of their "oil status".

Traditional oil producers in the Middle East and Latin America are tightening grip on their resource. Which is why east Africa is believed to be the next oil frontier the West appears determined to hold onto.

"With its vast natural and mineral resources, Africa remains strategically important to the West, as it has been for hundreds of years, and its geostrategic significance is likely to rise in the 21st century," an American security expert John CK Daly wrote in an online story in ISN Security Watch magazine published in Zurich, Switzerland, last week.

United States will take charge of region

Daly said the remit of Africom, which comes into effect next year, is still largely ambiguous, although "African nations remain cool to the idea amid fears of mission creep and unclear US intentions".

"From next year, the United States will take charge of security in the region to counter the growing spectre international terrorism, but according defence and economic experts, the US is positioning itself to neutralise Chinese influence in East Africa, which has been receiving attention from the world's fastest growing economy," Daly, a consultant and an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute, said.

The US military involvement in Africa is shared among the US European Command, the US Central Command and the US Pacific Command. Defence Secretary Robert Gates called this divided responsibility "an outdated arrangement left over from the Cold War."

Gates told the Senate Armed Services Committee four months ago that creating Africom would "enable us to have a more effective and integrated approach than the current arrangement of dividing Africa between different regional commands".

President George W Bush has ordered that Africom be created by September 2008. A top-ranking, four-star military officer who will serve on equal footing with other regional US commanders around the globe will head it.

Bush announced on 2 February, that the US planned to consult African leaders "to seek their thoughts on how Africa Command can respond to security challenges".

He also said the US would "work closely with our African partners to determine an appropriate location for the new command in Africa".

It is expected that East Africa or South Africa would host the command given their proximity to the volatile Middle East. Another US defence expert, James Jay Carafano, added, "The US is facing increasing international pressure to play a more prominent role on the world's most troubled continent. The continuing civil wars in Liberia and the Congo, the spectre of tyranny and man-made famine in Zimbabwe, the global spread of infectious diseases and the rising threat of international terrorism in East Africa are all issues of mounting concern."

Carafano, a defence scholar, said, "A dedicated command could also more efficiently oversee US anti-terrorism efforts in East Africa and provide American political leaders with more thoughtful, informed military advice based on an in-depth knowledge of the region and continuous planning and intelligence assessments."

Carafano pulled the veil off the Africom project, observing, "With its vast natural and mineral resources, Africa remains strategically important to the West, as it has been for hundreds of years, and its geostrategic significance is likely to rise in the 21st century."

According to the National Intelligence Council, the United States is likely to draw 25 per cent of its oil from West Africa by 2015, surpassing the volume imported from the Persian Gulf."

In addition, he added, "Africa has the world's fastest rate of population growth. The continent's population has doubled since 1970 to nearly 900 million and is expected to rise to 1.2 billion by 2020. This will be greater than the populations of North America and Europe combined."

President Bush has demonstrated a willingness to commit more resources in support of US overall Africa strategy. Washington has significantly increased assistance to Africa to deal with the HIV/Aids scourge. The proposed Millennium Challenge Account is another initiative designed to address the failures of traditional aid programmes.

The recently unveiled 100m dollars US counter-terrorism package for East Africa was also a welcome step in the right direction. The Central Command (Centcom) countries in or near the Horn of Africa area are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan.

Africom may be pushed beyond its objectives

Against this backdrop, the analysts pointed out, economic and energy resources concerns are the core of US interest in East Africa.

Anti-terrorism, they said, is just a smokescreen to lure governments for sustained commercial ties with the West.

Daly remarked, "Many Africans fear that the nexus of energy, poverty and terrorism may swiftly push Africom beyond its stated humanitarian objectives. The rising violence in Nigeria's Delta region may well be the rock upon which Africom is humanitarian focus flounders."

He said the region borders the critical sea lines of communication through the Red Sea. Famine, drought, and disease ravage the region, and civil wars in most of these countries have further exacerbated the problems.

Writing last week on US involvement in Somali turmoil, two American defence experts, Thomas P.M. Barnett and Bryan Christie, put the perceived ulterior motives in perspective using early this year's Ethiopian intervention in the Somali imbroglio.

Quoting military intelligence, the two reported, "When the invading Ethiopians quickly enjoyed unexpected success, Centcom's plan became elegantly simple: Let the blitzkrieking Ethiopian army drive the UIC (Union of Islamic Courts) along with its foreign fighters and Al-Qa'idah operatives, south out of Mogadishu and towards the Kenyan border, where Kenyan troops would help trap them on the coast."

In a similar manner, the region could be being pushed into a box after Chinese influence fades.