When the Bush Administration recently unveiled its new African military command – AFRICOM – Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Theresa Whelan said that the initiative was aimed at “promoting security, to build African capacity to build their own environments and not be subject to the instability that has toppled governments and caused so much pain on the continent.”

And yet hardly was the announcement made when the Bush administration organized the overthrow of the first stable government Somalia has had since 1991, stirring up a hornet’s nest of regional rivalries in the strategic Horn of Africa. US Special Forces accompanied the Ethiopian Army when it stormed across the border in late December to support the besieged and isolated Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The United States also provided the Ethiopians with “up-to-date intelligence on the military positions of the Islamist fighters in Somalia,” Pentagon and counterterrorism officials told *The New York Times* (*Pentagon Sees Move in Somalia as Blueprint*, by Mark Mazzetti, Saturday, January 13, 2007).

The target of the invasion was the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which over the past year had brought a modicum of peace to the warlord-riven country. Since the poorly armed ICU militias were routed, fighting in the capital, Mogadishu, sharply escalated. Nor have matters improved in recent months. “The situation here [Mogadishu] is out of control,” Ali Said Omar, chair of the Center for Peace and Democracy, told the *Guardian* in late February (*Civilians killed as fierce fighting returns to Mogadishu*, by Xan Rice in Nairobi, Wednesday, February 21, 2007, The Guardian).

The ostensible reason for US participation in the invasion was the ICU’s supposed association with al-Qaida, a charge that has never been substantiated. US warplanes and ships shelled and rocketed parts of southern Somalia where, according to Oxfam and the UN Refugee Center, 70 civilians died and more than 100 were wounded.

**Beyond the Horn**

The White House’s plans for Africa, which reach far beyond the Horn, are part of a general militarization of US foreign policy. A recent congressional report (*Military Role in US Embassies Creates Strains, Report Says*, by Mark Mazzetti, *New York Times*, Wednesday, December 20, 2006) finds that “some embassies have effectively become command posts, with military personnel in those countries all but supplanting the role of ambassadors in conducting American foreign policy.” The United States is already pouring $500 million into its Trans-Sahel Counterterrorism Initiative that embraces Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria in North Africa, and nations boarding the Sahara including Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Chad, and Senegal. A major US base in Djibouti houses some 1,800 troops and played an important role in the Somali invasion.

With Africa expected to provide a quarter of all US oil imports by 2015, a major focus of AFRICOM will be the Gulf of Guinea. The gulf countries of Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Angola, and the Congo Republic all possess enormous oil reserves. Some of them are plagued by exactly the kind of “instability” that AFRICOM was
Nigeria, for instance, is the world’s eighth largest oil exporter. “Though all the eyes of the public seem focused on the atomic ambitions of Iran, Nigeria is at the greatest risk of oil disruption today,” according to Peter Tertzakian, chief energy economist at ARC Financial Corporation. A year ago, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) shut down one-fifth of Nigeria’s oil production through a series of attacks on pumping stations and oilrigs.

General James L. Jones, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supreme commander, says the US-dominated military alliance is “talking” about using its forces to protect oil tankers off the west coast of Africa and to provide security for “storage and production facilities in areas such as the oil-rich Niger Delta.” NATO is doing more than talking. In June of last year, NATO troops stormed ashore at Vila Dos Espargos on the Cape Verde Islands. The war game modeled intervening in a civil war over energy resources.

If NATO were to “provide security” in the strategic Niger Delta, it would find itself in the middle of an enormously complex political situation that pits local people fighting for a bigger slice of the resource pie against corrupt elites allied with transnational oil giants like ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, France’s Total, and Italy’s ENI.

A spokesman for MEND, Jomo Gbomo, charged, “Oil is the key concern of the US in establishing its African command,” and warned, “We will fight everyone who goes on the side of the Nigerian government.” While the United States says its focus is on “terrorism,” Nicole Lee of TransAfrica responds that “This [AFRICOM] is nothing short of a sovereignty and resource grab.”

The Bush administration has long considered the control of resources like oil to be a strategic issue. In 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney’s National Energy Policy Development Group recommended that the administration “make energy security a priority of our trade and foreign policy,” a blueprint the White House has religiously followed. In 2002, the Administration also rolled out its “West Point Doctrine,” which in essence said that the United States would not permit the development of a major economic, political, or military competitor.

Both of these policies are increasingly running up against the new energy-hungry kids on the block, particularly China and India. China has been investing heavily into Africa. India, Malaysia, and South Korea have also joined the oil rush, along with competing for copper from Zambia, platinum from Zimbabwe, timber from the Congo, and iron ore from South Africa. In a strange reversal of the 19th century, former colonies are going head-to-head with their old masters in the race for raw materials.

Darfur and Oil
The Sudan is one of those places where it seems easy to distinguish the good guys from the bad. But up close, things are considerably more complex. The tragedy unfolding in Darfur is fueled in part by competition between nomads and agriculturalists. But it is also a proxy war between Sudanese elites in Khartoum as well as an arena for regional competition among Sudan, Chad, and Niger.

Lost in the media images of burned villages and destitute refugees is the issue of oil. The vast bulk of Sudan’s oil is in its south, where a long-running civil war is currently dormant. But in 2011 the south will hold a referendum to decide whether to remain part of Sudan or become independent. Will western oil companies that pulled up stakes in the 1980s and decamped to Chad push southerners to vote for independence so they can move back in?
Will Khartoum really accept a breakup of the country?

The bottom line is that Sudan, like Somalia, Nigeria, and most African countries, is a complex place, where military solutions are likely to cause problems, not solve them. There is also fear, according to Nigerian journalist Dulue Mbachu, “that increased US military presence in Africa may simply serve to protect unpopular regimes that are friendly to its interests, as was the case during the Cold War, while Africa slips further into poverty.”

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