

US Airpower in A



An F-16 taxis in Morocco during a bilateral exercise with the African nation in April. Military-to-military engagements on the continent have more than doubled in recent years.

frica

By James Kitfield

Africa Command's lean counterterrorism approach relies heavily on airpower.

Little-known Manda Bay is an important forward operating site in US Africa Command's campaign to help destroy al Qaeda's affiliated al-Shabaab terrorist group in Somalia.

On a recent afternoon, a detachment of Navy Seabee engineers was working around-the-clock shifts to finish a runway extension before the rainy season arrived. Once completed, the extension would allow Air Force C-130 transports to land at this remote base, the better to support Special Forces training detachments, other US forces in the region, and African Union troops deployed in Somalia.

Last summer, for instance, a Kenyan Ranger battalion trained by US Special Forces "Green Berets" arrived for a joint exercise with a US-trained Kenyan Special Boat Unit. Armed with US Special Forces doctrine, and backed by US airpower in the form of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance flights, the Kenyan Special Forces launched a combined amphibious landing and assault on the Somali port city of Kismayo last September.

The Kenyan Special Forces quickly routed al-Shabaab insurgents from their last urban stronghold in Somalia, denying the terrorist group a key port of resupply from the Arabian Peninsula.

The campaign against al-Shabaab is an early test of a larger effort under way to transform AFRICOM from a relatively quiet organization—concerned in the past primarily with "security cooperation" exercises and civil affairs projects—into a focused counterterrorism command bent on defeating resurgent Islamic terrorist and extremist groups on the African continent. The "Somalia model" is already being touted by US officials as the likely template for AFRICOM's response to Islamic extremists that captured much of northern Mali earlier this year. Indeed, as the US prepares to withdraw its combat forces from Afghanistan and starts bringing more than a decade of operations there to a close, the counterterrorism business is booming in AFRICOM's area of operations.

The recent, post-Arab Spring resurgence of al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups in the Middle East and North Africa has lent new urgency to AFRICOM's counterterrorism efforts. The growing

USAF photo by SSgt. Stephen Linch





SrA. Michael Ruehrwein (l) and SSgt. Sean Clark (r) clean the cockpit windows of an HC-130 at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti. Two HC-130s are on 24-hour alert at the base as part of Africa Command's Embassy Response Force.

threat from Islamic extremist groups has also highlighted an “economy of force” operational model that relies on relatively few US boots on the ground (primarily for training local security forces), instead leveraging the full panoply of US airpower, to include ISR missions, air transport, aerial refueling, and precision strike.

“The growing threat that al Qaeda affiliates are posing to nations in North, East, and Southwest Africa has really changed the dynamic by making counterterrorism a growth business on the continent,” said Air Force Maj. Gen. Carlton D. Everhart II, vice commander of 3rd Air Force/17th Expeditionary Air Force, the air component of US European Command and AFRICOM.

“There are some great capabilities we can offer those nations that want to partner with us,” he said. “When you consider just how vast Africa is, and the fact that there are almost no railroads and

very poorly maintained roads, airpower is critical to nearly all the support we offer to our African partners.”

Indeed, at Ramstein AB, Germany, headquarters of the US Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa, planners talk frequently about the tyranny of distance that affects operations on a continent more than three times the size of the United States. The sheer breadth of the landmass explains why, when Islamic extremists laid siege to the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, last September, there was no US military response force able to reach them in time to save US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans killed in the attack. When Islamic extremists launched an offensive that captured much of northern Mali earlier this year, AFRICOM had to build a new base for Predator remotely piloted aircraft in Niger to support French, Malian, and African Union troops who organized a counteroffensive.

A Toehold in Africa

The new Niger RPA base will add to a growing constellation of staging bases in Africa that already includes airfields for surveillance aircraft in Djibouti, Arba

An HH-60G Pave Hawk lands to pick up a pararescue team and simulated patients during a combat search and rescue exercise in the Grand Bara Desert of Djibouti.





Minch in Ethiopia, and the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean.

Few Americans are familiar with Djibouti, a tiny nation in northeast Africa whose international airport—where the single runway is shared by civilian airliners and military traffic—isn't even certified to conduct operations by radar. Yet observant air travelers visiting there sometimes spot US MQ-1 Predator RPAs parked on the military side of the field. Other visitors include French Mirage and American F-16 fighters, Japanese P-3 patrol aircraft, and French Puma and US HH-60 helicopters.

Since 2010, air traffic at the Djibouti airport has more than tripled, creating a headache for overburdened air traffic controllers. According to a recent article in the *Washington Post*, 16 Predators have been deployed to Djibouti since 2010; five have crashed after taking off from Djibouti since January 2011.

All of this makes Col. David Harris Jr., the air component commander for Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, one of the busiest airmen in uniform. On an average day, Harris sits in the task force's headquarters at Camp Lemonnier—a former French Foreign Legion post on one side of the airport—and helps orchestrate an airborne ballet that includes everything from slow-flying Predators and civilian

jetliners to fighters and search and rescue helicopters.

"The fact that we have so many different aircraft types operating in this airspace definitely complicates our mission," said Harris in an interview at Camp Lemonnier. "Sequencing the flight paths of everything from fast-flying 757 airliners to drones powered by modified snowmobile engines is an intricate dance, but we manage it every day."

As an example of how the increased Islamic extremist threat has intensified operations at CJTF-HOA, Harris pointed to two HC-130s on the tarmac at Djibouti. They are on 24-hour alert, part of the new Embassy Response Force that CJTF-HOA created after the Benghazi tragedy. Days after that incident, protesters in Khartoum, Sudan, breached the gates of the German and British embassies. Other demonstrators threw Molotov cocktails at US embassies in other countries.

Because of those attacks, US commanders at CJTF-HOA stood up the Embassy Response Force—a first-of-its-kind quick reaction force for Africa, designed specifically for the protection of US embassies. In January, the Embassy Response Force went on alert during an attempted coup in nearby Eritrea, where the State Department maintains a small diplomatic

USAF pararescuemen and US soldiers evacuate "patients" during a CSAR exercise in Djibouti in February. Response times to emergencies will vary due to the vast distances rescue airmen must transit.

outpost. The force stood down after State Department officials confirmed that the Eritrean government had successfully put down the coup.

In assembling the Embassy Response Force, US commanders first queried American embassies in Africa about the kind of help they would need in a crisis. The principal needs were perimeter security and possible evacuation of personnel. That dictated a fairly large force that includes Army infantry, USAF pararescue jumpers, and Navy explosives and ordnance-disposal experts. Each member of the team must be ready to launch within an hour after the alert is sounded. At that point, their response time is dictated by how fast the two HC-130s can transit Africa's vast distances.

To give an idea of the kinds of challenges the Embassy Response Force might encounter on a real mission, Harris recounted a recent personnel recovery mission in Ethiopia. The HC-130s landed at night on a pitch-black airstrip, but first had to make a "clearing pass" to scare a congress

off baboons and a pod of hippopotamuses off the runway. The site security team rapidly secured the area, as Air Force PJs treated and evacuated a badly injured US government worker.

“In terms of the need to respond quickly and to secure a site for the extraction of personnel, there are definitely parallels between the Embassy Response and personnel recovery missions we conduct on a regular basis to extract wounded or sick US personnel from far-flung locations in Africa,” said Harris. “That mission consumes a lot of my time.”

In written testimony for his Senate confirmation hearing in February, incoming AFRICOM Commander Army Gen. David M. Rodriguez declared the US military needs to increase its intelligence-gathering missions in Africa by nearly 15-fold to counter the growing terrorist threat on the continent.

“Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are clearly the top priority missions at AFRICOM, and they demand key airpower capabilities that include ISR, air mobility, airborne command and control, and sometimes precision strike,” said Col. David Poage, chief of the international relations division at USAFE-AFAFRICA.

To get a handle on the scope of the challenge, planners at Ramstein plot areas of conflict or potential conflict and overlay them on a map of Africa; they then identify military capabilities that would be useful in countering those

threats and regional allies willing and able to partner with the United States. “That exercise reduces this huge continent to an AOR [area of responsibility] that is more manageable,” said Poage. “We slice this elephant up in a way that lets us eat it one bite at a time.”

Greatly complicating AFRICOM’s challenge, however, is the unique nature of the command. Because of lingering colonial-era scars, African nations remain highly sensitive about any large-scale Western military presence. This is one reason AFRICOM operates out of a headquarters in Germany. Because it has few permanent forces of its own and relies primarily on rotational units for conducting operations, AFRICOM also has to file regular “requests for forces” that can take up to a month to fulfill, slowing the command’s response time.

Keeping Small

Air Force planners often find that force protection concerns and the limited infrastructure across much of Africa dictate that operations be conducted out of southern Europe. The NATO air operation that helped depose Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 were flown and commanded out of Italy, for instance, while aerial refueling tankers supporting French and African Union forces in Mali are flying out of southwest Europe.

“Whenever we plan a mission that puts aircraft or boots on the ground in Africa

we have to essentially start from scratch, sending an advance team to set up the required relationship,” said Lt. Col. John Chan, an operational planner for USAFE-AFAFRICA.

“We also have to keep the footprint of our operations small because of the difficulty of procuring even basic staples such as food and fuel, and yet that force must be robust enough to ensure that our people are protected and not in jeopardy,” he said.

As a form of outreach to African nations, USAFE-AFAFRICA frequently brings African air Chiefs to Ramstein for commanders’ conferences and exercises. Military-to-military engagements on the continent have more than doubled just in recent years, including an Africa Partnership Flight exercise in 2012 that taught participants from five West African countries how to deploy peacekeepers by air in an emergency.

“Sure enough, when the Mali crisis erupted, a number of our African partners who took part in the exercise put their training to use in actually deploying their troops in a crisis,” said Poage. “They learned that deploying forces by

USAF pararescuemen prepare for a static line jump from an MC-130P Combat Shadow over the Gulf of Tadjoura, off the coast of Djibouti, during a training mission for Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa.



USAF photo by SSgt. Devin Doskey



USAF photo by A1C Nicholas Byers

air is a lot more complicated than just showing up at the airline ticket counter and throwing your bag on a carousel.”

With the proliferating threat from Islamic extremist groups in Africa, USAF officials acknowledge the key to future operations is developing more partnerships and getting access to more runways and facilities in key regions.

“Strategically, Africa presents an anti-access challenge, which is why building relationships is so key,” said Everhart. “In each critical region we would like to build a hub-and-spoke type operation that allows us to bring in critical support, whether that’s ISR, air mobility, or midair refueling. That’s why having the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa is so vital to our strategy in East Africa. It’s allowed us to build friendships with regional governments that all see a common threat.”

African nations whose forces are battling terrorists or insurgencies most frequently request the sophisticated ISR that has become a calling card of US counterterrorism operations. That’s why, shortly after helping French forces deploy to Mali to fight terrorists associated with AQIM (al Qaeda in the Islamic Lands of the Maghreb), AFRICOM admitted it was building the base for Predators in nearby Niger to offer additional ISR support.

Locals frequently observe MQ-1 Predators taking off from Djibouti airport, some flying north toward nearby Yemen to track targets associated with al Qaeda

in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and others flying south toward Somalia to help African Union forces deployed there hunt down the al Qaeda-linked terrorists and insurgents of al-Shabaab.

A challenge for Air Force officers on CJTF-HOA’s staff was how to transmute state-of-the-art—and highly classified—intelligence information for those African Union forces. Their answer was the Africa Data Sharing Network.

Using outdated and surplus computers donated by the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office, they equipped African Union forces in Somalia with a secure data network that can access US surveillance imagery—imagery that has been carefully scrubbed to avoid compromising US sources and methods. African intelligence officers have been taught to read the images in such a way as to estimate the strength and positions of al-Shabaab forces.

“It was like turning on a lightbulb in a dark room, because suddenly the African Union forces were aware of who and what was moving all around them,” said Col. James Clark, director of command, control, communications, and computers for CJTF-HOA. “At that point we began seeing the African Union operations against al-Shabaab, both offensive and defensive, improve by a whole order of magnitude in terms of effectiveness.”

US military personnel secure a simulated patient on a stretcher during a January exercise in Djibouti. US airmen, marines, soldiers, and sailors participated in the exercise. It aimed to enhance interoperability during personnel recovery missions.

A third, unspoken pillar of the US air campaign in Africa is direct targeting of high-value terrorists. Though CJTF-HOA sources refused to comment on these operations, it’s an open secret that the United States conducts the same kind of targeted, counterterrorism strikes in Somalia and Yemen—often by RPAs—that it also uses to deadly effect in Pakistan.

However, it is the “eyes in the sky” provided by advanced ISR platforms that are consistently in highest demand.

“At a recent commanders’ conference with African Air Chiefs, I asked them what they needed most, and almost all of them answered, ‘More ISR,’” said Everhart.

That response was echoed by the French, he noted, when their troops in Mali were asked what US support was most important to them.

“Anytime someone tastes that sweet beverage we call ISR, they really like it, and they want more,” said Everhart. “It’s a great way to make friends and find partners.” ■

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