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AFRICA & US: LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN US MILITARY FOOTPRINT EXPANSION IN AFRICA

While the US is pledging to reinvigorate economic and commercial engagements with Africa, a planned drawdown of US troops on the continent is unlikely to proceed. Instead, the US military is spending extensively on operational bases and formulating longer-term strategic plans to maintain its footprint in Africa. These plans include often controversial deals signed with small and economically dependent states such as Djibouti and Cape Verde.

United States President Joe Biden's initial African policy plans are gradually taking shape seven months into his new administration. Most of the official policy plans are focused on "soft power" policies, such as a promised reinvigoration of his predecessor president Donald Trump's flagship "Prosper Africa" strategy that underlines US economic and commercial engagement with the continent. This strategy includes a pledge of USD 2.5 billion in trade and investment by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). It also includes a promise to donate hundreds of millions of COVID-19 vaccines to the African Union, as well as bilaterally to selected African countries.

Meanwhile, the US is also set to maintain, and even step up, its "hard power" presence on the continent. Despite commitments by the previous US administration to draw down some of its 6,000 military personnel stationed in Africa, the Biden administration is set to maintain most of the US military's bases, which are focused on East Africa and the Horn, and West Africa and the Sahel regions. There are currently 27 US military outposts in both a permanent and less permanent format across Africa, especially in the continent's northern tier. Moreover, the US military is set to significantly spend on ramping up base sizes and related infrastructure across Africa in coming years, based on government appropriations.

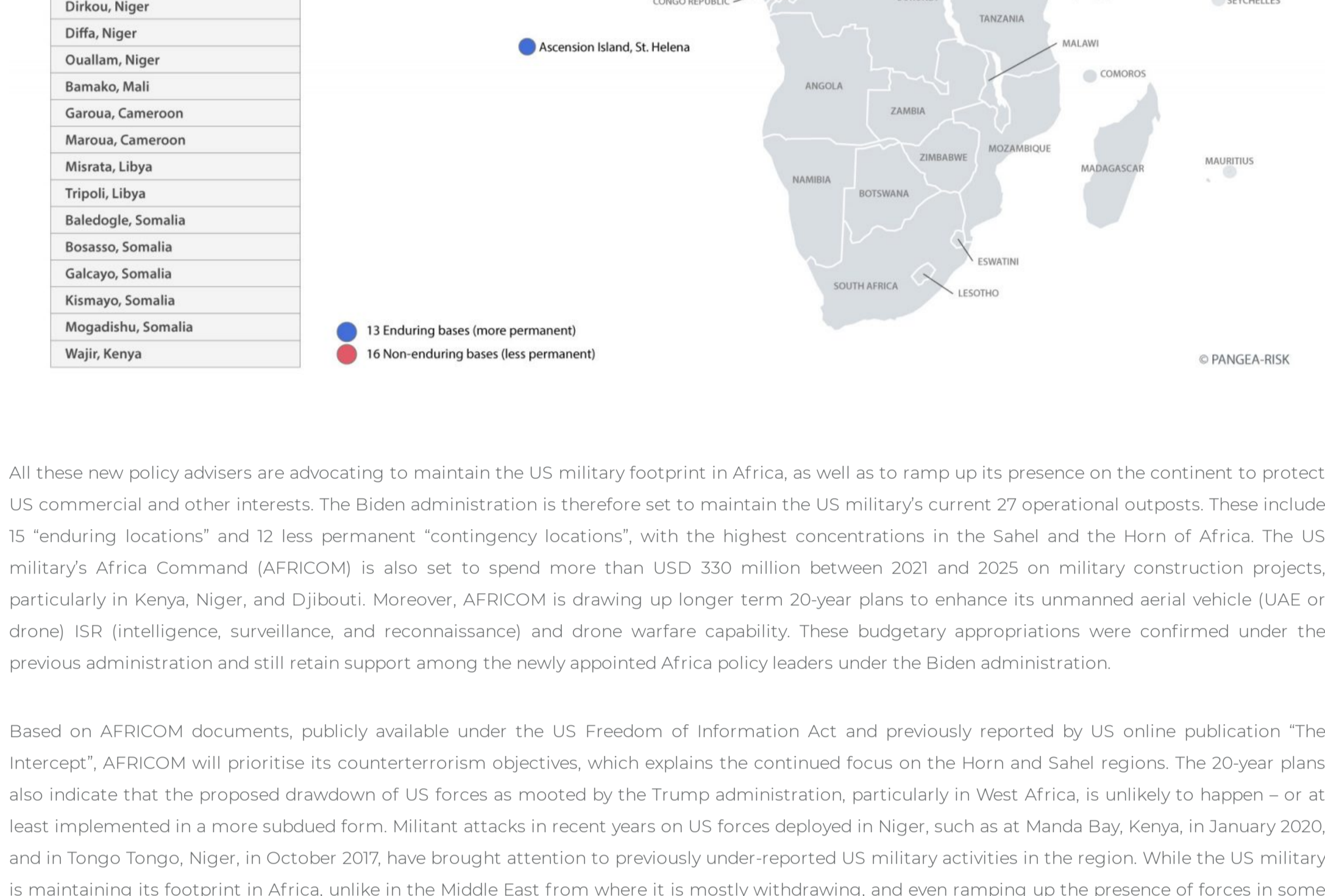
Similarly, the US military still seeks to move its Africa Command from Germany to Africa in coming years, while also establishing a presence in other strategically important regions, such as the Red Sea and the Gulf of Guinea. While global military competition in the Red Sea is well-known, the growing strategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea and US military presence across West Africa is less reported. PANGEA-RISK discloses that Cape Verdean authorities have since July 2020 agreed to a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the US military to allow US troops to operate from its archipelago. Such an agreement makes sense given global geo-political competition in the West African region and the need to counter the growing risk of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, both of which pose an existential threat to US commercial interests. However, the one-year-old SOFA with Cape Verde raises questions over broader US diplomatic and judicial engagements in the country, and whether this sets a pattern for US - Africa relations going forward.

In this report, PANGEA-RISK outlines the current US military presence in Africa and assesses ongoing plans to increase its presence on the continent, including through the signing of new SOFA bilateral deals that allow US military personnel to operate on African soil.

THE US MILITARY'S FOOTPRINT IN AFRICA

Since coming to power in January 2021, the Biden administration has swiftly appointed its diplomatic team to oversee the US and Africa relationship, which was deprioritised under the Trump administration. The US president has nominated career diplomat Mary Catherine Phee for the position of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs and as a Member of the Board of Directors of the African Development Foundation. Phee has experience in Ethiopia and South Sudan and has already played a diplomatic role in ongoing conflicts in the Horn of Africa, which have been prioritised by Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Other prominent Africa policy leaders include Biden allies such as Delaware Senator Chris Coons and Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, who is the US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. From Africa's geopolitical and national security perspective, the Biden administration will also depend on US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield and National Security Council senior director for Africa Dana Banks, who both have extensive Africa policy experience. The USAID role is strengthened by the confirmation of agency administrator Samantha Power, who is a former US ambassador to the UN.

US MILITARY FORCES AND BASES IN AFRICA

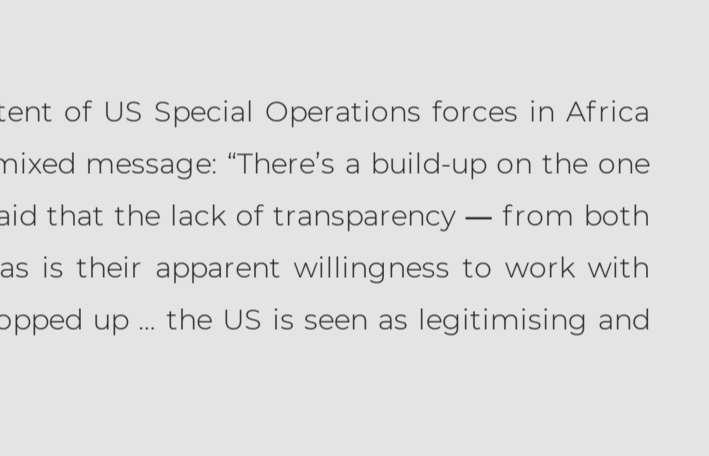


All these new policy advisers are advocating to maintain the US military footprint in Africa, as well as to ramp up its presence on the continent to protect US commercial and other interests. The Biden administration is therefore set to maintain the US military's current 27 operational outposts. These include 15 "enduring locations" and 12 less permanent "contingency locations", with the highest concentrations in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. The US military's Africa Command (AFRICOM) is also set to spend more than USD 330 million between 2021 and 2025 on military construction projects, particularly in Kenya, Niger, and Djibouti. Moreover, AFRICOM is drawing up longer term 20-year plans to enhance its unmanned aerial vehicle (UAE or drone) ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) and drone warfare capability. These budgetary appropriations were confirmed under the previous administration and still retain support among the newly appointed Africa policy leaders under the Biden administration.

Based on AFRICOM documents, publicly available under the US Freedom of Information Act and previously reported by US online publication "The Intercept", AFRICOM will prioritise its counterterrorism objectives, which explains the continued focus on the Horn and Sahel regions. The 20-year plans also indicate that the proposed drawdown of US forces as mooted by the Trump administration, particularly in West Africa, is unlikely to happen – or at least implemented in a more subdued form. Militant attacks in recent years on US forces deployed in Niger, such as at Manda Bay, Kenya, in January 2020, and in Tongo Tongo, Niger, in October 2017, have brought attention to previously under-reported US military activities in the region. While the US military is maintaining its footprint in Africa, unlike in the Middle East from where it is mostly withdrawing, and even ramping up the presence of forces in some African countries, its motivations, strategies, and the regional implications of such a military presence have attracted broader criticism.

Criticism of US military expansion in Africa

The expansion of US military interests has attracted growing criticism from activist groups and Africa's political opposition, particularly over a lack of accountability and transparency in such deployments. In May, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari asked the US government to move its military AFRICOM headquarters to the continent, from Germany. Buhari explained this would be aimed at better tackling growing armed violence in the region. He also requested for US boots on the ground in Nigeria to curb the rising threat of insurgency and insecurity in the country and across West Africa, where China, US, Russia, India, and France are struggling to expand their spheres of influence.



US special forces are already deployed across numerous African countries under the terms of bilateral SOFA deals that remain secret or lack transparency. In 2019, US Special Operations forces were deployed in 22 African countries: Algeria, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania, and Tunisia. This accounts for a significant proportion of US Special Operations forces' global activity: more than 14 percent of US commandos deployed overseas in 2019 were sent to Africa, the largest percentage of any region in the world except for the greater Middle East.

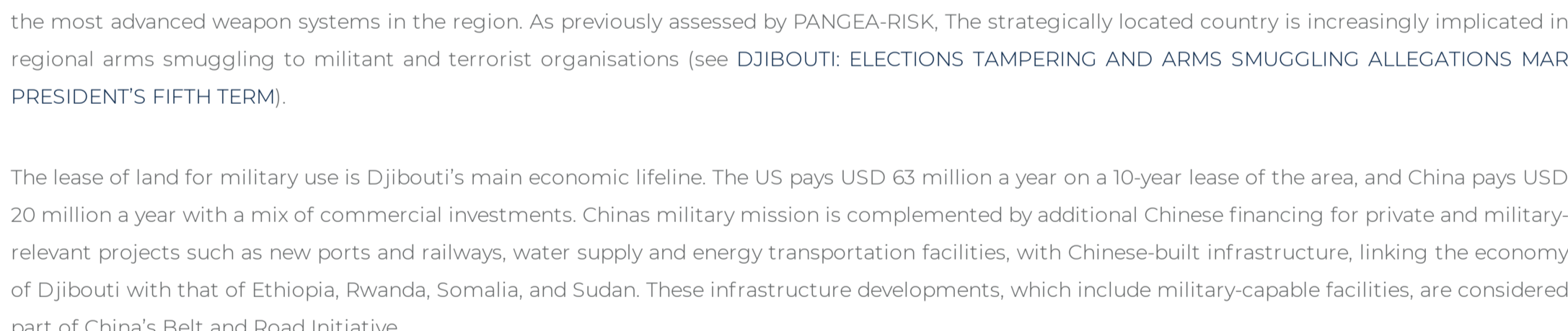
Last year, Comfort Ero, the International Crisis Group's Africa Program Director, said that the extent of US Special Operations forces in Africa illustrates the "creeping build-up" of the US military on the continent. Although, she added, it's a mixed message: "There's a build-up on the one hand, and restraint on the other. It's clear that the US does not want to be on the frontline." Ero said that the lack of transparency — from both US and African governments — on the US military's presence in Africa is a cause for concern, as is their apparent willingness to work with authoritarian governments. "It does feed into that broader concern that some states are being propped up... the US is seen as legitimising and further prolonging authoritarian tendencies, or states [that] are not seen as having legitimacy."

STATUS OF US MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS IN EAST AND WEST AFRICA

Rival military bases in Djibouti

The role of the US military in East Africa is well-publicised through its flagship operational base at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, as well as the operational drone base at Chebelley air base also in Djibouti. Djibouti hosts the most extensive US permanent military base in Africa at Camp Lemonnier. The small Red Sea-facing country also hosts US Special Forces, fighter planes, and helicopters, and is a significant base for drone operations in Yemen and Somalia. The Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CTF-HOA), based at Chebelley Airfield hosts at least 14 unmanned Predator and Reaper drones that are frequently deployed to launch Hellfire Missiles onto Somali and Yemeni territory. Lemonnier also hosts a squadron of F-15E Strike Eagle fighter jets, stationed C-130 Hercules aircraft, and Osprey MV-22 aircraft.

MAP OF DJIBOUTI



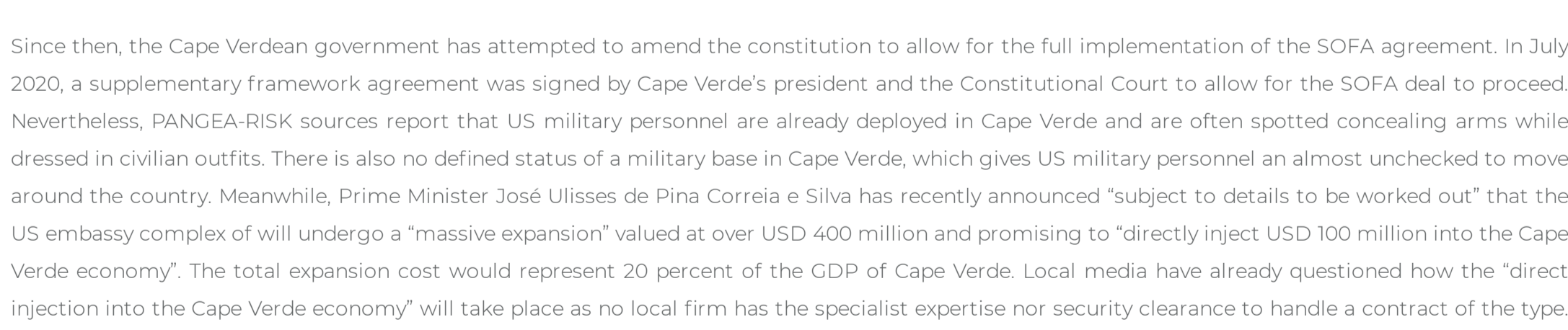
The former French colony hosts France's largest contingent in Africa – some 1,500 troops. The French base holds several Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft. Japan, Germany, and Italy also have a presence in Djibouti, while China has had a port and military base in the country since 2017. Meanwhile, plans are underway to allow the Saudi military to set up another base. It is in this tense geo-political climate that Djibouti's foreign military bases contain some of the most advanced weapon systems in the region. As previously assessed by PANGEA-RISK, The strategically located country is increasingly implicated in regional arms smuggling to militant and terrorist organisations (see DJIBOUTI: ELECTIONS TAMPERING AND ARMS SMUGGLING ALLEGATIONS MAR PRESIDENT'S FIFTH TERM).

The lease of land for military use is Djibouti's main economic lifeline. The US pays USD 63 million a year on a 10-year lease of the area, and China pays USD 20 million a year with a mix of commercial investments. Chinese military mission is complemented by additional Chinese financing for private and military-relevant projects such as new ports and railways, water supply and energy transportation facilities, with Chinese-built infrastructure, linking the economy of Djibouti with that of Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan. These infrastructure developments, which include military-capable facilities, are considered part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The controversial US role in Cape Verde

While US military operations in East Africa are well-publicised, its growing activities in West Africa are under-reported, while some West African governments have not always been transparent in their agreements with the US. In September 2018, Cape Verdean President Jorge Carlos Fonseca ratified a controversial SOFA with the US. The SOFA, which was agreed in September 2017, established a framework for association and cooperation that applies to US contractors and military personnel temporarily passing through the archipelago. The deal was approved in the national assembly yet was struck down by the Constitutional Court for violating the Cape Verdean constitution. Legal experts say that granting US troops immunity from prosecution is unconstitutional. Another condition that has been criticised is the SOFA's Article 12, which stipulates that both countries waive the right to sue each other regarding any possible damages, including the loss or destruction of the other party's property and the injuries or deaths of armed forces personnel derived from carrying out their duties.

MAP OF CAPE VERDE

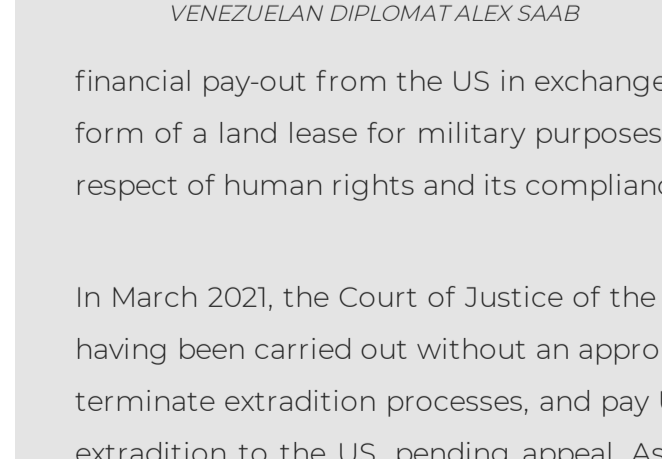


Since then, the Cape Verdean government has attempted to amend the constitution to allow for the full implementation of the SOFA agreement. In July 2020, a supplementary framework agreement was signed by Cape Verde's president and the Constitutional Court to allow for the SOFA deal to proceed. Nevertheless, PANGEA-RISK sources report that US military personnel are already deployed in Cape Verde and are often spotted concealing arms while dressed in civilian outfits. There is also no defined status of a military base in Cape Verde, which gives US military personnel an almost unchecked to move around the country. Meanwhile, Prime Minister José Ulisses de Pina Correia e Silva has recently announced "subject to details to be worked out" that the US embassy complex of a "massive expansion" valued at over USD 400 million and promising to "directly inject USD 100 million into the Cape Verde economy". The total expansion cost would represent 20 percent of the GDP of Cape Verde. Local media have already questioned how the "direct injection into the Cape Verde economy" will take place as no local firm has the specialist expertise nor security clearance to handle a contract of the type. Local media have also speculated that the new US site will be an embassy complex in name only as in reality it will be the very military base that the Constitutional Court declared illegal in 2020. From Cape Verde, the US military would be able to expand anti-narcotics and anti-piracy operations, while also staging counterterrorism strikes into West Africa.

As PANGEA-RISK has previously assessed, Cape Verde's worst economic crisis in 45 years has left the archipelago nation increasingly exposed to organised crime and money laundering that are undermining the country's political stability and eroding its judicial independence. With no prospect in sight for an economic recovery, local state institutions are going unfunded and are vulnerable to intimidation, extortion, and corruption from criminal elements that include the Russian mafia, Latin American drug cartels, and Angolan money launderers (see SPECIAL REPORT: HOW THE CONSTITUTIONAL HAS ERODED CAPE VERDE'S POLITICAL AND JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS).

The Cape Verdean government has also played off competing US and Chinese interests in its territory. While continuing implementation of the SOFA with the US military, Cape Verde's government has also signed deals with China's Huawei for IT and data processing. The US opposes most countries' use of Huawei on security grounds. Huawei was put on a US export blacklist in 2019 and barred from accessing critical technology of US origin, affecting its ability to design its own chips and source components from outside vendors. Nevertheless, Cape Verdean telecom companies have already built networks largely with Chinese components. The US has punished other countries for dealing with Huawei, while Huawei senior executives have previously been arrested for dealing with countries under US sanctions.

US military relations impair judicial immunity



The ongoing controversy over the presence of US military personnel in Cape Verde and the ongoing debate surrounding the SOFA relate to Cape Verde's broader erosion of judicial institutions. The local judiciary system has come under pressure from criticism over its handling of the extradition case of Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab, who has been in detention in Cape Verde since 12 June 2020. The arrest was reported by the US and initiated by Interpol, relating to a money laundering allegation by courts in Florida, US. These allegations relate to an investigation by the Geneva Public Prosecutor which was terminated in March this year. Local sources in Cape Verdean law enforcement have commented that the government has exerted arbitrary pressure on the local judiciary to push ahead with the extradition to the US after facing a diplomatic campaign from the previous US administration. Several sources believe that Cape Verde is seeking a substantial financial pay-out from the US in exchange for its extradition to buffer the government's strained finances. Such a pay-out would be in the form of a land lease for military purposes under the SOFA. This political intervention in the local judiciary has raised concerns over Cape Verde's respect of human rights and its compliance to international law.

In March 2021, the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) ruled that the arrest of Saab had been illegal, having been carried out without an appropriate Interpol Red Notice or arrest warrant. The regional court has ordered Cape Verde to release Saab, terminate extradition processes, and pay USD 200,000 in compensation. Nevertheless, the Cape Verde Supreme Court has since approved Saab's extradition to the US, pending appeal. As part of the regional ECOWAS body, as well as a member of the African Union, Cape Verde is legally bound to accept the rulings of the ECOWAS court. Cape Verde may now face economic and political sanctions for defying an order from the ECOWAS Court. The African Bar Association (ABA) has also criticised Cape Verde's non-compliance of the regional court order and warned of consistent violations of international law. The Saab case is indicative of a broadening erosion of Cape Verdean political and judicial institutions.

INSIGHT

The US administration is gradually formulating its Africa policy through "soft power" pledges, such as aid and investment, vaccine donations, and diplomatic. Meanwhile, the US government is also seeking to maintain its military footprint in Africa, as it faces a rival challenge from other global powers. It is therefore unlikely that the US will withdraw its 6,000 troops stationed in Africa at any one time. The US is also unlikely to proceed with previously proposed base closures, even though the US military is withdrawing troops from the Middle East and closing bases in that operational region.

Instead, some USD 330 million is being committed to spend on US military base construction and related infrastructure projects over the next five years, while AFRICOM is formulating even longer 20-year strategic plans for its operations in Africa. These will focus on counterterrorism, special forces operations, and humanitarian support, in tandem with the US' broader objective of safeguarding its commercial interests in the face of Chinese, Russian, and other competition. The continued US presence in Djibouti is a crucial aspect of this longer-term strategy for the US in Africa.

Meanwhile, in West Africa, even though US troops may be phased out of insecurity hotspots such as Niger and other locations in the Sahel, the US is seeking to cement SOFA deals with countries such as Cape Verde that are in dire financial straits and whose strategic location can be leveraged to secure pay-outs from the US. However, for Cape Verde the SOFA deal has attracted significant local resistance, while it has also pulled into question the country's judicial independence and transparency record.