

# A war on Africa

Touted as part of a war of liberation, NATO's intervention in Libya aims to stymie moves to strengthen African unity and independence, writes **Dan Glazebrook** from London.

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Africa the key to global economic growth: this was a refreshingly honest recent headline from the *Washington Post*, but hardly one that qualifies as news. African labour and resources, as any decent economic historian will tell you, have been the key to global economic growth for centuries.

When the Europeans discovered America 500 years ago, their economic system went viral. Increasingly, European powers realised that the balance of power at home would be dictated by the strength they were able to draw from their colonies abroad. Imperialism (aka capitalism) has been the fundamental hallmark of the world's economic structure ever since.

For Africa, this has meant non-stop subjection to an increasingly systematic plunder of people and resources that has been unrelenting to this day. First was the brutal kidnapping of tens of millions of Africans to replace the indigenous American workforce that had been wiped out by the Europeans. The slave trade was devastating for African economies, which were rarely able to withstand the population collapse; but the capital it created for plantation owners in the Caribbean laid the foundations for Europe's industrial revolution.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, as more and more precious raw materials were found in Africa (especially tin, rubber, gold and silver), the theft of land and resources ultimately resulted in the so-called Scramble for Africa of the 1870s, when, over the course of a few years, Europeans divided up the entire continent (with the exception of Ethiopia) amongst themselves. By this point, the world's economy was increasingly becoming an integrated whole, with Africa continuing to provide the basis for European industrial development as Africans were stripped of their land and forced down gold mines and onto rubber plantations.

After World War II, the European powers, weakened by years of unremitting industrial slaughter of each other, contrived to adapt colonialism to the new conditions in which they found themselves. As national liberation movements grew in strength, the European powers confronted a new economic reality the cost of subduing the restless natives was starting to near the level of wealth they were able to extract from them.

Their favoured solution was what former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah termed neo-colonialism handing over the formal attributes of political sovereignty to a trusted bunch of hand-picked cronies who would allow the economic exploitation of their countries to continue unabated. In other words, the idea was to adapt colonialism so that Africans themselves would be forced to shoulder the burden and cost of policing their own populations.

In practice, it wasn't that simple. All across Asia, Africa and Latin America, mass movements began to demand control of their own resources, and in many places these movements managed to gain power sometimes through guerrilla struggle, sometimes through the ballot box. This led to vicious wars by the European powers now under the leadership of their upstart protégé, the USA to destroy such movements. This struggle, not the so-called Cold War, is what defined the history of post-war international relations.

So far, neo-colonialism has largely been a successful project for the Europeans and the US. Africa's role as a provider of cheap, often slave, labour and minerals has largely continued unabated. Poverty and disunity have been the essential ingredients that have allowed this exploitation to continue. However, both are now under serious threat.

Chinese investment in Africa over the past ten years has been building up African industry and infrastructure in a way that may begin to tackle the continent's poverty. In China, these policies have brought about unprecedented reductions in poverty and have helped to lift the country into the position it will shortly hold as the world's leading economic power. If Africa follows this model, or anything like it, the West 500-year plunder of Africa's wealth may be nearing a close.

To prevent this threat of African development, the Europeans and the USA have responded in the only way they know how militarily. Four years ago, the US set up a new command and control centre for the military subjugation of Africa, called AFRICOM. The problem for the US was that no African country wanted to host them; indeed, until very recently, Africa was unique in being the only continent in the world without a US military base. And this fact is in no small part thanks to the efforts of the Libyan government.

Before Gaddafi's revolution deposed the British-backed King Idris in 1969, Libya had hosted one of the world's biggest US airbases, the Wheelus Air Base; but within a year of the revolution, it had been closed down and all foreign military personnel expelled.

More recently, Gaddafi had been actively working to scupper AFRICOM. African governments that were offered money by the US to host a base were typically offered double by Gaddafi to refuse it, and in 2008 this ad hoc opposition crystallised in a formal rejection of AFRICOM by the African Union (AU).

Perhaps even more worrying for US and European domination of the continent were the huge resources that Gaddafi was channelling into African development. The Libyan government was by far the largest investor in Africa's first-ever satellite, launched in 2007, which freed Africa from \$500 million per year in payments to European satellite companies.

Even worse for the colonial powers, Libya had allocated \$30 billion for the African Union's three big financial projects, aimed at ending African dependence on western finance. The African Investment Bank, with its headquarters in Libya, was to invest in African development without charging interest, which would have seriously

threatened the International Monetary Funds domination of Africa a crucial pillar for keeping Africa in its impoverished position.

Gaddafi was also leading the AU's development of a new gold-backed African currency, which would have cut yet another of the strings that keep Africa at the mercy of the West, with \$42 billion already allocated to this project again, much of it by Libya.

NATO's war is aimed at ending Libya's trajectory as a socialist, anti-imperialist, pan-Africanist nation in the forefront of moves to strengthen African unity and independence. The rebels have made clear their virulent racism from the very start of their insurrection, rounding up or executing thousands of black African workers and students. All the African development funds for the projects described above have been frozen by the NATO countries and are to be handed over to their hand-picked buddies in the rebel National Transitional Council (NTC) to spend instead on weapons to facilitate their war.

For Africa, the war is far from over. The African continent must recognise that NATO's lashing out is a sign of desperation, of impotence, of its inability to stop the inevitable rise of Africa onto the world stage. Africa must learn lessons from Libya, continue the drive towards pan-African unity, and continue to resist AFRICOM. Plenty of Libyans will still be with them when they do so.