

The Establishment and Implications of the US African Command: An African Perspective

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Introduction

This brief is designed to concisely describe and evaluate the foreign policy-making of the United States (US) in relation to Africa, and also to offer in sufficient detail an early assessment of the nature, leadership, features and purposes of the US African Command (AFRICOM) from an African perspective. It explores how AFRICOM is supposed to oversee security and conduct military operations when necessary. The brief also examines whether AFRICOM will pick its way through a minefield of misunderstandings in both the US and Africa, and either worsen or improve Africa's environment of security and peace. It advances the argument that AFRICOM is a combatant command set up by the US in an attempt to make more efficient its diplomatic and military activities in Africa. Yet, AFRICOM has unintentionally come to be considered as an unsettling militarization of US-Africa relations that will only compound the continent's multifaceted problems.

In order to consider all these issues in the most adequate and balanced way, the brief is divided into three parts. The first part assesses the structures and patterns of foreign policymaking of the US in dealing with issues related to Africa. It also addresses the perceived interests of the US in Africa.

This serves as a background for the second part which examines the origins and configuration of AFRICOM and then summarizes its missions. The third and final part dispassionately evaluates the interrelated and inherently contradictory implications of AFRICOM for both the US and Africa. The brief concludes with a tentative estimation of the realistic possibilities for AFRICOM's effectiveness and its prospects for achieving credibility in Africa under the Obama administration. It is based on the available primary documents and secondary resources. These consist of books, journal articles, media publications and governmental committee reports.

The brief is expected to substantially add to the current state of knowledge about issues related to US policy towards Africa in general and AFRICOM in particular as well as future trends. Accordingly, it could serve as a valuable source of information for civil and military officials of African governments, African civil society organizations and academic specialists.

1. US Foreign Policy towards Africa

US Foreign Policymaking Relating to Africa

The charge of making US foreign policy is constitutionally conferred on the president. In other simplified words, US foreign policymaking is concentrated in the hands of just one man, the president. Such a monopoly of foreign policymaking was facilitated by the near-paralysis of the other actors of foreign policy. Indeed, with a Congress uninterested and uninformed on African-related issues and only partially exercising control through committee hearings and its granting of appropriations (Woodward, 2006:7), the president is relatively free to make unchecked foreign policy decisions with regard to Africa which was and remains insignificant as an outlet for trade and investment. This presidential command of African foreign policy issues is further enhanced by the all-too-apparent apathy and laxity of the US, public generally uninformed about pressing problems in Africa, and the lack of aggressiveness on the part of the media (Woodward, 2006:8).

Each president defines his role and responsibilities somewhat differently and fulfils them in a manner that reflects or is at least compatible with his own operating style' (Sapin, 1966:65). The Department of State and the Secretary of State are traditionally expected to be the president's sole foreign policy advisors and executioners. Apart from the Department of State, the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency provide information and analysis to the president. The National Security Council provides the mechanism whereby the vice-president, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense and other senior officials participate in decision-making. The National Security advisor, supported by a small staff, oversees the preparation of policy analyses and proposals, which serve as a basis for discussion in the National Security Council (Lord, 1988; Jordan et al, 1989).

It is apparent that, for the last five decades, the successive presidents of the US and their senior advisors almost never had the concern, knowledge and experience for managing relations with Africa (Schraeder, 2001:135; Wiley, 1991:40). In any case,

Africa represents only a tiny portion of the vast range of states, regions and issues involved in the formulation of US foreign policy (Carson, 2004:1). And, Africa lacks 'a strong and organized domestic lobby to push the continent's issues onto the US foreign policy agenda' (Piombo, 2007:1). Actually, one has 'to move down to the level of the Assistant Secretary to find an individual with a large reservoir of knowledge and deep-seated interest in Sub Saharan Africa' (Dickson, 1985:146). Accordingly, 'African issues more so than other regions remained the esoteric concern of a few ... By default, African questions remained the domain of middle levels of the executive branch' (Dickson, 1985:152). For instance, George Bush Senior's Secretary of State, James Baker, 'spent very little time worrying about Africa, essentially leaving policy to [Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Cohen]' (Cohen, 2000:54).

Thus, the issues that emerge from day to day in Africa are usually handled by lower layer officials, who are supposed to be guided by an understanding of the rather vague priorities of the president and translate them into concrete initiatives (Schraeder, 2001:135; Clark, 1998:8). The National Security Council's Interdepartmental Group for Africa assesses US interests in Africa and formulates options accordingly. It is commonly chaired by the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and drew members mainly from the Department of State, the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency which are involved in Africa (Cohen, 2000:11; Lord, 1988:152-155; Schraeder, 2001:141). It follows that the Department of State exercised full foreign policy primacy on Africa, and the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs was always the 'lead policymaker in the US government on African issues, including regional security policy' (Frazer, 2007:1). Yet, the persistent rivalry between these different bureaucratic outfits, inter-agency networks and officials dealing with Africa (Woodward, 2006:7) constantly led to 'a fragmented policy unable to articulate clear goals and interests' (Moss, 1995:196-197) and thereby characterized by an inconsistency of major proportions.

One other major problem in the conduct of relations with Africa is the ad hoc approach of almost all US administrations. When a new president assumes office, he replaces the whole upper layers of officials concerned with foreign policy, from the Secretary of State and National Security advisor down to the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. The turnover of officials means that conceptions of US interests are incessantly redefined with an unfortunate and 'continuing preoccupation with the current and the immediate' (Sapin, 1966:23), and the strategies for protecting them equally changed. Foreign policy initiatives would clearly suffer since there was no sufficient time for them to take root, and for their authors to know their shortcomings and to see the reactions of other states (Schraeder, 2001:145-149).

The professionals in the Department of State (including the embassies¹), the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency are the main sources for the specialized knowledge and analysis on African issues. There is no shortage of in-depth expertise on Africa, in the form of political and intelligence analysts, economists and defense planners, as sound policies often require insight and on-the-ground understanding regarding the political and social forces and the setting of African states in order to analyze military and political situations, inclinations and actions (Dickson, 1985:172; Wiley, 1991:43-44). That kind of knowledge about a state or region comes from specialized study, living there and mastery of the language. Such specialization is usually available (Cohen, 2000:13, 41 and 221), but is either not 'always full or accurate as it might be' (Woodward, 2006:3) or is self-evidently underutilized. In fact and quite often, 'decisions on African issues often ignored the empirical evidence that could have been acquired from consultation with specialists on Africa' (Dickson, 1985:74).

US Interests in Africa

Despite Africa's varying geographical and political scope, officials and analysts of the US generally view the continent in terms of the global strategic situation (Lawson, 2007:1). They usually divide into three broad levels US interests in Africa,

which were evidently limited in comparison with US interests in other areas and 'had not been clearly defined' (Okumu, 2007:2). Consequently, 'the absence of clear US interests has left Africa at the bottom of foreign policy concerns' (Moss, 1995:195). On the strategic level, Africa is near the world's sea lanes like the Strait of Gibraltar, the Red Sea and the Cape route through which oil and vital minerals are shipped and which could be possible targets of terrorism and piracy. Furthermore, dating back to the Cold War years, African states provide useful communications facilities and air and naval facilities through which US troops could be transported or a variety of combat operations launched.

On the political level, there are in Africa more than fifty states which play a substantial role in international forums and possess a consequential voting strength in the United Nations. Indeed, African states comprise 25 % of UN membership and engage in bloc-voting, and China has come to rely upon their support to heed its policies and overcome international criticism (Sprance, 2008:15; McFate, 2008:14). There is also the constant concern that the political instability of African states could invite external intervention to the detriment of US interests and security. For instance, following the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, the 2002 attacks in a Kenyan resort and especially after the September 2001 attacks on US soil, US interests almost exclusively related to the prevention of terrorism of Africa (Ploch, 2007:12; Sieber, 2000:2; Mills, 2004:159). 'Foremost in many American minds is Africa's potential as a heaven for international terrorist organizations. Extreme poverty, ethno-religious divisions, corrupt and weak governance, failed states, and large tracts of *ungoverned space* combine to offer what many experts believe to be fertile breeding grounds for transnational Islamist terror' (Berschinski, 2007:5). Accordingly, the US has been providing military aid and training for African states in order for them to viably secure their borders and regulate their internal environments on a sustained basis.

On the economic level, Africa's importance to the US is obviously minimal by European, Latin American or Asian standards. It is one of the

largest but most conflict-prone continents on the world (McFate, 2008:11). And, it ‘remains the poorest continent and the least integrated into the world economy – with slow growth rates, declining levels of per capita income, limited capital markets, and relatively small international and interregional trade flows’ (Carson, 2004:2). Yet, the US has a significant stake in Africa which continues to be a source of oil which has become ‘a vital national security interest of the United States’ (Volman, 2003:576). The US is much interested in Africa’s oil given that the continent ‘has 10 % of the world’s proven oil reserves’ (Giroux, 2008:1) and has become a substantial supplier of the US, there is growing instability in the Middle East which called for a ‘diversification of supplies in order to diminish dependence on any single area’ (Volman and Klare, 2004:227; Sprance, 2008:8), and both US and international demand for energy will continue to increase in the longer term (Volman, 2003:574). ‘North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 18.6 % of US oil import in 2005 compared to 17.4 % from the Middle East’ (Schafer, 2007:2). Moreover, within the next decade, ‘Africa’s production is expected to double, and US imports of oil from West Africa alone are forecast to increase to 25 % of total US oil imports’ (Schafer, 2007:2).

In addition, China ‘is establishing itself as a major external power in Africa ... [and] Sino-African trade has grown with breath-taking speed and amounts to over US \$ 70 billion’ (Giroux, 2008:1-2), and ‘that number could rise to US \$ 100 billion by 2010’ (Sprance, 2008:4). Indeed, China has gained unprecedented access to African markets for its export-driven economy ‘growing at roughly 9 % per year’ (Berschinski, 2007:5). And, it obtains 30 % of its oil from African sources, especially Sudan, Congo-Brazzaville and Angola (Hurst, 2006). What’s more, 900,000 Chinese nationals and over 700 Chinese companies currently conduct business in the continent, making China Africa’s second largest trading partner behind the US. Furthermore, China offers generous and unconditional financial support in exchange for diplomatic support, sensibly undermining the political influence of the US in Africa² as well as the competitive advantage of US companies, and

maybe challenging US access to major African ports and its related ability to trade and receive oil (Sprance, 2008:8-9). The increasing competition from China has also forced the US to revisit its trade relations with African states. It actually led the Clinton and Bush Junior administrations to introduce and expand the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in order to facilitate commodity transactions between the US and Sub-Saharan African states, especially oil and cotton (Ploch, 2007:11; Lawson, 2007:7).

2. Establishment of AFRICOM

2.1. The Origins of AFRICOM

Combatant commands were established during the Cold War, specifically in 1946 (Cale, 2005:1; Whelan, 2007:2), in order to ‘better manage military forces for possible armed confrontation with the Soviet Union and its proxies. Today, they are prisms through which the Pentagon views the world. Each command is responsible for coordinating, integrating, and managing all Defense Assets and operations in its designated area of responsibility’ (McFate, 2008:10). However, in previous decades, the Department of Defense paid little attention to Africa in its combatant command structure. In fact, ‘until 1983 Sub-Saharan Africa was not included in any of the geographic combatant commands...[Even when] it was finally included in the combatant command system, it simply became a much-ignored component of overstretched commands’ (Sieber, 2007:1).

Indeed, responsibility for Africa was divided among three geographic combatant commands none of which was based on the continent: the United States European Command (EUCOM), the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and the United States Pacific Command (PACOM). EUCOM, based in Stuttgart, Germany, included over 90 states encompassing all of Europe, 42 African states and Israel under its area of responsibility (Cale, 2005:6). CENTCOM, established in 1983 and based in Tampa, Florida, covered most of the south west and central Asia, and 8 states in Africa including Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia and Sudan all deemed to ‘having closer ties to the

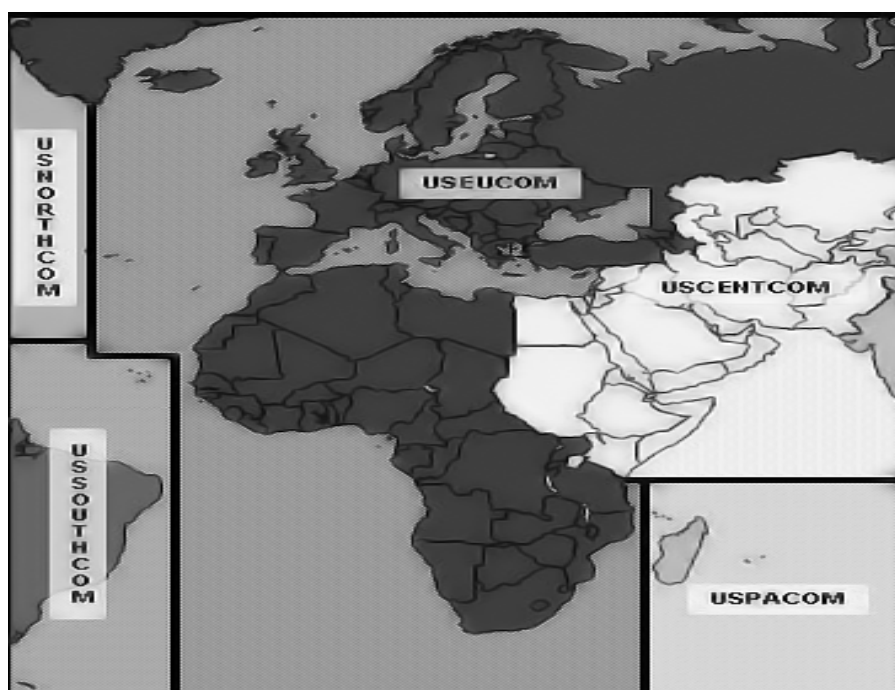
Middle East' (Whelan, 2007:3). PACOM, based in Hawaii, spanned the west coast of the US to the east coast of Africa, and it included 43 African states including the islands of Comoros, Madagascar and Mauritius (Schaefer, 2007:4).

It should be noted that no other continent was divided, in such a disjointed way, among a panoply of combatant commands (Mills et al, 2007:1). In effect, in this Cold War-based combatant command structure, Africa was 'never a number-one priority for any unified command. Each viewed its strategic imperative as being elsewhere, leaving Africa as a secondary or even tertiary concern' (McFate, 2008:11). Indeed, concerns of Africa were subordinated to inevitably higher priorities in Europe and the Middle East. For instance, CENTCOM gave its very most attention in terms of resources to the twin wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as fighting the long-drawn-out war on terrorism, and focused on the threat of Iranian acquiring nuclear weapons and the future of the oversized US presence in the Middle East. Similarly, EUCOM has been preoccupied with the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), European allies, Russia political and territorial aspirations as illustrated by Georgian

War in August 2008 and the downsizing of US forces based in Europe. Also, PACOM's focus has been and remains Asia including China and North Korea (Schaefer, 2007:4).

As a result, these combatant commands became unmistakably overstretched and were unable to effectively perform their responsibilities in Africa. The division 'has reportedly created problems in coordinating activities, and allegedly has increasingly become too great a burden on EUCOM and CENTCOM staff' (Ploch, 2007:2). More disturbingly, owing to their lack of concern, the combatant commands never developed a sizeable cadre of experts dedicated to Africa (McFate, 2008:11) which was not a 'priority for the senior officers whose career prospects depended on their services in Europe, the Gulf, and the Pacific' (Volman and Klare, 2004:228). Nonetheless, after September 2001, The Bush administration recognized Africa 'as a key area for its counter terrorism operations, specifically against al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in various sub-regions within Africa' (Sieber, 2007:1). This new-found concern was reflected in the 2006 National Security Strategy which forcefully notes that Africa 'is of growing geo-strategic importance [in its own right] and is a high priority' (Bush, 2006:38). Hence, the US believed that this

Map 1: Africa divided among EUCOM, CENTCOM and PACOM



challenge and its interests could best be addressed by establishing a single combatant command for all African states.

2.2. Composition and Organization of AFRICOM

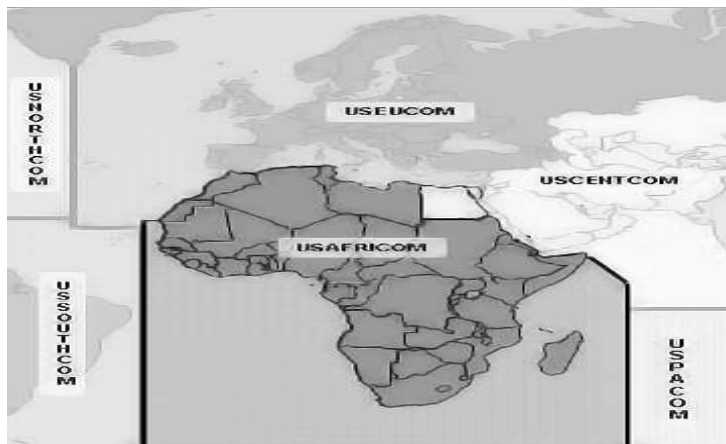
After operating for a year as a sub-unified command under EUCOM, AFRICOM became a fully operational combatant command on October 1, 2008, just 34 days before the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency. AFRICOM will be responsible to the Secretary of Defense for US military relations with all African states except Egypt, which remains within the area of responsibility of CENTCOM³. It is estimated that the new command will have approximately 400 personnel. The first commander of AFRICOM is General William Ward. A four-star African American general, he previously served as deputy commander of EUCOM. He has served in both Egypt and Somalia, and his most recent position was US security coordinator, Israel-Palestinian Authority, in 2005. Well-versed in the region's dynamics and threats, Ward would bring a seasoned hand and deep understanding to the new position' (Scheinmann, 2007:2).

General Ward has two deputies. First, the deputy to the commander for military operations is filled by a military flag officer, a three-star general. At present, it is Vice Admiral Robert Moeller. He supervises all matters relating AFRICOM operational implementation and execution. In addition, he will exercise the command's authority in the absence of the AFRICOM commander. AFRICOM also has a deputy to the commander

for civil-military activities, a position filled by a senior State Department Foreign Service officer. At present, it is Ambassador Mary Carlin Yates. The deputy to the commander for civil-military activities will be responsible for directing the command's civil-military long-range planning and programs, and will work with the African Union on developing how AFRICOM can provide effective training, advisory and technical support to the development of the African Stand-by-Force. The purpose of the deputy to the commander for civil-military activities is also to direct AFRICOM's plans and programs associated with health, humanitarian assistance and security sector reform (Ward, 2007:6-7).

AFRICOM is initially based in Kelly Barracks, on the outskirts of Stuttgart, Germany, where EUCOM is located. There are concerns that locating the command on the African continent could be perceived as a negative move enabling the US to introduce a larger military presence in Africa (Ploch, 2007:8). US officials have repeatedly asserted that AFRICOM will not 'have a large single headquarters in Africa rather small regionally-based staff presences' (Mills et al, 2007:5), with the possibility that they may turn into military bases in the future (Ruiters, 2007:5). Unlike traditional combatant commands, AFRICOM is said to be innovative and will have an integrated staff of permanently assigned Department of Defense (military and civilian) and non-Department of Defense government personnel as well as officers and staff from foreign military and civilian organizations (Ward, 2007:7).

Map 2: Africa under the responsibility of AFRICOM



2.3. AFRICOM's Sphere of Activities

The primary focus of AFRICOM will be conducting security cooperation to build partnership capacities in areas such as maritime security, especially in Gulf of Guinea region, the Horn of Africa and the West Indian Ocean, and also border security and counterterrorism (Schaefer, 2007:1). Furthermore, it will continue to play a vital role in assisting the training of African peace keepers through the African Contingency Operation Training Assistance (ACOTA) program (Mills et al, 2007:9).

Moreover, AFRICOM will play a significant role in the area of humanitarian assistance. There will be a branch within the command focused on Africa, which will enable better planning and coordination of military support to humanitarian assistance efforts (Ploch, 2007:13). AFRICOM will even be engaged in its activities countering the use of child soldiers and focus in HIV policy development, for instance ensuring that sufficient infrastructure is in place for HIV testing and counselling (McFate, 2008:17; Volman, 2008:20).

3. Implications of AFRICOM

3.1. Positive Implications of AFRICOM

3.1.1. For the US

AFRICOM undoubtedly offers a better and more integrated framework for pursuing US interests in Africa in the light of the rapid changes engendered by both the end of the Cold War and the September 2001 terrorist attacks. AFRICOM enabled the Bush administration to

go to the US Congress and argue that the establishment of AFRICOM demonstrates the importance of Africa for US national security and the administration's commitment to give the continent the attention that it deserves. If Africa is so important and if the administration's actions show that it really wants to do all sorts of good things for Africa, it hopes that the next president will be in a much stronger position to make a convincing case that the legislature must appropriate

substantially greater amounts of money to fund the new command's operations. And, within the Pentagon, the establishment of AFRICOM as a unified command under the authority of a high-ranking officer with direct access to the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff will put the new command in a much stronger position to compete with other commands for resources, manpower, and influence over policymaking (Volman, 2008:4).

The decision of the Bush administration to give Africa a higher priority in the combatant command structure would at least do away with 'an organizational arrangement [which was] a vestige of both the continent's colonial legacy and the Cold War, during which the concerns of Africa were subordinated to interests in Europe [or the Middle East]' (Carafano and Gardner, 2003:3). More significantly, AFRICOM could 'provide American political leaders with more thoughtful, informed military advice based on an in-depth knowledge of the region' (Carafano and Gardner, 2003:1). It could thus enable the US 'to exercise a consistent policy over the region rather than inconsistent or multiple policies arising from two or more commands, with [essentially] different priorities, responsible for the region' (Schaefer, 2007:4). AFRICOM could also enable the US 'to improve intelligence and contingency planning, and enhance military-to-military relationship and training' (Schaefer, 2007:4). Under such circumstances, the US could more effectively secure better access to oil, curb China's growing political, diplomatic and economic influence, oversee counterterrorism undertakings and anticipate in advance future security challenges in Africa. As Ruiters made it clear, 'it is generally accepted that governments act to protect their interests in various ways' (2007:5).

3.1.2. For Africa

The establishment of AFRICOM could be a credible symbol of US commitment, notionally indicating the newly emerging strategic importance attached to Africa by the US. It could also signal an attempt to better understand African states'

historical legacies, multiple circumstances, wider security concerns and parameters by the US (Schaefer, 2007:5). Beyond that, AFRICOM cannot, and was not designed to, address ongoing conflicts and even prevent nascent crises from intensifying in Africa. But, it could provide the context and guidance for solving Africa's political and military crises, early enough for them to be meaningful, or at least for damping down unwelcome developments and reversing external disruptions in Africa.

It could especially help in the training of deployable African peace keeping battalions and building of more professional African militaries able to fend off external threats and protect sensitive areas such as oil installations. It could also provide a channel of communications, and even seek reciprocal restraints and develop mutual trust among different warring parties. Finally, it could enhance maritime security along Africa's coastlines in order to reduce criminality through the provision of effective training, intelligence and technical support as well as the conduct of occasional joint exercises (Morrison, 2007:2; Whelan, 2007:5).

3.2. Negative Implications of AFRICOM

3.2.1. For the US

The Department of Defense has a comparative advantage in the US government structure in terms of superior organizational, financial and logistical resources (Sieber, 2007:5), measured up to the relatively weaker Department of State which is essentially dissociated from military operations aimed at establishing positions of influence. An AFRICOM answerable to the Department of Defense, given wide discretion and having operational autonomy as well as better understanding of Africa's political and strategic realities, may end up becoming the major, if not dominant, influence on the substance of foreign policy towards Africa. It may, by default, come to participate in many crucial aspects of day-to-day implementation of that policy and even 'dictate policy to African governments' (Schaefer and Eaglen, 2007:3). It could inevitably overshadow the civilian-led policymaking leadership and the interagency process,

ultimately shifting the initiative away from the Department of State (Okumu, 2007:12; Copson, 2007:119-120).

It could also lead to a blind endorsement by the US, as was the case during the Cold War, of weak, corrupt and repressive regimes which would enthusiastically cooperate with AFRICOM, a deceitful alibi for them to commit heinous human rights abuses (Mentan, 2007:52). Despite its rhetoric about spreading democracy⁴, the US could thereby be held responsible for the erosion of gains towards multiparty democracy and the derailment of internal motors for political change in Africa. The greater the association of the US with an African state, the greater its identification with the prevailing regime which will be emboldened to resist settlements in unresolved internal and external conflicts. An overt US presence or connection could thus transform the stakes of African conflicts and make them more impervious to diplomatic solutions (Ruiters, 2007:5). It could further exacerbate regional tensions, as rival states compete to host AFRICOM facilities, rather than contributing to their solution.

3.2.2. For Africa

With, on balance, a questionable record of US relations with Africa, African states and peoples have always been and still are suspicious of US involvement in the continent's internal affairs. Furthermore, the prevailing image of the US military is grimly conveyed by images of the Iraqi war which has claimed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens. African states and peoples are also wary of the fact that AFRICOM will somehow become the lead US government interlocutor with Africa, representing a militarization of US foreign policy towards the continent despite the 'brave attempt to put a civilian mask on the face of [the] combatant command' (Malan, 2007:2). They are also afraid that an increase in such involvement and militarization will 'only fuel the terrorism which it was meant to stop and increase anti-American sentiment in Africa' (Sieber, 2007:3). Many Africans actually think that military power is absolutely no panacea against terrorist threats, and that, in most cases, it will attract them after building animosity

and allowing conditions to deteriorate, as events in Somalia speak for themselves (Mentan, 2007:3; Bah and Aning, 2008:128).

It is also highly doubtful, from the Africans' perspective, that an undermanned AFRICOM would better understand and effectively respond, on any scale and in a more direct manner, to the security priorities of African states and peoples⁵. It could, on the contrary, produce many unintentional and adverse costs which will linger on for the coming decades, including the risk of triggering a militarization of Chinese policy in Africa. China could, for instance, set up its own Africa Command, and African interests could be once again trampled by a new Cold War between the US and China (Giroux, 2008:3). In sum, it could unwittingly send the message that Africa is still viewed by the US as a strategic prize in a Cold War-style geopolitical struggle, causing irreparable harm to US-Africa relations.

Conclusion

It is the understanding of the author of this brief, after surveying debates surrounding the setting-up of AFRICOM, that the structure of the three combatant commands dealing with Africa made it hard for the US to design and consistently implement a coherent policy which primarily aims at enhancing its energy security and counterterrorism activities on the continent. Thus, while paying lip service to the rather hollow concept of humanitarian assistance, AFRICOM will focus in practice on providing better support for the pursuit of renewed US interests in Africa which can be accurately summarized by three words – 'oil, China and terrorism' (Okumu, 2007:19).

Deeper analysis suggests, however, that the conception of AFRICOM was, partially owing to a thinness of 'American understanding of diverse and complex African societies' (Copson, 2007:124), very poorly thought-through and badly implemented⁶, for instance leaving out Egypt which is a major player in African international relations. Moreover, the very name of the combatant command carries a strong colonial overtone and basing it in Germany was a rather ominous choice, reminiscent of the 1885 Berlin Conference after

which the infamous *scramble of Africa* got under way by European colonial powers⁷.

It is also increasingly becoming apparent that even a determined, well-staffed and better-prepared AFRICOM will reflect the longstanding contradiction of US policy towards Africa which perpetually suffers from institutional rivalry and hypothetically requires respecting human rights and strengthening democratization. Yet, these concerns, traditionally regarded as the centrepiece of US foreign policy, seem to have been thwarted by more immediate and narrower security requirements designed by the Department of Defense⁸. It is in this context that the pragmatist and far-sighted Obama was elected President of the US.

Every incoming US president would like to distance himself from his predecessor's foreign policy course, especially one from the opposite party. Yet, Kagan predicted, as early as in 2006, that 'if the Democrats did take office in 2009, their approach to the post-September 11 world would be marginally different but not stunningly different from Bush's ... In fact, the options open to any new administration are never as broad as its supporters imagine, which is why, historically, there is more continuity than discontinuity in American foreign policy' (Kagan, 2006).

Any early analysis of the foreign policy of the incoming administration can only proceed along these lines. To be sure, Obama has inherited countless domestic and international problems. As he grapples with the numerous practical and immediate political and military necessities related to these problems, the range of options open to him will be limited, and he may, from day one, find it absolutely impossible to dispense with military power⁹. Thus, even though he seems to understand the need for 'less emphasis on military power and more on using diplomacy and foreign aid to bend other nations toward US interests' (Tumulty and Thompson, 2008:27), Obama will be obliged to somewhat 'follow the [clumsily militaristic] path marked out by the Bush administration' (Volman, 2008:14).

The case of AFRICOM will be no different, especially since no obvious institutional alternative exists to it. This was clear from the statements Obama made in reference to AFRICOM during the

campaign. Obama maintained that AFRICOM ‘should serve to coordinate and synchronize our military activities with our other strategic objectives in Africa’, contending that ‘there will be situations that require the United States to work with its partners in Africa to fight terrorism with lethal force’. And, he went on to assert that ‘having a unified command operating in Africa will facilitate this action’ (Volman, 2008:14).

It would be, nonetheless, wise for the Obama administration to ‘adopt an intelligent approach by realizing that dealing with Africa’s crises requires more than just brute military force, but in fact demands a measured and calculated response to deal with any potential threats on the African continent albeit directly or indirectly related to security’ (Swart, 2007:2). In the first place, Obama should use the good will that he so skilfully generated during the campaign in order to incrementally dispel the *chasm of mistrust* among African peoples (Bah and Aning, 2008:130) which built up over the unilateralism and equivocation of the eight years of the Bush administration.

The Obama administration should then ensure that AFRICOM’s presence on the continent remains as low-key as possible. It should unambiguously rule out building and maintaining a base structure on African soil. Two arguments can be used against stationing troops on African soil. Firstly, stationing troops in Africa will be regionally disruptive¹⁰, and will undermine the host state politically, exposing it to intensified criticism that it is just a puppet while depicting the US as being unnecessarily aggressive. Secondly, the creation of such capabilities would create incentives for their use by the US for other purposes including counterproductive interventions. Thus, the Obama administration should focus more on how to shore up US interests and influence in Africa on the performance of regionally prominent African states without further destabilizing them and jeopardizing their cooperation.

Endnotes

¹ Beinart rightly points out that ‘US embassies increasingly cower behind barbed wire, disconnected from the societies they need to understand and help’ (2008:26).

² There is an increasingly potent perception in the US that ‘China has achieved great strategic success in Africa and has profited handsomely from America’s disjointed efforts on the continent ... [that] the establishment of AFRICOM will challenge the status quo in Africa, and [that] Beijing is not pleased’ (Sprance, 2008:14). This alarmist perception, overlooking the fact that China’s engagement may have offered African states real opportunities for sustainable economic development, led to the decision to raise, through AFRICOM, the price of security for China, in the process countering and even nullifying its strategic gain and forcing it to cooperate with the US on any but the latter’s own terms (Volman, 2008:4). This perception provides sufficient evidence that the US is settling back into a Cold War frame of mind.

³ Some writers maintain that the exception of Egypt is understandable, given its historical and strategic ties to the Middle East in general and Israel in particular (Schaefer, 2007:4; McFate, 2008:11). Yet, as the only African state to remain in CENTCOM, given its acute dependence on the US for economic and military assistance, despite the assurance that it ‘will be considered as a country of special concern for AFRICOM’ (Frazer, 2007:1) and as long as its hydro-political security solely depends on Africa, Egypt will feel some discomfort and would imperatively wish to influence any thorough rearrangement of US regional military posture and policymaking, especially one related to African security (For Egyptian strategic thinking, see Souare, 2008 and Said, 2006).

⁴ This ideologically-driven policy of democratization is likely to fail because it is selectively applied, conditioned by a profound misunderstanding of the nature and features of African politics (Moss, 1995:205-208), and anchored to the naïve belief that democracies are supposedly inclined towards peaceful relations with each other.

⁵ For millions of ordinary Africans, the million-dollar question is: was AFRICOM really the outcome of an objective analysis of Africa’s long-term security requirements? And, how will AFRICOM responsibly deal with Africa’s diverse and unforeseeable conflicts among multiple groups quickly mobilizing thousands of supporters? These conflicts usually explode as a result of colonially crafted internal ethno-religious tensions and grievances as well as ill-advised external intervention, and give external powers little warning or reaction time. They sometimes involve Western-trained predatory militaries, lead to the complete breakdown of political order and threaten regional security by spreading

to neighbouring states, drawing them into the conflict and generating refugee and IDP flows as well as an illegal arms trade. Finally, will AFRICOM look at Africa in a long-term framework, as much as a decade ahead?

⁶ Morrison argues that ‘much of the blame for the controversy currently embroiling AFRICOM can be laid at the feet of the Defense Department, whose belated and clumsy outreach generated suspicion about the military’s true motives and raised questions about the Command’s ability to deliver value to Africans and US taxpayers’ (2007:1).

⁷ According to Ploch, some observers even ‘suggest that an African Command located in Europe would perpetuate African perceptions that the West views Africa through a colonial lens’ (2007:8). Others assert that ‘the potential certainly exists for a second scramble that will lead to Africa’s partitioning into docile political entities that lack any genuine capacity for autonomous action’ (Isike et al, 2008:35).

⁸ As usual, the US faces ‘the traditional conflict between commitment to human values and exercise of power for other interests’ (Forsythe, 1990:435).

⁹ Military power is undoubtedly the most applicable instrument to deal with certain intractable problems (Howard, 1970:46). Howard posits that ‘no cheque in international politics can be honoured unless there is a full supply of military power in the bank to meet it’ (1970:48). But, its success ultimately will depend on how it is used and perceived equally to its availability and flexibility.

¹⁰ A prominent African affairs analyst explained that ‘AFRICOM seems to be a unilateral approach that would be counter to the current trend towards unity on the continent ... [and that] any country hosting the command will be criticized for violating common positions on African defence and security, which discourages the hosting of foreign troops on the African soil’ (Okumu, 2007:7-8).

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