

## Introduction

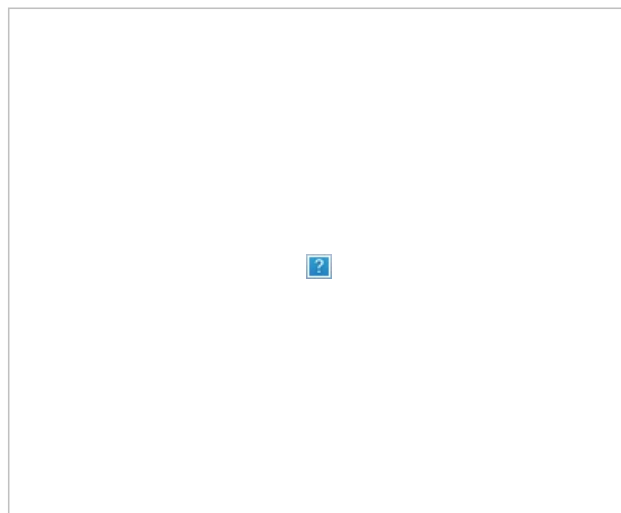
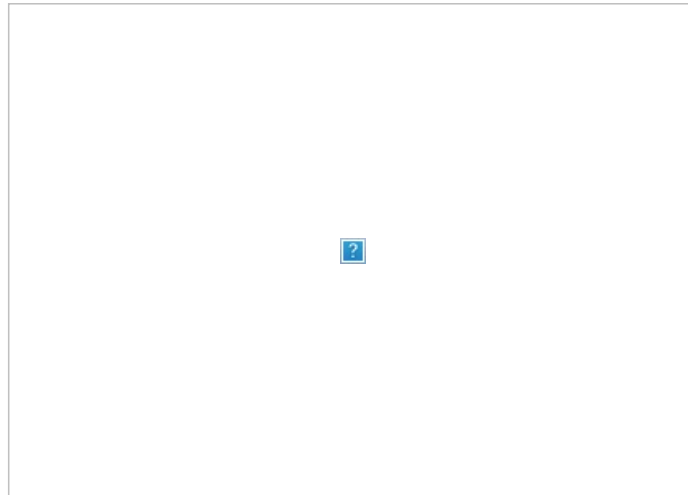
In the era of Cold War, the 'National Security Act of 1947' of the United States not only paved the way for the creation of separate US Air Force from the US Army Air Corps but also the formation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) along with the creation of Unified Combatant Commands (UCC). The UCC is defined as a system having: forces from at least two military services; a continuing, broad mission and; either a functional or geographic responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Map 1 which reflects the 'Area of Responsibility' (AOR) of the six geographic Combatant Commands listed below :- 2

- (a) USNORTHCOM : US Northern Command
- (b) USSOUTHCOM : US Southern Command
- (c) USEUCOM : US European Command
- (d) USCENTCOM : US Central Command
- (e) USPACOM : US Pacific Command and
- (f) USAFRICOM : US Africa Command

The basic motive behind the formation of these commands has been to defend the interests of the United States (US) on the foreign soil and carry-out military operations, if required. This essay seeks to examine the background of the formation of the US Africa Command and its relevance in the present geopolitical context.

## AFRICOM

On 06 Feb 2007, the US President, George W Bush announced the establishment of the United States Africa Command i.e. AFRICOM, a separate military command for the whole of African continent with an AOR for 53 countries barring Egypt. This command formally came into existence on 01 Oct 2008 and headquartered at Kelley Barracks of Stuttgart, Germany. Before the formation of AFRICOM, US-African military relations were conducted by three separate military commands of USEUCOM, USCENTCOM and USPACOM as shown in the Map 2 below.



## Purpose and Intent

The establishment of AFRICOM was considered to be necessary “in order to streamline the bureaucratic structures that had expanded to three different commands”<sup>3</sup> with the motto of ‘Partnerships, Security, Stability, and Reliability’. Moreover, the establishment of AFRICOM was essential to reflect the increased interest and commitment on the part of the US to Africa. This has been primarily so because Africa is not only geographically large, economically resourceful but also a volatile region. Through AFRICOM, the US aims to build the military capacity of African nations in the belief that “failed states are best suited for ideal training, staging and breeding grounds for international terrorists.”<sup>4</sup>

The US President further stressed that “Africa Command will enhance our efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote our common goals of development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa.”<sup>5</sup> In this context, AFRICOM as a tool of the US foreign policy ensured the implementation of a host of military, security cooperation, and security assistance programmes being funded either by the Department of State or the Department of Defence.

## **Packaging and Marketing**

The branding and packaging of AFRICOM was done in a best possible manner to sell it to the African nations. To start with, the US government nominated General William E ‘Kip’ Ward, a four star General from the United States Army as the first Commander of AFRICOM. Perhaps, he was most suited to this job as he was an African-American who was currently serving as the deputy commander of EUCOM and in the past he was associated with ‘Operation Restore Hope’ of Somalia in 1992-1994.

The most highlighted fact of this initiative was that “the commander of AFRICOM cannot conduct exercises or carry-out any other military activity in any of the African countries without the consent of the respective US ambassadors.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in contrast to the other US combatant commands, AFRICOM was not supposed to act as the lead agency but oversee both traditional military activities and programmes being funded through the State Department budget by providing assistance, advice, and training for the African security forces on a bilateral and regional level.

Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for African Affairs, testified before the Congress in 2007 that the primary focus of AFRICOM has been on “preventing problems before they become crises and preventing crises before they become catastrophes or conflicts” and “AFRICOM is about helping Africans build greater capacity to assure their own security.”<sup>7</sup> She also claimed that the funding by the US government would help “train health care professionals and provide desperately needed hospital equipment, train teachers and provide educational materials, prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS through various awareness programmes, train prosecutors in support of the legal reforms and the promotion of independent judiciaries, train police forces consistent with important human rights norms, and to train customs and border control officers to increase capacities to thwart illicit trafficking of weapons, narcotics, and even children across national borders.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Africa’s Apprehension and Threat Perception**

The United States government had a very high level of optimism from the African governments and their respective leaders in the context of AFRICOM. They were of the opinion that AFRICOM would be gladly accepted, widely supported and the African countries would be more than willing to collaborate with it. However, AFRICOM was marred in controversy during its early years as the views of African leaders ranged from lukewarm acceptance to outright hostility. Such concerns are elaborated in the succeeding paras.

## **Historical Legacy**

Africa-US relations date back to the 17th century when ‘African slaves’ were ‘transported’ to the US. In 1884-85, even though the US did not participate directly in the infamous episode of ‘Scramble for Africa’ but did endorse the move of European states to occupy Africa in order to fulfil their commercial requirements.

Caught in the quagmire of ‘Cold War’ in the 20th century, the US assumed African nationalist leaders to be ‘radicals’ and ‘natural allies’ of the ‘Communists’. This led to military interventions and covert operations whereby duly elected and legitimate African leaders were assassinated and replaced with corrupt regimes. In 1960, on the directions of the US President, Dwight D Eisenhower, CIA conspired to kill Congo’s democratically elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in 1965, the Army Chief of Staff, Joseph Mobutu overthrew the first President, Joseph Kasavubu in a CIA backed coup and grabbed power.

In a similar fashion, there were unsuccessful attempts to assassinate the first President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah but was ultimately deposed in a US backed coup on 24 Feb 1966. The CIA also supported the Angolan South-African rebels who made a constant effort to overthrow the legitimate government of Angola during 1976-1992. Moreover, it is now in the public domain how the US government always supported the ‘apartheid system’ being practised by the minority government of South Africa. Even in the Great Lakes region, Uganda and Rwanda had been actively supported by the US military and intelligence agencies in their invasion of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>10</sup>

The recent history also played a crucial role in building-up the negative perception around AFRICOM. The formation of AFRICOM in tandem with the unilateral decision of the US to attack Afghanistan and Iraq raised suspicions in the minds of Africans. The US air strikes on Somalia in January 2007 and their overwhelming support for Ethiopia’s military intervention in Somalia also added to their concerns. Thus, the African leaders were of the opinion that the formation of AFRICOM was a ‘neo-colonial’ effort by the US to dominate the region militarily.<sup>11</sup>

## **Lack of Consensus**

With the formal announcement for the establishment of AFRICOM, the sovereign African countries were quite perplexed with the unilateral decision taken by the US. They strongly resented it, in the belief that “the US had not

taken into consideration the requirement and concerns of the African people it intended to work with”.<sup>12</sup> The Department of Defence (DoD) admitted this fact that “they had made no attempt to consult with anyone at the UN while they were developing AFRICOM and hadn’t really consulted with anyone in Africa either”.<sup>13</sup>

The hasty decision of formation and establishment of AFRICOM without any consultation with the African countries gave impression that “the United States was least interested to listen to the African voices and presented a readymade solution which was applicable to all the African problems”.<sup>14</sup> This unilateral decision without any consultation or prior inputs from the African states reflected the “arrogance and condescension of the United States”.<sup>15</sup> The African leaders not only perceived this decision as an aggressive policy but also considered AFRICOM to be a potential threat to Africa.

### **Militarisation of US-Africa Policy**

While referring to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and thereafter the open declaration of ‘Global War on Terrorism’ on Afghanistan and Iraq by the US, many African leaders were of the opinion that AFRICOM’s formation reflected a growing militarisation of the US relations with their continent and a new focus on anti-terrorism at the expense of traditional development aid.<sup>16</sup> Even though there is a strong representation of non-military US public sector agencies in AFRICOM focussing on the components of soft power paving the way for diplomacy and aid but not to forget, AFRICOM is still a military organisation.

The critics have voiced their concern as AFRICOM has also been formed to strengthen the military of friendly regimes who can act as ‘surrogates’ on behalf of the US in its ‘Global War on Terrorism’ (GWOT) particularly in countries with abundant oil and natural gas supplies – and for efforts to increase its options for more direct military involvement in the future on the African soil.<sup>17</sup> This in turn would prevent the direct military involvement of the US in Africa. This argument stands to be true as it is in public domain that the “US-Africa relations since the Cold War have been basically defined by the national security interests of the United States”.<sup>18</sup>

Many opponents while citing the historical legacy of the US to get involved in proxy wars considered AFRICOM to be an “attempt to militarise Africa in order to remain an economic competitor against the European Union, India and China – under the cover of fostering peace, security, combating terrorism and fighting the narcotics trade in West Africa”.<sup>19</sup> Many critics shared the comment that “China is bringing factories and infrastructure to Africa, while the US brings the military”<sup>20</sup> and they asked, “whether the old wineskin of an American Combatant Command can really hold the new wine of peaceful cooperation and, if it does, whether the old skin could contain it”.<sup>21</sup>

Africans often have a very negative view of their own militaries because of past misbehaviour, including coups, mistreatment of civilians, and corruption. Even though the US military personnel are professional and committed to civilian control but they do not consider the African militaries to be completely trustworthy. It has been because of their lack of professionalism and the lack of desire to work under the civilian control. This proved to be true in 2012 when Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, a military officer who received professional military education under ‘International Military Education and Training’ (IMET) programme at the US, led the coup in Mali and deposed the democratically elected President Amadou Toumani Toure.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, some Africans were also of the opinion that increase in the US military on the African soil would attract the enemies of the US thereby bringing the GWOT to the backyard of the African continent.

### **AFRICOM Headquarters on African Soil**

The original plan of the US to establish the AFRICOM’s headquarters on the African soil was one of the prominent reasons why many African leaders, governments and civil society vehemently opposed it. A number of African countries like Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Djibouti and Kenya refused to host AFRICOM on their soil. Some African countries such as South Africa, considered to be a regional hegemon were of the opinion that a permanent American military presence in the region will act as a rival in their sphere of influence.<sup>23</sup>

Coming across the stiff resistance, the Bush Administration in February 2008 announced that AFRICOM’s headquarters would remain in Stuttgart, Germany, for the foreseeable future. However, the fierce opposition to AFRICOM’s headquarters on the African soil reflected the lack of understanding of African politics on the part of DoD as many opponents opined that AFRICOM was a recipe for further militarisation and potentially, the continued pauperisation of Africa.<sup>24</sup>

### **Change in African Responses**

Since 2007, the US and AFRICOM has withstood all the criticisms and have been constantly engaging the African countries through diplomacy. AFRICOM in concert with the other US government agencies and international partners conducted sustained security engagement through military-to-military programmes, military-sponsored activities, and other military operations in order to promote a stable and secure African environment in support of US foreign policy.<sup>25</sup>

AFRICOM working at both the bilateral and multilateral forum chalked out military engagements with African countries whereby they participated in joint military exercises under the supervision of AFRICOM trainers. The African militaries have benefitted immensely from the military exercises conducted by AFRICOM as they have been equipped with new arms and sophisticated weapons. However, a broader question still remains - whether they will adapt the professionalism from the US counterparts or they will still remain divided due to political compulsions of the domestic politics.

Though AFRICOM was feared by the African governments and citizens but, with the passage of time and the increased engagement between the African states and AFRICOM, the US has become aware of the continent’s problems thereby resulting into a positive development of increased resources, training, and assistance. Simultaneously, the US

Armed Forces who had a single military base at Camp Lemonnier of Djibouti in Africa have established drone bases at Djibouti, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Niger, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Seychelles.

In this regard, the decision of the US administration not to have AFRICOM headquarters on the African soil has brought the African countries closer and in the words of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for African Affairs, Amanda J Dory, "The US military effort on the continent is being accepted by many African leaders... when US Africa Command first stood up, there was concern among some leaders that it signified a 'militarisation of US foreign policy and a sort of creeping colonialism'. Those fears seem to have subsided".<sup>26</sup>

However, it must be noted that "the rejection of AFRICOM did not stem from widespread anti-Americanism but rather from the reluctance of leaders, the media and public opinion that stemmed from fears concerning US hegemony in Africa" (Burgess, 2008).<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

AFRICOM which acts as a tool of the US foreign policy at the ground level of Africa aims to provide a stable and secure African environment which is in the long-term interest of Africa as well as the US. However, the increasing number of African participants in the military exercises conducted by AFRICOM indicate that the African countries are willing to move ahead with AFRICOM. Moreover, the fear of militarisation of Africa has been sidelined as the US economy is yet to completely recover from the financial crisis of 2008 coupled with huge explorations of shale oil within the country.

## Endnotes

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