

The United States of America's Africa Command and the Dilemma of Security and Stability in Africa

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Recently, significant amount of research has been devoted to establishing that Africa is becoming a new area for power rivalry. It is not surprising that Africa is playing a critical role in emerging global realignments in politics, trade and international cooperation. Like China, the USA also considers Africa an area of strategic significance. The America's strategic interests in Africa extend beyond oil and other resources. To that end, the US has established AFRICOM to advance its strategic position on the Continent. However, it is clear that the US and African nations have differing priorities regarding the main elements of the relationship. The key question is whether these differing priorities and strategic interests will outweigh the existing US-Africa relations. The main purpose of this article is to analyse AFRICOM's origin, its role, US strategic interests in Africa and the African response thereof. Besides, the article attempts to assess – to what extent the US has succeeded in this endeavour?

The creation of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM or AFRICOM), new Unified Combatant Command for the African continent is reflecting Africa's increasing strategic importance to the US. The US has argued that the AFRICOM is to support the African nations to build greater capacity to ensure their own security. Yet many argue that this military centred strategy narrowly filters the realities of security challenges across the continent.¹ Many analysts think that the AFRICOM has been established mainly in the context of the war against terrorism, to counterbalance China and to maintain a strategic edge in Africa.² This is perhaps illustrated by the increased level of the US military sales, financing and training expenditure in African countries, which are now regarded strategic to the US interests.

US Command Areas and AFRICOM

Unified commands were instituted during the Cold War to better manage military forces for possible armed confrontation with the Soviet Union and its proxies.³ In post-Cold War era, these commands have been managed either on the basis of geographic or functional area of responsibility for the smooth functioning of military operations and maintaining military relations with other countries. Advent of 21st century has proved to be a turning point in USA's Africa policy, resulting in the formation of a separate command area for Africa. Today, these commands are prisms through which the Pentagon views the world.⁴ After the creation of AFRICOM, there are now six regional command areas across the globe. These are European Command (EUCOM) for European region, Central Command (CENTCOM) for Central Asia region, Pacific Command (PACOM) for Asia-Pacific region, Northern Command (NORTHCOM) for North America, Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) for South America and finally, Africa Command (AFRICOM) for African region.

Initially, the US military activities in Africa were divided among three geographic commands; EUCOM, CENTCOM and PACOM. In fact, this arrangement to divide a continent which was facing common problems and challenges was believed as unscientific. Therefore, a new command for Africa as a separate command was launched with initial operating capability as a sub-unified command under EUCOM in 2007, and reached full operating capability in October, 2008. It was the result of an internal reorganisation of the US military command structure, creating one administrative headquarters that is responsible to the Secretary of Defence for the US military relations with all African countries,⁵ except Egypt, which remains under CENTCOM. AFRICOM is unique in comparison to other commands as the Department of Defence (DoD) officials articulated-combatant command 'plus'. This implies that the commands have to pursue all the roles and responsibilities of a traditional geographic combatant command, including the ability to facilitate or lead military operations, as also include broader 'soft power' issues such as health, infrastructure rehabilitation, environment, economic development, security issues, conflict attention and other human security aspects. These, altogether, aimed at building a stable security environment and to incorporate a large civilian component from the other US governmental agencies to address these challenges. However, the headquarter of AFRICOM is to continue to remain at Kelley Barracks (Stuttgart), Germany until 2012 in order to allow the command to gain greater understanding of its long-term operational requirements.⁶

Why a Separate Command Area is Needed for Africa?

Although, the US forces have conventionally focused on fighting and winning wars, the security policy of the US is now trying to develop conflict prevention and management strategy in order to address threats through increased emphasis on threat security cooperation and capacity building with allies.

Africa has been plagued by political conflicts and instability over the last fifty years, retarding political, economic and social development in the African countries. It led many states to be turned into fragile states e.g. Somalia, Sierra-Leone etc. The inability or unwillingness of such fragile states to govern territory within their borders can lead to the creation of safe-havens for terrorist organisations.⁷ The US National Defence Strategy testified in 2008, that "the inability of many states to police themselves effectively or to work with their neighbours, to ensure regional security represents a challenge to the international system,... if left unchecked, such instability can spread and threaten regions of interest to the US, our allies, and friends".

However, there are enough evidences to suggest that terrorist groups might have profited from the collapse of the state administration and security institutions for instance, the situation during 1990s following civil wars in Sierra-Leone and Liberia.⁸ It is quite easy to convince individuals to support terrorism against the West if they face a bleak future in these kinds of environments, when it is contrasted with the situations prevailing in the Western countries.⁹ The Department of Defence (DoD) has also identified 'instability in foreign countries as a threat to the US interests', therefore, stability operation has been given priority over combatant operations.

Furthermore, some of the US officials believed that EUCOM and CENTCOM have become overstretched particularly given the demands created by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. General James L Jones, the former Commander of EUCOM, pointed out in 2006 that "EUCOM's staff was spending more than half their time on Africa

issues”.¹⁰ His successor, General Bantz J Craddock testified that “Africa in recent years had posed the greatest security stability challenge” to EUCOM, and “a separate command for Africa would provide better focus and increased synergy in support of the US policy and engagement”.¹¹

The 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) reiterates, “Preventing conflict, stabilizing crises, and building security sector capacity are essential elements of America’s national security approach”. Given Africa’s strategic significance to the US, the Bush Administration has established AFRICOM in order to:

... strengthen our security cooperation with Africa and help to create new opportunities to bolster the capabilities of our partners in Africa. Africa Command will enhance our efforts to help bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote our common goals of development, health, education, democracy and economic growth in Africa. US government has formed a new command with additional roles and responsibilities (in addition traditional role of combatant) aimed at building a stable security environment and incorporate a larger civilian component from other US government agencies to address these challenges.

The above statement shows the increasing importance of Africa for the US and deepens the realisation that any instability in African countries has the potential to threaten the US interests on the continent.

AFRICOM and Its Objectives

The AFRICOM is responsible for organising the US military operations and maintaining military relations with all African countries. In addition, it is concerned with other US government agencies and international partners; conducts sustained security engagement through military-to-military programmes, military-sponsored activities and other military operations as directed to promote a stable and secure African environment.

The US officials have broadly underlined that the command’s mission is to promote the US strategic objectives of strengthening stability and security in the region by conducting wide ranging programmes and activities. Eventually, this will help African states to meet their goals of building capable and professional militaries that are subordinate to civilian authority, respect human rights, and adhere to the rule of law. Therefore, building partnership capacity through the security assistance appears to be the main objective of the US military strategy in Africa.

A key aspect of the command’s mission is its supporting role to other US agencies and departments’ efforts on the continent. AFRICOM is a non-kinetic force and is expected to supervise an array of non-combat related operations that relate to US’s strategic interests. But like other combatant commands, AFRICOM is expected to oversee military operations, when directed, to deter aggression and respond to crises.

The US Strategic Interests in Africa

Historically, the African continent had not been identified as a strategic priority for the US military. During the Cold War, Africa was nothing more than a chess board for superpower manoeuvring and the US foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa had little to do with Africa. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many American policymakers considered the US military’s role and responsibilities on the continent to be minimal. The DoD in National Security Strategy for sub-Saharan Africa of 1995 outlined – “ultimately we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa”. Therefore, the decade of 1990s witnessed a changed pattern of selective and limited engagement by the US as they apparently found no strategic interest in Africa.¹³

Following terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar-e-Salaam (Tanzania) in 1998, the US conducted a retaliatory attack against a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum (Sudan), that the US government officials initially contended was producing precursors to chemical weapons for Al Qaeda. The embassy bombings and the retaliatory strike against Sudan are considered to be a turning point in the US strategic policy toward the region.¹⁴ Moreover, the terrorist attack on World Trade Centre (2001), launch of the US ‘War on Terror’, targeted the US embassy in Kenya (again in 2002), Algeria (2007) and Morocco (2007) and more importantly the terrorist prominent foothold in North Africa pressurised the US to take African issue seriously. Thus, organisation of the US military engagement in the region and improving the regions capacity to respond to a crisis has got a higher place on the US strategic agenda for the continent since 2001.

The US experts on Africa underlined five factors that have shaped increased US interest in Africa i.e. global trade, oil, armed conflicts, terror and HIV/AIDS. However, the US has sought to increase its economic relations with Africa. According to IMF, its total export has tripled from \$ 7.6 billion in 2000 to \$ 21 billion in 2010.¹⁵ Natural resources, particularly energy resources, dominate the products imported from Africa. It is important to note that African oil is of higher quality, lower sulphur content, easily refinable and, therefore, more profitable in comparison to oil from Gulf countries. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimates suggest Africa may supply as much as 25 per cent of imports to US by 2015 (African oil constituted approximately 18 per cent of all US imports in 2006).¹⁶ But the instability in Niger delta, Nigeria and other oil producing areas threaten the US interests. These factors had led to a conceptual shift to a strategic view of Africa.

President Obama has affirmed Africa’s strategic importance to the US on several occasions. In a speech in Ghana in July 2009, he said:

“When there is genocide in Darfur or terrorism in Somalia, these are not simply African problems, they are global security challenges, and they demand a global response.... And let me be clear: our Africa Command is focused not on establishing a foothold on the continent, but on confronting these common challenges to advance the security of America, Africa, and the world”.¹⁷

The 2010 National Security Strategy has also pointed out a number of priorities for African continent, including access to open markets, conflict prevention, global peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and the protection of vital carbon sinks. However, the growing Chinese engagement in the Africa has ushered the region into a competitive battlefield.

The view is widespread in Africa that AFRICOM is a tool to erode China's growing influence on the continent.¹⁸ It is in this context that some of the US defence scholars have also described the prevailing ambience in the African region as a proxy economic Cold War, especially in the quest for resources between China and the US.¹⁹

The US Military Assistance and Security Cooperation in Africa

In general, sub-Saharan countries lack the capabilities to sustain successful peace-keeping operations over the long term. This kind of situation often prompts and rationalises the US interventions in Africa. The US DoD is conducting a variety of activities in Africa. In addition to traditional contingency operations, the US military takes number of efforts aimed at increasing the capabilities of African militaries to provide security and stability for their own countries and the region as a whole. Their operational activities include humanitarian relief, peacekeeping, counter-narcotics, sanctions' enforcement, check proliferation of small arms and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), non-combatant evacuation, maritime interdiction operations etc. For all these activities, the State Department provides funds and overall guidance and directions for the programmes under the foreign military assistance program.

A key objective of the US military strategy in Africa is to develop partnership capacity. The US government provides security assistance to African militaries through both bilateral and multilateral initiatives such as the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), the Enhanced International Peacekeeping Capabilities (EIPC) programme, the African Regional Peacekeeping Programme (ARP), International Military Education and Training (IMET) etc. Besides, AFRICOM conducts an annual training exercise 'Africa Endeavor'20 with African nations. The first Africa Endeavor was held in South Africa in 2006. Subsequent exercises took place in Nigeria in 2008 and in Gabon in 2009. Recently, 'Africa Endeavor-2010' was concluded from August 9-19, 2010 in Accra, Ghana, which was attended by 36 African nations.

In October 2007, the US Naval Force in Europe launched a new initiative, the African Partnership Station (APS) under which a naval ship, the *USS Fort McHenry*, was deployed to the Gulf of Guinea to provide assistance and training to the Gulf nations. The US military assistance also includes efforts to improve information sharing networks between African countries through programmes such as the Multinational Information Sharing Initiative. AFRICOM also supports the US security sector reform initiatives in post-conflict countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, and Sudan.

The US military also occasionally provides advisers to peacekeeping missions such as those deployed in Sudan and Somalia. The US forces routinely conduct a variety of bilateral and multilateral joint exercises with African militaries through programmes such as Joint Combined Exchange Training and Disaster Assistance and Maritime Security Training.

In 1999, the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS) was created to conduct a variety of academic activities, especially for African military and civilian officials aimed at promoting good governance and democratic values, countering ideological support for terrorism, and fostering regional collaboration and cooperation in the African defence and security sectors. Indeed, one of the main objectives of creating this centre was to support the development of the US strategic policy towards Africa.

In addition, the US government provides military equipment under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme and loans to purchase such equipment under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programme. The US waves off repayment of these loans for African countries time to time.

The US adopted number of initiatives to address the root cause of terrorism and conduct military operations to destroy terrorist targets through military operations. The Department of State launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) programme to increase border security and counterterrorism capacities. US and African forces have conducted joint exercises such as Exercise Flintlock to improve security partnerships initiated under PSI programme and Trans Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP).²¹

African Perception and Response

The reactions to the creation of a new command for Africa are severely different in both the US and Africa. In the US the response has been largely positive, although a deep concern has been raised over the implications of placing missions and functions that are inherently civilian under the lead of the US military. The fear is that this may lead to a militarisation of the US funded programmes in Africa and hinder democratic development. On the other hand, in Africa the perceptions are more mixed. There has been considerable apprehension over the US motivations for creating AFRICOM. Some Africans worry that the move represents a neo-colonial effort to dominate the region militarily. Reports of the US air strikes in Somalia, the US support for Ethiopia's military intervention in Somalia and more recently the US support to protest movement in North African countries have added to those concerns.

Historically, the US programmes to train and equip African countries had resulted in devastation and violence as a result of the infusion of weapons and training into unstable areas of Africa. Many Africans view the US counter-terrorism efforts in Africa as nothing but continuation of the same programme under which military aid has been provided to countries such as Chad and Equatorial Guinea. Besides, the US foreign policy analysts have focused attention on China's engagement in Africa in recent years, which has led some to question whether an AFRICOM might be part of a new contest for influence on the continent.

However, all African perceptions on AFRICOM are not negative. Many feel that increased American attention to the continent's problems would potentially bring increased resources, training and assistance. Nigerian President Umaru Yar'Adua, during his December 2007 visit to Washington, DC, commented, "We shall partner with AFRICOM to assist not only Nigeria, but also the African continent to actualise its peace and security initiative, which is an initiative to help standby forces of brigade-size in each of the regional economic groupings within the African continent."²²

President Adua's statement on AFRICOM is consistent with Nigeria's well-known position on the necessity for Africa to avail itself of opportunities for enhanced capacity for the promotion of peace and security in Africa.

During President Bush's second official visit to Africa in February 2008, Ghana's President John Kufour also welcomed the US Africa Command initiative, which in his view, would strengthen the relationship and mutual respect between the two countries. In October 2008 the South African government, initially one of the most vocal on the continent in expressing concerns about the new command, welcomed the USS Theodore Roosevelt, the first US carrier to visit the country since the end of apartheid.

The US expects all African leaders to be optimistic but convincing them all would not be easy. It could not be denied that, in terms of its structure and declared intent, AFRICOM embodies a fresh attempt to create an inter-agency strategy that weaves diplomacy, defence and development into a coherent mechanism.

Conclusion

Historically, state security and human security in Africa had been undermined by superpowers especially during the Cold War period. Post-Cold War, however, Africa (freed from being the victim of superpower rivalries) subsequently opened the gates of new opportunities for African countries. This period marked a remarkable shift in the foreign policies of major economies such as the UK, France, China, India etc toward Africa which brought it to the centre stage in international politics. As a result, political, economic and military assistance to African countries have increased during last two decade. Likewise, a new phase in relations between Africa and the US arrived, in which the US military assistance and military training programmes have risen steadily.

AFRICOM, however, seems as a strategic move post-9/11 on the part of US, which is sensitive to local needs and regional differences. Undoubtedly, it is about projection of the US interests, but this doesn't mean that Africa is not benefited at all. In fact, this new scramble for African markets and natural resources, particularly energy resources, have put Africa as the next destination of strategic rivalry. Consequently, this has created a more competitive environment and strengthened the bargaining capacity of the African countries.

The key threats to the African security come from the intra-state conflicts and violent rivalries rather than inter-state. The major African challenges are to ensure security, stability and well governed environment in which political, economic and social development could be possible. Only by addressing the challenges which are due to the developmental deficit, security and stability can be achieved and maintained in the African region. This is because the lack of security prevents development from taking roots and thus perpetuating conflict and compromising development. In fact, in doing so, an impetus is needed which must come from within Africa itself and only then any external assistance would prove to be beneficial.

However, it seems that AFRICOM has changed the traditional approaches of security. Hopefully, its strategic missions would narrow the gap between security and development. AFRICOM could be more effective if there is a commonality of purpose and a coincidence of interests between the two. To develop this sense of shared purpose and mutual interest requires constant high-level dialogue, joint analysis efforts, and frequent re-calibration of priorities and programmes. Subsequently, AFRICOM could render a platform, where greater African and US engagement can decisively shape the continent's future. Certainly, many obstacles are there, which should be removed by collective efforts and by understanding how AFRICOM would add real value to African security and stability. It is crucial for the US-Africa relationship to have a durable foundation that could stand the test of time.

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