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Report

AFRICOM: Protecting US interests disguised as 'military partnerships'

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Introduction

AFRICOM will be the legacy of Bush's failed foreign policy that threatens future generations throughout our continent[1].

In classic Orwellian juxtapose, Obama's AFRICOM strategy appears to echo 'War is Peace' and 'Ignorance is Strength'[2].

...is naive to imagine that better consultation, planning, and marketing would have substantially improved AFRICOM's reception on the continent. No communication and consultation could have altered the essence and improved the image of a superpower whose foreign policy is characterized by unilateralism, militarism, and disregard for international law. The formation of a US military command for Africa is a component of this foreign policy and is thus inescapably associated with its features[3].

As these quotes indicate, there has been much vociferous opposition to the formation of the US government's African Command (USAFRICOM or AFRICOM). This paper will tease out the reasons behind this opposition.

The first part of the paper discusses the structure of the command, its developmental aspects and the resultant conflict between the US Departments of Defense and State. Part two delves beneath the surface and teases out what might be other, unstated

reasons behind AFRICOM's establishment, including the rise of China, the increasing importance of African oil and the US 'war on terror'. Part three discusses the various activities that AFRICOM is involved in and has undertaken since its establishment, including the 'state partnership program' which the command has used to penetrate into African military affairs; even South Africa, one of its most strident critics, has fallen prey to this. The fourth part synthesises and analyses the responses of various African actors to AFRICOM. The last part forecasts Africa's short- to medium-term future were AFRICOM allowed to continue with its current modus operandi. It also provides recommendations for how these consequences might be mitigated. Important in this regard are the fasttracking of the African Union's High Command and the deployment of its standby force as a counterbalance to AFRICOM and as a leveraging tool for negotiations.

The running argument of this paper is that AFRICOM's establishment is not as altruistic as its developmental component might lead one to believe. Thus, were it allowed to continue its activities unhindered, the African continent will witness drastic consequences, including an intensification of the second 'scramble for Africa' as well as a likely increase in civil wars and a weakening of political processes across the continent.

Structure

Unveiled in February 2007 and fully operational since 1 November 2008, AFRICOM is the ninth unified and sixth regional US military command that was established after the Second World War[4]. Formed with the supposed intention of bringing 'peace and security to the people of Africa and [promoting] [the US and Africa's] common goals of development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa,' the command's establishment was justified on the grounds that 'weak states...can pose as great a danger to [US] national interests as strong states'[5].

In order to achieve these objectives, AFRICOM defines its responsibilities as military-to-military partnerships to improve the capacity and operability of African armed forces, assisting other US agencies in fulfilling their tasks in Africa and, where necessary, undertaking military activities in Africa to protect America's national interests[6]. Headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany (because of African opposition to its headquarters being on the continent), the command employed over 2 000 personnel by 2010 – including over 300 special operations forces and 250 intelligence operatives – with a total annual budget of around US\$350 million[7]. The 2 000-strong US Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) based at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, falls within AFRICOM's sphere of activity, and specialised naval, armoured, air and marine core forces mainly based in Italy and Germany have been assigned to the command[8].

Unlike other US military commands, AFRICOM has a small developmental component, with over thirty officials from other US agencies – including the US Department of State (DOS) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) – as part of its structure. Further, one of its deputy commanders will always be a senior state department official. The official reason for this is to synchronise AFRICOM's activities with US development activities. However, it has been forthrightly criticised by the DOS for ensuring that military activities, i.e. defence, come before development and diplomacy, an inversion of the 'Triple Ds' policy.[9]

Prior to AFRICOM's formation, the USA dealt with African states through three different regional commands: the US Central Command, which was tasked with exercising responsibility over Egypt, the horn of Africa and Kenya amongst others; the Pacific Command, whose responsibilities included the various Indian Ocean nations such as Madagascar and the Comoros; and the European Command under which most African states fell.[10] It is also significant that Egypt remains within the remit of the Central Command, mainly as a result of its proximity to the Middle East – Israel in particular.[11]

Reasons behind AFRICOM's formation

The rise of China

Despite the stated reasons provided by the US government for AFRICOM's creation, many commentators and analysts – especially on the African continent – are of the view that more sinister motives are at play.[12] Chief amongst these is the rise of China, whose economy has grown by an average of nine per cent per annum over the past thirty years and whose GDP has grown to around sixteen per cent of the world's GDP from a figure of less than five per cent in 1980.[13] Asia is a lens through which this can best be viewed. Despite US troops being stationed in Japan and South Korea, and despite US assistance to these countries during the Cold War, Chinese trade with them surpassed that of the USA in 2007.[14]

This is similar to the African case. Chinese trade with the continent has grown from around three billion dollars annually in 1995 to over 100 billion in 2008.[15] In addition, China has provided large amounts in developmental loans to African states, including US\$22 billion to Angola and US\$13 billion to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it has invested over US\$ 13 billion in the continent in the past five years.[16] It is noteworthy that Chinese trade with Africa is skewed toward the African side; since 2008, China has had a US\$5 billion deficit as a result of trade with Africa, thus indicating that

this trade might not be as predatory as many argue.[17] These trade and aid relations are made more appealing to African states by the fact that Chinese aid is broadly unconditional and is a result of historical south-south solidarity. One condition that China insists on is that its business partners not recognise Taiwan. This has enticed many states onto the Chinese side, best illustrated by the fact that only four African countries now recognise Taiwan, down from over twenty in the 1990s.[18]

As a result of these factors, Chinese trade with Africa has surpassed that of the USA, an aspect that the latter seeks to address.[19] AFRICOM's developmental mask attempts to create the illusion that US actions on the continent are altruistic and not part of the 'scramble for Africa' that many analysts argue it is. However, the 2006 US National Security Strategy's assertion that Africa holds strategic and geopolitical significance for the USA clearly indicates the opposite.[20] In addition, the US administration's military support to Africa under the African Contingency Response Initiative (ACRI) and the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) initiative, among others, has been partly aimed at reducing the dependence of African states on Chinese military assistance in training and equipping their armed forces.[21] China is currently the third largest supplier of arms to Africa, with arms deals totalling over US\$500 million per annum.[22]

Oil

Linked to the competition with China is the control over oil. As early as 2001, Africa's oil resources were posited as being a potential solution to America's energy problem.[23] The Cheney Report[24] predicted that by 2015 Africa's Gulf of Guinea would account for over twenty-five per cent of US oil imports, prompting George Bush to declare Africa's oil a national strategic interest of the USA.[25] In reality, the situation has played out even more dramatic. The consequences of the American invasion of Iraq have meant that by 2006 the USA was already receiving twenty-two per cent of its oil from Africa, and by 2007 US oil imports from Africa eclipsed its imports from the Persian Gulf.[26]

This situation has been brought into sharp focus and exacerbated by the fact that China currently receives around a third of its oil requirements from Africa; Sudan and Angola being the states from which the country imports most of its oil[27]. China has therefore invested large amounts of capital in extraction capacity in African states that possess oil resources and, in the case of Sudan, even utilised its position on the United Nations Security Council to dilute and block resolutions targeting the regime.[28] This has further entrenched the Cold War-like competition between the USA and China over

Africa, leading many commentators to assert that we are currently witnessing the beginnings of a new 'scramble for Africa'. [29]

The USA has rejected this notion. [30] Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, said at a Royal United Services Institute conference in 2008 that the USA believed that African oil should be sold on the open market. She emphasised that this did not mean that the USA sought to monopolise African oil. [31] Despite this, the statement served only to conflate the notions of access to African oil and the control thereof. While the USA does support and believe in the use of a market mechanism for the sale of oil, it also seeks to control the process to its benefit. The invasion of Iraq is a clear illustration of this. Throughout the 1990s, US companies had access to Iraqi oil on the spot market, yet it sought to control this process, resulting in the 2003 invasion. [32]

A recent International Energy Agency (IEA) report speculated that through increased fracking, and as a result of advances in technology that would enable the USA to access oil from deeper beneath the surface, American dependence on oil is set to drastically decrease. [33] The IEA's November 2012 report predicted that by 2020 the USA would become the world's largest oil producer and by 2035 it would be oil independent. [34] A possible consequence of this might be a US retreat from the aggressive pursuit of African interests and the continent being spared the ensuing competition that could resemble the Cold War. However, this is only speculation because opposition to fracking and its consequent environmental degradation is increasing in the USA and globally.

Counterterrorism and the 'war on terror'

The 'war on terror' doctrine is a key reason for AFRICOM's establishment. [35] This follows the promotion of the argument that weak states pose as much danger to the USA as strong states and that there is a link between underdevelopment and terrorism. [36] Many analysts have referred to this process as the 'security-development' discourse and have argued that its seductiveness is dangerous because of the ease with which a causal relationship can be drawn between underdevelopment and terrorism. [37] So pervasive has this idea become that the various AFRICOM statements do not even attempt to hide the 'counterterrorism' thrust of the initiative and most African states have bought into the idea.

It is noteworthy that AFRICOM is not the first US initiative to use counterterrorism as a cover to infiltrate African states. Under the Pan-Sahelian and Trans-Sahel counterterrorism initiatives, the USA pursued its 'war on terror' agenda by coordinating

counterterrorism activities with African states including Mali, Mauritania, Algeria and Niger, providing the weaponry and equipment and, at times, funding fuel costs.[38]

AFRICOM's main aim in this regard is to intensify and coordinate activities dealing with the 'war on terror' in Africa by coordinating and managing the above initiatives and furthering the security-development discourse by incorporating counterterrorism into the various military partnerships and training programmes it oversees.[39] North Africa is important in this regard. During his July 2012 trip to the region, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said:

'We continue to be concerned about the continuing Al Qaeda presence in places like Yemen and Somalia and in North Africa. And so for that reason, we strongly urge countries like Tunisia to develop a counterterrorism operation that can deal with that. And there are a number of efforts that we can assist them with to develop the kind of operations, the kind of intelligence that would help them effectively deal with that threat. And they expressed a willingness to work with us on that effort.'

As Baron argues, the wording is very important. '[They] expressed a willingness to work with us' is an indication that the USA was the party ascertaining the 'threat' and then attempting to force other states to see the threat from its perspective. This illustrates how the USA is carrying out its 'war on terror' and how it is attempting to bully states to follow suit.[41] Moreover, Panetta's statement clearly illustrates how AFRICOM incorporates 'counterterrorism' into the command's programmes and initiatives. Additionally, the command has over 600 special operations and intelligence officials assigned to it, officials that are trained to ensure that US aims are achieved.[42]

AFRICOM's activities

Apart from the initiatives which preceded AFRICOM's formation, and despite widespread opposition to the idea of it being stationed on African soil, the command has surreptitiously managed to infuse itself into various African militaries.[43] This has been accomplished mainly through military-to-military partnerships which the command has with fifty-one of Africa's fifty-five states.[44] In many instances, these partnerships involve African militaries ceding operational command to AFRICOM.[45] In addition, National Guard partnerships have been set up between African states and individual US states through the state partnership programme which AFRICOM's head, General Carter Ham, referred to as one of the most important tools in the command's kitbag.[46] To date, seven countries are participating in these partnerships, with Ham hoping to create four more by the end of 2013.[47] In 2009, the command held an air force training drill with eight West African states.[48]

Even South Africa, the African country that was most opposed to AFRICOM's establishment, has fallen prey to this programme; it is currently part of a national guard partnership with the New York Guard.[49] In addition, AFRICOM navy vessels have been deployed to dock at numerous African ports. Here again South Africa stands out. Its Simon's Town port is frequently visited by the command's naval vessels including destroyer frigates such as the Arleigh Burke.[50] Simon's Town has also been utilised to undertake and coordinate what the command calls 'theatre of security cooperation', i.e. counterterrorism training and activities, with the South African navy enthusiastically participating.[51] Furthermore, even nuclear submarines such as the USS San Juan[52] have been allowed to dock for what both the SA and US navies term 'training exercises'.

But most important were its activities in Libya where AFRICOM was at the forefront of implementing the UN-mandated no-fly zone. Initially, little about AFRICOM's activities in Libya was known until it released a statement saying that the command had 'stopped the advance of the Libyan army on defenceless civilians in Benghazi, put into place a no-fly zone over Libya, and established a sea embargo against the Gadhafi regime'.[53] These actions might appear to be above board since UN resolution 1703 did mandate the creation of a no-fly zone. A different perspective might be gained, however, when AFRICOM's mission creep is examined. Instead of protecting civilians, it was actively involved in the destruction of armoured vehicles, providing close air support to rebel forces, impeding African Union negotiations for a political settlement to the conflict and ultimately assisting in causing the deaths of thousands of people when a political solution could have been found earlier.[54]

AFRICOM also negotiated with the governments of Senegal and Uganda to set up forward deployment bases in those countries and it is rumoured that Botswana is in the process of becoming home to another[55]. Forward deployment bases are different from normal bases. Weapons, ammunition and other equipment are stored at these bases and permission is often granted for the host countries to use the bases under certain conditions. Thus, for example, a forward deployment base in Uganda would seem to be a Ugandan base which the USA equips under the guise of strengthening the Ugandan military. In fact, the weapons are kept ready for the USA to use should it see fit to do so. These various bases, termed 'lily pads', that had been envisaged by the USA before AFRICOM was operationalised, have been realised without much contestation. It has also become clear that through various incentives, US interests can be secured even if African states rhetorically oppose AFRICOM. Djibouti, for example, was given over US\$30 million for allowing the USA to operate a base there.[56]

Responses and criticisms

Responses by states and regional organisations

African states and regional organisations were almost unanimous in their opposition to AFRICOM and its proposed stationing in Africa.[57] The twenty-five-member Community of Sahel-Saharan States (Cen-Sad) asserted that it 'flatly refuses the installation of any military command or any foreign armed presence of whatever country on any part of Africa, whatever the reasons and justifications,' while the fourteen-member Southern African Development Community (SADC) argued that 'it is better if the United States were involved with Africa from a distance rather than be present on the continent'.[58] The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also firmly opposed AFRICOM's creation, while the leaders of Zambia, Nigeria and South Africa were strident in their criticism of the command.[59] Liberia was the lone voice supporting AFRICOM, with President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf arguing that though the command was intended to secure US interests, these often coincided with the interests of African states[60].

Opposition on the continent had its desired effect and the command was forced to postpone its ambition to locate its headquarters within Africa. AFRICOM's website made its position clear: 'The command has no plans to move its headquarters from Stuttgart and will be located here for the foreseeable future.'[61] The key reason for African opposition to the basing of AFRICOM on the continent was its expected impact on the balance of power within regional institutions and between states.[62] Regional institutions feared that AFRICOM's presence would undermine their influence while regional hegemony feared its stationing in neighbouring states would alter the balance of power.[63] Thus South Africa and Nigeria used their influential positions in SADC and ECOWAS respectively to lobby against the command being headquartered in their regions.[64]

In addition, the US failure to consult with the African Union (AU) during AFRICOM's conceptualisation made many states wary about the command's real intentions.[65] Many saw it as an attempt to eclipse the AU and to become the most important decision-making body on African security.[66] This fear was proven to be largely correct by AFRICOM's undermining of the AU during the 2011 Libyan crisis.[67] The AU's call for negotiations and a political solution were flatly rejected and undermined by the AFRICOM-coordinated NATO force (with the collusion of some AU member states), which overstepped its UN mandate and orchestrated regime change.

Entrenching dictators, militarising African states' domestic policies

Some critics have argued that the US fixation on the security-development linkage and its attempts to realise this through AFRICOM risks entrenching dictators in Africa.[68] This is because AFRICOM would, for the sake of US interests and its security agenda, maintain amicable relations even with states repressing their own people, so long as these states agree to cooperate with the command.[69] The US government has asserted that various criteria would be considered before it would cooperate with any African state, but its failure to spell these out has led many to justifiably question this commitment.[70] Moreover, recent revelations seem to point to the opposite. For example, the USA has maintained good relations with the Ethiopian regime, even partnering with it and providing it with equipment and training to fight the Somali Al-Shabab militia, despite Ethiopia's poor human rights' record and its attempts to suppress protests and dissent.[71] In addition, the USA has been silent on the anti-democratic actions of the regime in Equatorial Guinea and muted its criticism of fraudulent Angolan and Nigerian elections, mainly as a result of the role of these regimes in securing US oil interests. It is not surprising that Nigeria is the fifth largest supplier of oil to the USA.[72]

Linked to this is the tendency of some African states to use the AFRICOM discourse to propose and enact military solutions to domestic problems.[73] Mali is an important example. Rather than establishing the conditions for the north to have some form of autonomy – a measure the international community has been pushing the country's government to implement for the past fifteen years – the Malian government, at the behest of the USA and France, was incentivised as early as 2004 to reassert control over the region and clamp down on supposed Al-Qaeda affiliates.[74] Training and intelligence support were provided and the north became remilitarised, leading to the disillusionment of the various Tuareg tribes which had justifiable grievances.[75] The consequences have been severe.

The Tuareg rebellion – which had been brewing for decades – intensified, leading to a coup by southern soldiers in March 2012, less than a month before Mali's election, resulting in the country being divided into two regions. The intensification of the rebellion was one of the consequences of the AFRICOM coordinated NATO intervention in Libya and the overthrow of the Gadhafi regime.[76] Gadhafi's fall led many Tuareg who had been part of his security forces or who had been working in Libya to flee into north Mali with weapons. There they joined disillusioned Tuareg tribesmen.[77] The case of Iyad Ag Ghali is noteworthy. Rumoured to be the head of the Ansar Dine group operating in Timbuktu and Gao, Ghali had previously fought alongside Gadhafi and had been requested by the Libyan National Transitional Council to desert the

regime.[78] He accepted and, with other heavily-armed fighters, fled to Mali, joining with other Tuareg and forming Ansar Dine.

Secrecy and vagueness

Many institutions have criticised AFRICOM for the blanket of secrecy that covers its activities.[79] The manner in which the command's creation was announced – through a White House statement – fuelled this criticism. Not much was reported about it prior to the statement and there was a lack of consultation regarding the command's inception.[80] Many organisations view AFRICOM as a secretive institution, with even some proponents of AFRICOM arguing that too little information about it is available. Kfir asserts that the only information he could obtain about the command was through media statements.[81]

Related to the lack of transparency is the vague and open-ended nature of the command's goals. Sceptics have questioned the definitions of peace and security in AFRICOM's stated goal of bringing 'peace and security to the people of Africa'.[82] The US 'war on terror' only adds to these questions, and many argue that these goals are purposely vague so as to allow the US to conduct its 'war' on African soil under their guise.[83]

Neo-colonialism

The recent surge in US interest in Africa has made many suspicious of the real intentions of the USA.[84] This is because – through its containment policy adopted during the Cold War – it has historically backed dictators, funded various (often extremely brutal) militia groups, and had an unfavourable attitude toward African liberation movements.[85] Many African intellectuals and political leaders have not forgotten this role and opine that the main reason for AFRICOM's formation was to protect US oil interests on the continent and contain the burgeoning Chinese influence.[86] Many have argued that if drastic action is not taken to address the new scramble for Africa, the progress made by the continent during the 1990s and early 2000s would be reversed.[87] Hamza Mustafa Njozi of the University of Dar Es Salaam summed up these fears when, referring to Tanzania's gold and oil resources which are being explored by multinational corporations, asserted: 'If what has befallen other countries is any barometer, the Americans will need a military base in Tanzania' because 'military presence is necessary to ensure total control of this vital resource as well as the continued pillage of our gold mines.' AFRICOM, he said, was attempting to do just that.[88]

Consequences and recommendations

It is clear that if AFRICOM were to continue operating unhindered in its current form, interstate violence in Africa could increase and Africa's civil wars, which have recently been declining, could increase as different ethnic groups and opposition factions secure weapons to deal with the predicaments they face. Political solutions will be less likely and governments such as those of Ethiopia and Equatorial Guinea will be more militarily empowered to suppress human rights and pro-democracy activities in their countries. Africa's resources (particularly its oil) risk inflaming more intense conflicts, similar to the situation during the Cold War when factions would be provided with weapons from foreign powers and African states' sovereignty would decrease as these powers gained unhindered access to the continent. The conflict in Mali provides the best example of this.

From a largely peaceful state, Mali is now embroiled in conflict, has been divided in two, resulting in the recent invasion of northern Mali by France and the subsequent involvement of African military forces – with disastrous consequences. After claiming a successful intervention, France prepares to leave while questions emerge about the aftermath, regarding the restoration of the Malian government's control over the north, possible ethnic and tribal reprisals and the refugee crisis, all as a result of the Malian government's cooption into the US security-development and 'war on terror' discourse which led the state to cooperate with AFRICOM, consequently militarising Malian policies.

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