The United States Africa Command: Enhancing American security or fostering African development?

Christopher Isike,* Ufo Okeke-Uzodike** and Lysias Gilbert*

Introduction

Today, I am pleased to announce my decision to create a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa. I have directed the Secretary of Defense to stand up US Africa Command by the end of the fiscal year 2008.

We will be consulting with African leaders to seek their thoughts on how Africa Command can respond to security challenges and opportunities in

* Christopher Isike and Lysias Gilbert are PhD candidates at the School of Politics, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
** Ufo Okeke Uzodike is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the School of Politics, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
Africa. We will also work closely with African partners to determine an appropriate location for the new command in Africa (White House 2007).

With this opening statement in February 2007 President George W Bush announced the establishment of the United States African Command (AFRICOM), signalling the beginning of a new phase in US foreign policy engagement with Africa. According to the statement AFRICOM would become partially operational in October 2007 with an initial operating capability, and become fully operational not later than October 2008. Structurally, AFRICOM is the net result of an internal reorganisation of the US military administrative headquarters that is responsible to the Secretary of Defense for US military relations with Africa (including the islands of Equatorial Guinea, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Principe, and the Indian Ocean islands of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles, but excluding Egypt) which currently falls under US Central Command (CENCOM).

The US has a number of military commands located in different parts of the world. Before the establishment of AFRICOM three of these commands (US European Command (EUCOM), US Pacific Command (PACOM) and CENCOM) shared responsibility for Africa. Until December 2006, when the US began to assist Ethiopia with its invasion of Somalia, the three commands maintained a relatively low-key presence, often using special operations forces to train, equip and work alongside national militaries through security partnerships such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative. With the standing up of AFRICOM, US military and security interests on the continent will now be coordinated under one administrative headquarters and commander. Currently operating from Stuttgart in Germany, the plan is to eventually locate AFRICOM in Africa. The command is still in its early planning stage and is formulating mission, staffing and location options. As a result, details in terms of its eventual structure, composition and planned location are sketchy at this stage.

However, what is officially and clearly enunciated in terms of its central purpose is that AFRICOM is intended not only to strengthen US security cooperation with Africa but also to create new opportunities to bolster the capability of African states to deal with threats to their stability and security. AFRICOM has four official objectives:

- To bolster security on the continent
- To prevent and respond to humanitarian crises
- To improve cooperative efforts between the US and African nations in order to stem trans-national terrorism
- To sustain enduring efforts that contribute to African unity, with a central focus on preventing wars rather than fighting wars
Despite these objectives and other official pronouncements\(^1\) that suggest that AFRICOM will go beyond traditional security concerns by addressing non-traditional security issues such as good governance, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and economic development, it remains essentially a military organisation. This is a central issue of concern for many who are opposed to the idea of locating an American military organisation in Africa. Such opponents view AFRICOM as a recipe for the further militarisation and, potentially, the continued pauperisation of Africa. This has led to scepticism around the ‘real’ national security interests and strategic economic motives of the US in this latest foreign policy onslaught on Africa – especially in view of the dissonance between US strategic security concerns on the continent and the issues that constitute the African security predicament.

This paper therefore seeks to scrutinise the embryonic AFRICOM by raising a number of questions to unravel its true purpose, either as an instrument to enhance American security interests in Africa or a means to foster African development, as claimed by the Pentagon. For example, given that AFRICOM has been part of the planning of the US government for several years, why the sudden rush to establish it now? Why, as Algerian Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammed Bedjaoui asked, did no one ever propose any anti-terror cooperation with Algeria in the 1990s when terrorist violence was rampant and wrought havoc in that country? What is the nature and what is the scope of Africa’s security challenges and vulnerabilities? How do these fit into US security concerns and strategic interests on the continent? Will AFRICOM not be a vehicle for the further militarisation of the continent and the securitisation of the development partnership between Africa and the US? Are African fears about AFRICOM misplaced and are there genuine prospects for a new kind of partnership that will be mutually beneficial? Is AFRICOM not another ‘gun-boat diplomacy’ foreign policy action by the US in response to the ‘new scramble for Africa’ that could eventually end in the re-colonisation of the continent?

Clearly, as we approach the end of the first decade of the 21\(^{st}\) century, Africa remains a continent with immense sociopolitical and economic challenges. While a number of African states have been experiencing steady economic growth since the latter part of the 1990s, the continent remains the most impoverished in the world and income gaps are still widening (Arrighi 2004; Leonard 2006; UNDP 2006). For instance, in South Africa, which has enjoyed an average economic growth rate of 3,9 per cent over the past three years, the poorest 10 per cent of the population account for only 1,4 per cent of the national income, while the richest 10 per cent account for 44 per cent (UNDP 2006). The situation is the same in most other parts of the continent. While economic growth is an important driver of development, a high growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP), budget surpluses and foreign exchange reserves are of limited value if they are not accompanied by a regime of good governance, more equitable distribution of resources, improved access to healthcare and education, and sound policies on the environment.
The democratic ‘third wave’ that has been blowing across the continent has not been much help in delivering democratic dividends as corruption continues to militate against democratic consolidation. The general net result is that African states have continued to regress, both in terms of human development indicators (such as standard of living, literacy, disease and unemployment) and in human factor indices (such as corruption, violent crime and moral depravity). Perhaps the HIV/AIDS pandemic is the continent’s biggest test as people who are HIV-positive in sub-Saharan Africa constitute about 64 per cent of the global total of 39.5 million people living with the disease (Sharma et al. 2005). These are the grim realities that confront and threaten the survival of states and the existence of most African peoples in the 21st century. Not surprisingly, these realities also serve to make Africans vulnerable, not only to external suggestions but also to exploitation both by agents of imperialism and by those of anti-imperialism, such as al-Qaeda.

On the other hand, in addition to pursuing its global war on terrorism (GWOT), US security concerns in Africa revolve around the need to secure energy and other vital mineral resources (cobalt, coltan, diamonds, gold, manganese, petroleum and uranium) from the continent. Since the end of the Cold War, amidst a deepening crisis in the Middle East and tightening petroleum markets, the US has increased its search for new sources of oil. This has led to renewed interest in the ‘African oil triangle’, which is centred in the basin of the Gulf of Guinea. Therefore, any attempt at destabilising oil production activities in oil-rich states like Nigeria is viewed as a threat to America’s energy security that must be contained.

Beyond intra-state destabilisation of oil production activities, a number of other factors are spurring America’s energy security interests in Africa. For instance, rapid economic growth rates in many developing states (such as China, India, Indonesia and Russia), as well as rapid growth in the oil consumption levels of oil exporters (such as Algeria, Iran, Malaysia and Mexico), are posing new threats to the global availability of oil. Indeed, former major oil exporters such as China and Indonesia are now net importers of oil while countries such as Mexico, Algeria, Iran and Malaysia may join them by the end of the second decade of the 21st century (Krauss 2007). Although the resulting shortfalls may be offset by greater political stability, which may result in increased production activities in countries such as Iraq, Iran and Nigeria, a serious danger remains in that political instability may actually worsen in these and other oil producing countries or regions. In this context, the creation of AFRICOM may indicate that the US does not want to take chances with a region that has the greatest potential (apart from the Middle East) to meet its requirements for oil in the medium term.

Furthermore, the increasing imperial incursion of China, and perhaps also of India, into Africa is creating concern for the US about its strategic interests on the continent. For instance, China’s share of investments in Africa has grown rapidly since 2000, running
into US$40 billion in 2005, ‘fuelled mainly by the rise in Chinese textile exports and its increasing import of African oil and minerals to diversify its import sources to feed its fast growing economy’. These investments have also come in the form of development aid projects and loans strengthened through bilateral and multilateral forums, such as the Asia-Africa Summit, China-Africa Cooperation and China-Africa Business Council. Unlike the US, China has been expanding its interests to other sectors, such as agriculture, electricity, banking and telecommunications. Nevertheless, China’s huge and growing appetite for oil has been a clear and deliberate focus of its investment activities. In its quest, China has paid little or no attention to traditional trade and security arrangements. For major industrial powers such as the US, Japan and the European Union, the Chinese now constitute a huge security threat. As one observer argues, ‘China’s quest for energy resources on the world stage is creating a destabilizing effect on international and regional security’ (Chietigji 2005).

In contrast to American, Japanese and European insecurity about Chinese expansionist activities, many African leaders appreciate the alternative options provided by the growing Chinese presence on the continent. American and African security interests do not converge through the establishment of a military organisation like AFRICOM, but they do in the need to enhance human security by furthering mutually articulated partnerships aimed at deepening democracy and building capacity for good governance as well as increasing aid and foreign direct investment, writing off debts, halting environmental despoliation and finding a cure for HIV/Aids. This paper attempts to advance this argument and will relate with some of the aforementioned questions through the lens of the human security paradigm.

**Africa’s human security challenges**

Traditionally, security tended to be equated with state security and was thus viewed only from a state-centric and militarist point of view with the state as the sole actor (Booth 1991). However, new sources of threat to human existence emerged in the last decade of the 20th century. These vulnerabilities pose greater dangers to human existence than inter-state war, with the result that there has been an increasing need to rethink the concept of security. This rethinking has widened and deepened the concept to include people as referent subjects in the security calculus (Booth 1991; Buzan 1991; Peterson 1992; Tickner 1995). In its 1994 *Human development report*, the United Nations Development Program maintains that threats to human security occur in at least seven distinct areas of human existence (UNDP 1994):

- Community security
- Economic security
- Environmental security
- Food security
- Health security
- Personal security
- Political security

**Human security**

In essence, the concept of human security is woven around issues of human emancipation (Booth 1991:539), social justice (Peterson 1992) and human dignity and the environment, if they have political outcomes (Ayoob 1995).

Kaul (1995:313–319), in equating human security with the security of individuals rather than just the security of nations or territory, underscores the primacy of human security in contemporary times thus: ‘What is needed today is not so much territorial security – the security of the state – but human security, the security of the people in their everyday lives, one that is reflected in the lives of our people, not in the weapons of our country.’ Vulnerabilities springing from non-traditional sources are a greater threat to human existence and global peace and security than inter-state war and aggression. For example, poverty, disease, famine and state oppression of citizens have combined to produce 17 million refugees, 20 million internally displaced persons, and massive migrations of people within and beyond national borders (Boutros-Ghali 1992). It is this consideration that led Campbell (2002:8) to argue that human security is a theory that:

... retreats from the concept of might, one that validate all citizens, men and women, Africans, Asians, Indians and all peoples. This new theory informs a foreign policy that is based on demilitarization of the planet, reversing environmental degradation and ending crimes against humanity since the genocide against the first nation peoples and the peoples of Africa and African descent.

Africa, with its weak state structures and failed economies occasioned largely by bad governance, remains vulnerable to human insecurities, such as environmental degradation, poverty, HIV/AIDS and illiteracy, which are rife on the continent. Susan Rice, a former under-secretary of state for African affairs in the Clinton administration, aptly captured the reality of Africa’s human security dilemma and its vulnerability to terrorism and insurgency in these words (2002:6):
Africa is the world’s soft underbelly for global terrorism, an incubator for the foot soldiers of terrorism because its young, disaffected, unhealthy and uneducated population often have no stake in government or faith in the future, so they harbor an easily exploitable discontent with the status quo.

According to Garth Shelton (2006:2), the US has identified Africa as a future potential base for terrorist attacks against it (the US) because of Africa’s ‘proximity to the Arabian peninsula, the failed state of Somalia, and the large number of countries in Africa where the government’s control is weak and policing poor’. Shelton also contends that ‘widespread poverty and general disorder offer terrorists the opportunity to establish bases and support systems and to recruit active group members’ (ibid). This state of vulnerability or insecurity from the sphere of national politics underscores the vulnerability of African states to traditional security threats. According to Nef (1995:2), the post-Cold War security order has led to a profound alteration of the state as a mechanism for conflict management and the allocation of resources. He contends that this has resulted in the emergence of different but related issues that simultaneously threaten the survival of the state and the security of its people. These issues include the spread of sub-national and low-intensity conflicts, and a decline in the rule of law. The latter results in high crime rates and strained relationships between civil society and the state, which expose the state and its people to all sorts of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, small-arms proliferation and terrorism. The situation is exacerbated when the state turns on its citizens and becomes a direct source of threat through its actions or lack thereof.

The inability of most African governments to provide effective political leadership, manage social conflict and allocate resources equitably, for the common good of their peoples, have greatly undermined many African states, their essence, survival and, ipso facto, the security of their peoples. In the worst cases such ineffectual leadership may degenerate to a level where it manifests in communal violence or ethnic nationalist struggles (Algeria, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Tanzania), genocide (Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia and Sudan), religious violence (Algeria and Nigeria), low-intensity wars and small-arms proliferation (Angola, the DRC and Liberia) and insurgencies (Chad, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Uganda). Evidently, with its weak state structures, porous borders, weak judicial and law enforcement institutions and poorly managed economies, Africa remains vulnerable to threats from the traditional realm of security, which validates the ‘ungoverned spaces’ argument put forward by Pentagon officials to rationalise growing US military commitment in Africa. This conforms to Ayoob’s (1995:130) expanded and methodologically stronger conceptualisation of Third World security as ‘vulnerabilities, both internal and external, that threaten or have the potential to bring down or significantly weaken state structures, both territorial and institutional, and regimes that preside over these structures and profess to represent them internationally’ which, though state-centric, broadens the range of potentially threatening or destructive
domestic issues. It must also be noted that the crises of ungoverned spaces in Africa are very closely linked to, and often caused and amplified by, threats from non-traditional spheres of security, specifically those pertaining to human existence. Indeed, there is incontrovertible historical evidence (Algeria, Angola, Chad, Ethiopia, the DRC, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda) that militarism is ineffective in curbing conflict in Africa unless the environment that gave birth to the violence is fundamentally altered (Shelton 2006). Also, the US militarist approach to anti-terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq has only served to plunge these countries into a prolonged crisis of instability. In this context, it follows that any policy action aimed at securing Africa must start from a clear understanding of the human dimensions of conflict, which overlap and cut across the environmental, social and economic spheres.

Environmental sources of insecurity

Like other parts of the world, Africa is very vulnerable to a range of environmental challenges, such as deforestation, desertification, gas flaring, global warming and losses in biodiversity. However, in no other part of the world are the effects of environmental challenges more closely linked to the capacity and ability of people to live securely. In many parts of Africa, land degradation, a decrease in food production, and a scarcity of water resources (amongst other challenges) have imposed a severe burden on individuals and communities and, in some instances, have actually served to deepen social divides by pitting communities against each other as they battle to secure available resources. For example, an estimated 500 million hectares of land in sub-Saharan Africa – including 65 per cent of agricultural land – have been adversely affected by soil degradation since 1950. The resultant decrease in food production constitutes the food security dilemma in parts of Africa and especially in southern Africa, where food insecurity manifests in food scarcity, malnutrition and hunger (see Swatuk & Vale 1999; Saundry 2007). In addition, the region is bedevilled by a scarcity of water. In fact, control over water resources has become a strategic security concern and has often led to conflict, for example in the dispute between Namibia and Botswana over the sharing of water from the Okavango River that supplies water to the delta (Swatuk & Vale 1999).

Drought and desertification, both serious environmental challenges that threaten sustainable development in Africa, have a far-reaching adverse impact on human health, food security, economic activity, physical infrastructure, natural resources and the environment, as well as national and global security. According to the UN’s 2007 Africa review report on drought and desertification, deforestation, especially when undertaken to meet energy needs and expand agricultural land, is a serious direct cause of desertification in Africa. Biomass constitutes an average of over 80 per cent of the energy used in many sub-Saharan countries, including Burundi (91 per cent), the Central African Republic (90 per cent), Mozambique (89 per cent), Burkina Faso (87 per cent), Benin (86 per cent), and Madagascar and Niger (both 85 per cent). This high dependence on biomass
fuel has resulted in an alarming rate of tree felling that exposes large tracts of land to desertification. In Ghana, where the population density has reached 77 persons per square kilometre, 70 per cent of firewood and charcoal needed for domestic purposes come from the savannah zones. As a result 20 000 hectares of woodland are destroyed in Ghana each year. In Uganda, where 90 per cent of the population live in rural areas and depend directly on land for cultivation and grazing, forest land has shrunk from 45 per cent of the country’s surface area 1980 to 21 per cent in 2000. It is feared that if the current rate of deforestation of tropical forests continues, these forests may be almost entirely destroyed by the year 2050, which will contribute devastatingly to climate change, loss of biodiversity, land degradation and desertification (SARPN 2007).

Social sources of insecurity

According to Nef (1995), social sources of insecurity are those that affect the quality of social life within a nation or between nations. In most cases, social insecurity results from a number of factors within a society that, combined, lead to mutual vulnerability within populations and between states. These include population growth, illegal migration, internally displaced persons or refugees and the HIV/Aids pandemic. In Africa, where the high population growth is not matched by increased capacity to develop and utilise economic resources, quality of life is severely compromised.

Studies have shown a positive relationship between these trends and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Africa (Vetten & Bhana 2001). The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organisation estimated the number of people living with HIV at the end of 2006 to be 39,5 million worldwide. While approximately 10 per cent of the world’s population live in sub-Saharan Africa, an enormous 64 per cent of all people living with HIV live in this region, including 77 per cent of all women living with the virus. Although HIV prevalence has declined in some countries – Uganda in the 1990s and, more recently, Zimbabwe, Kenya and urban parts of Burkina Faso – overall prevalence levels in southern Africa remain high at between 10 and 20 per cent with countries like Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland showing even higher rates. Levels of infection in other parts (North and West Africa) vary from between 1 to 5 per cent among adults (ages 15–49) (South Africa 2007). According to Edge (2006:6), Aids-related fatalities have also resulted in a rapidly growing number of so-called Aids orphans; more than 12 million children in Africa have been orphaned as a result of Aids. The future looks even gloomier since it is projected that the number of Aids orphans in Africa will increase to about 40 million in the next decade (Edge 2006:6).

Economic sources of insecurity

In a skewed global economic system characterised by deep polarisation of the world’s population into small areas of relative wealth and larger areas of relative poverty, Africa
finds itself at a disadvantage in the globalisation race with a marginal contribution to trade. The continent is generally characterised by weak states with commodity-based economies that lack the political capacity to diversify and develop their enormous resources. This is partly due to Africa’s colonial heritage, which tied the economies of former colonies to those of their colonisers, therefore perpetuating a debilitating imperial dependency from which African states are yet to break free. Socialist governments in Tanzania, Ghana, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau that tried to detach themselves from the global capitalist economy ended up more impoverished and became even more dependent on foreign aid for their survival. Apart from the colonial exploitation of Africa, which had its antecedents in the slave trade, the continent’s economic woes have been blamed on the debt crisis, exploitative trade relations and regimes as well as economic recovery prescriptions of Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These prescriptions for economic recovery were handed down when Africa’s economies deteriorated significantly in the 1980s and early 1990s as a combined result of various factors, including the second oil price shock, bad or inappropriate domestic economic polices and governance arrangements, declining primary commodity prices in the global market, and falling external resource flows (Ayittey 1992; Adepoju 1993; Mbaku 1999).

Despite the striking external factors contributing to Africa’s persistent economic underperformance and underdevelopment, it is crucial to underscore the contributing role of internal factors. Inept, corrupt and (often) parochial leadership, obtuse military governments and generally non-transparent or unaccountable governance have undermined the ability of many African states to provide peaceful and enabling environments for economic growth and development. Deprived of money for development projects and programmes, and unable to attract adequate foreign direct investment due to endemic corruption and economic mismanagement, the region is handicapped by high unemployment rates and pervasive poverty. Indeed, despite the continent’s wealth in natural resources, African states typically are at the bottom of the list when it comes to measuring economic activity, such as per capita income (often less than US$200 per year) or per capita gross domestic product (GDP) – both measured in the UN Quality of Life Index. In 2006, 34 of the 50 nations on the UN’s list of least developed countries were in Africa. Given the context of high population growth rates and low GDP growth rates, it is easy to see how and why the political economies of so many African states are rife with tension as communities rally around parochial lines of affinity to compete for scarce resources.

This situation is exacerbated by the unfair trade regimes and economic partnership agreements (EPAs) of the Western-dominated international economic system. A case in point is the trade agreements between the EU and groups of countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific region (EU-ACP agreements). As shown in table 1 below, the EU-ACP trade agreements represent unequal and, ipso facto, exploitative trade relations.
between the developed economies of Europe and the underdeveloped economies of the ACP countries – with a hefty price in human security for the latter. EPAs were negotiated among 25 EU countries, which have a combined GDP of USUS$13 300 billion, and six groups of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Among these ACP countries are 39 of the world’s 50 least developed countries (LDCs). The smallest group, the Pacific Islands, has a combined GDP of only USUS$9 billion, which is 1 400 times smaller than the EU’s. Even the largest group, the West African region, is more than 80 times smaller than the EU in terms of GDP.

Not surprisingly, therefore, EPAs have served the interests of Europe to the detriment of, for instance, African local industries, and have thus exacerbated poverty on the continent. The African experience of EPAs is vividly expressed by a Ghanaian peasant, Tetteh Hormeku (Third World Network, Accra, Ghana):

I come from a small fishing village in Ghana. Members of my family fished for their livelihood, but fishing has become impossible since larger European fishing vessels came and fished our seas empty. The same happened with poultry. EU imports of frozen chicken wings destroyed the local market … EPAs are free trade agreements, and as such, they will bring poverty to Africa.

Table 1 EU-ACP economic partnership agreement profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPA</th>
<th>GDP 2005 (US$ billion)</th>
<th>Percentage of EU GDP*</th>
<th>Ratio EU GDP:ACP GDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>13 300</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADC</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>0,50</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESA**</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>0,56</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>1,22</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Africa</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0,30</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0,54</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific***</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0,07</td>
<td>1 414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total EPA</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>3,20</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
* Data given to two decimal places.
** Eastern and southern Africa.

Given the seeming deadlock reached at the December 2007 EU-Africa trade summit, the EU threatened to increase duties on imports of ACP countries to Europe if they do not sign up to the trade deals offered to them. According to Oxfam International:

The EU has forced countries to choose between the devil and the deep blue sea. Countries either sacrifice their current exports, which provide hundreds of thousands of jobs and vital revenue, or they sign up to deals which will undermine future industrial growth and expose vulnerable subsistence farmers to unfair, subsidized European competition.7

Rationalising the United States African Command: Prospects for a new development partnership

A number of African states have been quite vocal in their criticism of plans to locate AFRICOM in Africa. Nigeria, South Africa, Libya, Algeria and Morocco have all made policy statements that AFRICOM will not be welcome on their soil.8 According to the Nigerian minister of foreign affairs, Nigeria will not support the deployment of US combatant troops under the auspices of the AFRICOM because ‘stationing US combat troops on African soil is counter-productive, unnecessary and a derogation of the sovereignty of African states’ (Ikokwu 2007). The Nigerian government opted instead for an African Standby Force for the Gulf of Guinea, warning that it will not allow AFRICOM in Nigeria or anywhere near the West African sub-region (Idonor 2007). Perhaps the unspoken concern of many African governments is that AFRICOM, as an American standby force on African soil, may potentially be utilised to destabilise or even overthrow governments of which the US does not approve. For instance, if such a force were in place a few years ago, might they not have sought to rid Zimbabwe of Mugabe? Is it possible that what we are currently witnessing in Somalia is a foretaste of what such a force might be looking to do once it is fully operational? Many African governments regard AFRICOM as the logical outcome of the US’s need to secure its growing strategic interests by maintaining continuous access to, or control over, African resources. An American government official acknowledged as much when she commented that essentially AFRICOM’s raison d’être is about American interests: ‘Let’s face it, AFRICOM is not about Africa; it is about the United States. It is about what the United States needs. It will happen because America wants it in place.’9

Nevertheless, an objective analysis would require an assessment of AFRICOM’s prospects of becoming – even coincidentally – an avenue for fostering a mutually beneficial development partnership between Africa and the US in the long run. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia – one of the few states in Africa to have given public support to AFRICOM – has tried to engage with this prospect:
If [AFRICOM] aims to use its ‘soft power’ mandate to develop a stable environment in which civil society can flourish and the quality of life for Africans can be improved, African nations should work with [AFRICOM] to achieve their own development and security goals.

Through these means, the potential of [AFRICOM] can far exceed its initially limited scope of engagement. To achieve the greatest possible results in development, security, and governance, this must be the model for donor assistance in the future: helping governments that are willing to help themselves.\textsuperscript{10}

Johnson-Sirleaf believes that while AFRICOM is proof of the growing importance of Africa to US national security interests, it also recognises that long-term protection of Africa lies in empowering African partners to develop a healthy security environment by embracing good governance, building security capacity, developing good civil-military relations and enabling economic growth and development. This is rooted in the assumption that growth and development can only occur in an environment where security, development and good governance are integrally linked. In Africa, where state corruption, weak social and security infrastructure and their multiplier effects of pervasive poverty and armed insurgency are very much in evidence, AFRICOM could serve as an instrument to create a truly secure African environment where development can thrive.

However, even Johnson-Sirleaf agrees that the objectives of AFRICOM would be best achieved only if it truly seeks to implement its ‘soft power’ mandate, which centres on humanitarian assistance, information sharing and collaboration on issues of human security. In contrast, a ‘hard power’ mandate is militarist and unnecessary given that Africa is neither at war with itself nor with the US. Poverty and underdevelopment occasioned by bad governance and corruption are at the core of social and armed conflict in Africa. Any effort aimed at securing Africa and its peoples must therefore specifically address the security challenges confronting the continent, which render it vulnerable to terrorist activity and recruitment. Clearly, the US does not need an African command stationed in Africa to tackle such challenges. Existing aid mechanisms should instead be strengthened and, if necessary, new ones should be established to deal with the enormous human security challenges facing the continent. As Johnson-Sirleaf argues, this assistance could be tied to performance instead of need, which means that the benefits of aid programmes will accrue only to those states that are genuinely willing to help themselves and invest in their people. Johnson-Sirleaf takes the position that AFRICOM is needed to ‘develop a process for greater interagency coordination to ensure that existing commitments to Africa are maximized and that additional resources can be efficiently allocated’. Her claims notwithstanding, no compelling reasons have been put forward by proponents of
AFRICOM for its establishment as a tool for fostering African development. Given that poor leadership and governance, as well as poor external circumstances, are key factors in Africa's persistent underdevelopment, the US and its Western allies should be looking to address those issues directly in true partnership with African leaders and institutions, such as the AU and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). For instance, they can help to fight corruption by supporting strong regimes that will make it difficult and hazardous for corrupt African leaders and elites to invest in the West and elsewhere the loot that they have plundered from their national coffers. Another avenue of genuine engagement with Africa would be the renegotiation of the current skewed trade regime that makes it impossible for products made in Africa to gain access to US and European markets. This will go a long way towards resolving Africa's security challenges while also smartly confronting the Chinese challenge.

Furthermore, given AFRICOM's military component and its potential to further militarise the continent, why can existing security partnerships between the US and Africa (such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) and its military component, Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans-Sahara (OEF-TS) or the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) programme) not instead be strengthened in order to make them more effective? Why can US aid agencies like USAID not be strengthened to deal more effectively with the humanitarian aspects of Africa's security challenge in tandem with the militarist efforts of initiatives such as OEF-TS? TSCTI, which kicked off officially in 2005, is an expanded version of the seemingly successful Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) established by the US State Department after 9/11, which was created with the purpose of preventing Africa from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. Under the PSI, the US provides basic training and equipment to countries of the Sahel to deal with terrorist encroachment. TSCTI's mandate is to help strengthen regional counter-terrorism capabilities, enhance and institutionalise cooperation among the region's security forces, promote democratic governance and foster bilateral relations between the US and individual African states.

ACOTA, another US State Department programme, is actually the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) in a new guise. Its central goal is to increase the capabilities of the military in Africa by partnering African countries in areas such as human rights, interaction with civil society, international law, military staff skills and small unit operations, in order to enhance regional peace, security and unity. A growing number of African militaries supported by ACOTA have subsequently participated in peacekeeping or peace support activities in various parts of the continent, including Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, the Central African Republic and Sudan. In tandem with USAID's humanitarian aid priorities, ACOTA and TSCTI provide sound vehicles for achieving AFRICOM's claimed objectives. The usefulness of these programmes begs the question why they should be linked more fully to an American military infrastructure.
African responses to AFRICOM: Genuine or misplaced fears?

As mentioned above, Africa has responded in both pessimistic and optimistic tones to US efforts to establish and locate AFRICOM in Africa. Generally, opponents have two central concerns, namely:

- That the location of AFRICOM on African soil might be a significant step towards a US-driven militarisation and destabilisation of an already conflict-prone continent
- That it would be a case of letting the bully in through the back door, with attendant consequences for the sovereignty of individual African states

There is also concern that AFRICOM signals a growing US securitisation of aid and development. We shall add a fourth concern: the likelihood that AFRICOM’s presence might actually undermine the ability of African institutions such as the AU and NEPAD to carry out the crucial tasks of articulating and coordinating African-led attempts to address regional problems and challenges from within.

Can Africa afford, once again, to lose its leadership of initiatives aimed at addressing its problems? What historical grounds do Africans have to trust that the US (or any other foreign power) will be genuinely keen and focused on solving African problems when doing so falls outside their own strategic interests? What justification do Africans and their leaders have to believe that AFRICOM is really anything other than another instrument in the emerging struggle for global power and dominance in which they are adjudged to be a pawn which, though not exceptionally desirable, is important enough to deny to rivals? In other words, given the new scramble for the continent’s resources by the US and its partners (including Japan), China and India, there is good reason to believe that AFRICOM is yet another part of the battle for the modern-day re-colonisation of Africa. Are these fears genuine or misplaced?

In 1884/85, when a number of European powers partitioned Africa at the Berlin Conference, it was done without African representation or regard for African views. It was done by Europeans in pursuit of European strategic objectives. The net result was numerous non-viable and often illogical geographical entities with artificial boundaries and internal structural arrangements that have remained a constant source of conflict within Africa. An important point that must not be ignored is that AFRICOM – like the 1884/85 partitioning of Africa – was not born of mutual consent. Clearly, the dispatch of US State Department and Pentagon officials and AFRICOM’s transition team members to Africa in April 2007 to ‘consult with [their] African partners on where and what kind of presence AFRICOM should have’ was an afterthought and a public relations gimmick aimed at covering a unilateral action with a multilateral sheen. In October 2007 the
AFRICOM commander made the following statement: ‘There have been no negotiations yet on moving the headquarters or pieces of the headquarters from Stuttgart to Africa, but whatever is done will be done deliberately and only after discussions with African allies.’ The question is, why did the US not adopt the same attitude of dialogue with Africa before announcing and establishing AFRICOM? This actually confirms the fear that AFRICOM is more an instrument for securing US strategic interests in Africa than for fostering African development through collaborative partnerships. Indeed, Africa’s political leaders have not been invited into the discussion rooms where AFRICOM’s activities are being planned, which belie the rhetorical claims of partnership.

**Conclusion: Is the United States Africa Command a ‘new scramble for Africa’?**

Though still largely embryonic, AFRICOM has sparked controversy, not only about its appropriateness, relevance, actual intentions and potential effectiveness, but also about claims that it is an innovative development instrument and partnership opportunity as well as a security shield for Africa. Although some proponents suggest that the opposition to AFRICOM is anchored largely in unfounded conspiracy theories, the fact remains that the US (or any other country for that matter) does not usually act outside its national interests (Fennimore 2003; Van Nieuwkerk 2004).

Indeed, the unilateral manner in which AFRICOM was established and constituted raises genuine doubts as to the core interests of the US in Africa. Its imposition on the continent despite serious objections from most African states raises serious questions about whose interests AFRICOM is meant to serve. Why is the US pushing AFRICOM on a continent that did not ask for and does not want that sort of security or assistance? Perhaps we are witnessing the beginnings of a new era in global relations – that of post-modern neo-colonialism – as Africa’s growing global strategic importance is setting the continent up for competition among Europe, America and China. The potential certainly exists for a second scramble that will lead to Africa’s repartitioning into docile political entities that lack any genuine capacity for autonomous action. Given its rapidly growing influence on the continent, China is now the biggest threat to centuries of European and American stranglehold on Africa’s resources.

The evidence therefore suggests that, as much as AFRICOM is a US attempt to curb international terrorism, it is also a far-reaching American response to the growing (and potentially hostile) Chinese challenge in Africa. Like that of the Americans, the European response to the Chinese has been to resuscitate, in 2007, the previously moribund Euro-Africa summit, where it attempted with little success to brow-beat the continent into renewing unfair trade arrangements. But can Africa, a continent with immense human security challenges, afford to continue being an outpost for neo-colonial partnerships?
Can the US and its Western allies really afford not to cultivate a more balanced and equal partnership with Africa as we move toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century? Will access to Africa’s immense natural resources not be more secure when its human security needs are more fairly addressed?

In our view, Western security needs in Africa would be best assured not by using military means to check China or terrorism in Africa but rather by looking to meaningfully address the region’s human security needs that are amplified both by unfair trade relations between the continent and the West and by the benign neglect and scrounging relationship that historically enabled, cuddled and protected corrupt and self-centred leaders to do their bidding throughout the continent. Given the current context, AFRICOM appears to be a case of old wine in a new bottle.

Notes

2 Adjibolosoo (1999) conceptualises the human factor as the spectrum of personality characteristics (including love, integrity, honesty, responsibility and accountability) and other dimensions of human performance that enable social, economic and political institutions to function and remain functional, over time. He argues that the absence of these characteristics and other dimensions of human capital amounts to human factor decay, which in turn impacts negatively on development since humans themselves are the means of development itself.
6 It should be noted that Africa’s share of income decreased steadily over the past century. In 1820, the average worker in Europe earned about three times as much as his African counterpart. By 2002, the average European worker earned twenty times as much as the average African (Okunlola 2002). Although per capita income in Africa has been increasing steadily, it is still below that of other parts of the developing world, for example Latin America.
8 See http://www.bbc.co.uk/hi/afrika/7026197.stm.
9 Interview with a US government official (who asked to remain anonymous) on 6 September 2007 in Durban, South Africa.
11 The TSCTI expanded the geographical scope of PSI (Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) to include Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia.
12 See http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp.

References


Other Internet sources