



Africa Command: Opportunity for Enhanced Engagement or the Militarization of U.S.-Africa Relations?

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August 2, 2007

Testimony given to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Payne and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health for giving me this opportunity to share my views on the proposed Africa Command (AFRICOM). These are personal views and do not reflect those of my employer, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). My name is Wafula Okumu and I presently head the African Security Analysis Programme at the ISS in Pretoria, South Africa. Our work is devoted to tracking, monitoring and analysing threats to human security in Africa. Among the many variables that we track are military matters, particularly those related to the African peace and security agenda and the various contributions being made by the international community to build the capacity of Africa to implement this agenda. I would like to start my presentation with a brief background on U.S.-Africa relations, then give you an overview of the objectives of AFRICOM, as presented in Africa, analyse why I think AFRICOM was set up, and then share with you how it is

perceived in Africa. I will then explain why Africans are reluctant to embrace the proposed command, share with you the possible misconceptions behind AFRICOM and what can be done to overcome them before concluding my remarks.

Background

Until recently, Africa has not been strategically attractive to the U.S. This is partly because U.S. interests in Africa had not been clearly defined and it had no bureaucratic structure to manage those almost nonexistent interests. For a long time, the strategic thinking has been that the U.S. has “no compelling interests in Africa” and “do not want anybody else to have any, either.” However, whenever a non-Western nation or idea made its way into Africa, the U.S. got very nervous. This is what happened from the 1960-1990, when the Soviet Union tried to spread its communist ideology to Africa. Today, many think the U.S. is very nervous of Chinese economic penetration into Africa. America’s concern is that the Chinese are trying to control the continent’s natural resources and gain influence over it. The U.S. is also worried that radical Islamism is a dangerous idea that could germinate in poorly and badly governed states of Africa. AFRICOM is being sold as an answer to these threats. Until the enunciation of AFRICOM, the continent had been haphazardly divided into three U.S. commands—European, Central and Pacific. In order to understand this state of affairs we need first to understand the basis of U.S. foreign policy towards Africa.

Basis for Understanding U.S. foreign policy towards Africa

U.S. foreign policy towards Africa has been variously referred to as either “benign neglect” or “manifest destiny.” In other words, these postures have defined or driven U.S. relations with Africa. Despite changes of U.S. administrations since 1960, when most African countries started gaining independence, the substance has always remained the same. Only the styles of various administrations have changed. As we shall see later, when given a choice between supporting the liberation struggles of the African people or bolstering its NATO allies, the U.S. easily chose the latter. On the other hand, it has sent Peace Corps volunteers to remote villages to assist in improving agricultural production while at the same time erecting trade barriers against products of these local farmers. It is this principle of “manifest destiny” that seems to be embodied in AFRICOM’s objectives and stated mission.

AFRICOM’s Stated mission

- Prevent conflict by promoting stability regionally and eventually ‘prevail over extremism’ by never letting its seeds germinate in Africa.
- Address underdevelopment and poverty, which are making Africa a fertile ground for breeding terrorists.
- “...view the people, the nations and the continent of Africa from the same perspective that they view themselves.”
- Build the capacity of African nations through training and equipping African militaries, conducting training and medical missions.
- Undertake any necessary military action in Africa, despite its non-kinetic nature such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Why the U.S. really wants to set up AFRICOM

Despite the above stated objectives, there are many reasons why the U.S. wants to set up AFRICOM. First, the U.S. has become increasingly dependent on Africa for its oil needs. Africa is currently the largest supplier of U.S. crude oil, with Nigeria being the fifth largest source. Instability, such as that in the Niger Delta, could significantly reduce this supply. The U.S. National Intelligence Council has projected that African imports will account for 25% of total U.S. imports by 2015. This oil will primarily come from Angola, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Nigeria. Nigeria, Africa's largest oil producer, has now overtaken Saudi Arabia as the third largest oil exporter to the U.S. The importance of the African oil source can be gleaned from the fact that in 2006, the U.S. imported 22% of its crude oil from Africa compared to 15% in 2004. President Bush appeared to have African oil supplies in mind during his 2006 State of the Union Address, when he announced his intention "to replace more than 75% of (U.S.) oil imports from the Middle East by 2025." Continuing unrest in the Middle East has increased the urgency for the U.S. to build a security alliance with Africa in order to achieve this goal.

Second, Africa is an unstable region with badly governed states that can only manage their affairs, particularly security-related, with outside assistance. Since September 11, 2001, U.S. foreign policy has heavily focused on preventing and combating global terrorist threats. The events of 9/11 changed the way the U.S. views and relates to the rest of the world. Likewise, the foreign policies of Western powers have increasingly been militarised to secure and defend Western interests. Terrorism has been

identified as one of the biggest threats to these interests. AFRICOM is expected to stop terrorists being bred in Africa's weak, failing and failed states from attacking these interests.

It is widely held in the West that failing and failed states in Africa create opportunities for terrorists to exploit. Among the targets of these terrorists are Western interests such as oil sources and supply routes. Improvement of African security would inevitably promote U.S. national interests by making it less likely that the continent could be a source of terrorism against the United States.

Third, one of the critical challenges facing Africa and the UN is training, equipping and sustaining troops in peace missions. African armies need training in peacekeeping. It is proposed that through AFRICOM, African troops will be trained and aided to keep the peace in African conflict zones. This should come in handy when it is considered that all African Union-led peacekeeping operations deployed so far have encountered monumental problems. The most recent deployment, African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), is on the verge of folding because of a lack of financial and logistical support, as well as trained troops to keep a peace that is not there. Furthermore, it is stated that the medical assistance given through AFRICOM could reduce the high prevalence of HIV in African militaries.

All things considered, it could be seen that the whole idea is, to a large extent, a bureaucratic issue within the U.S. government (State Department vs the Pentagon) on the best way of promoting American interests in Africa—

securing investments and oil sources, fighting off Chinese competition and waging the war against terrorism.

What Africans think of AFRICOM

Despite its altruistic sounding objectives AFRICOM is yet to be warmly and widely embraced in Africa; as the following comments indicate:

- “AFRICOM would destabilise an already fragile continent and region, which will be forced to engage with U.S. interests on military terms.”—Michele Ruiters, *Business Day* (Johannesburg)
- “Ironically, AFRICOM was announced as Chinese President Hu Jintao was touring eight African nations to negotiate deals that will enable China to secure oil flows from Africa.” Editorial, *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 8 February 2007
- AFRICOM is “aimed at influencing, threatening and warding off any competitors by using force.” –Editorial, *The Post* (Lusaka), 12 April 2007.
- African countries “should wake up after seeing the scars of others (Afghanistan and Iraq).” *Reporter* (Algiers).
- Mohamed Bedjaoui, the Algerian Minister of State and Foreign Affairs, has questioned why there was no proposal for an anti-terror cooperation with Algeria when the country was experiencing high levels of terrorist violence in the 1990s.
- “How can the U.S. divide the world up into its own military commands? Wasn’t that for the United Nations to do? What would happen if China also decided to create its Africa command? Would

this not lead to conflict on the Continent?” Abdullahi Alzubedi, Libyan Ambassador to South Africa.

- “Increased U.S. military presence in Africa may simply serve to protect unpopular regimes that are friendly to its interests, as was the case during the Cold War, while Africa slips further into poverty.”—Nigerian Journalist Dulue Mbachu.
- “People on the street (in Africa) assume their governments have already had too many dealings with the U.S. in the war on terror at the expense of the rule of law. The regimes realise the whole idea is very unpopular.”—Rachid Tlemchani, University of Algiers Professor.

These and many other similar comments expressed during the visits of U.S. officials, and in newspaper editorials and meeting on African peace and development have led a State Department Official to conclude that: “We’ve got a big image problem down there. Public opinion is really against getting into bed with the U.S. They just don’t trust the U.S.”

Why Africans are reluctant to embrace AFRICOM

The coldness with which Africans hold AFRICOM was displayed in July when Gen Kip Ward, the newly appointed first commander of AFRICOM, was denied a meeting with the South African minister of defence, Mosiuoa Lekota, during his visit to the country to drum up support for the planned command. There are a number of reasons why Africans are reluctant to embrace AFRICOM.

First, any country hosting the command will be criticised for violating Africa’s common positions on African defence and security, which discourages the hosting of foreign troops on the African soil. In particular, it

is thought, such troops could be used to undermine the Continent's Non-Aggression Pact, solemn declaration on common African defence and security, and other positions on hosting foreign bases in Africa.

Second, Africans vividly remember that colonialism was preceded by philanthropic missionaries who came to fulfil God's Will of rescuing Africans from the clutches of barbarism. To paraphrase Kenyatta's allegory, "when the Whiteman came to Africa, he was holding a Bible in one hand and asked us to close our eyes and pray. When we opened our eyes after the prayer, his other hand was holding a gun and all our land was gone!" Africa's colonial history was characterised by military occupations, exploitation of its natural resources and suppression of its people. After testing decades of independence, these countries are now jealously guarding their sovereignty and are highly suspicious of foreigners, even those with good intentions.

Third, when Africans reflect on the continent's relations with the U.S., they see ambiguity, neglect, and selective engagement. For instance, during the period of decolonization, the U.S. did not openly support the UN decolonization initiatives, particularly when these were not aligned with its Cold War positions. Often, the U.S. was reluctant to support anti-colonial and anti-apartheid liberation movements in Southern Africa and colonial Portugal, a member of NATO. U.S. forcefully reacted to African regimes that forged close relations with the Soviet Union and China, while aligning closer to anti-Communist African despots who were anti-democratic and had horrendous human rights records. With this historical background, AFRICOM might be considered in Africa if its objectives did not appear to

be based on the principle of “manifest destiny” of “saving Africa.” The proposal will be seriously considered if it primarily seeks to strengthen the capacity of the African Union and other African organizations to implement Africa’s development, peace and security agendas.

Fourth, Africans are not comfortable dealing with the military in matters related to their development and sovereignty. Africans are concerned that the establishment of AFRICOM might do more harm than good—“the poised hammer that makes everything suddenly look like a nail,” in the words of *Esquire* magazine. They would be much more comfortable dealing with American diplomats, USAID and Peace Corp volunteers rather than the U.S. Marine. Africans are nervously concerned that AFRICOM will sanction the militarization of diplomacy and severely undermine multilateralism on the continent. Africans have consciously adopted multilateralism as a common approach to addressing the continent’s problems and confronting its challenges. AFRICOM seems to be a unilateral approach that would be counter to the current trend towards unity on the continent. Consequently, the establishment of AFRICOM must secure an African consensus otherwise it would bring new and grave threats and challenges to the continent’s peace and security agenda. The issue of foreign military presence on the African soil is in violation of this agenda.

Additionally, the U.S. should bear in mind that following the emergence of other players in Africa; any initiative aimed at the whole continent cannot be unilaterally conceived and implemented. Although it is factually acknowledged that the U.S., as the most powerful global military and economic power, has the will and capacity to undertake unilateral actions,

there are severe limitations and far-reaching consequences for the unconsidered use of power. The U.S. engagement in the Middle East has proved that the policy of consolidating democracy in the region, destroying al-Qaeda and removing abhorrent regimes from power can fail despite all its seemingly good intentions.

Fifth, the launching and the aggressive promotion of AFRICOM are taking place at the same time that Africa is debating the “Union Government” proposal. There are feelings, as expressed in a recently held consultative meeting of the African Union PCRD in Lusaka, Zambia, that AFRICOM is an American attempt to ensure that the aspiration for African Unity is checked by a heavy U.S. military presence on the continent. This concern is based on the track record of American military intervention in Africa. The image of U.S. military involvement in Africa becomes more confusing when one looks at the “hard” security concerns of Africa. Many Africans are asking why American troops were not deployed to prevent or restrain the Rwandan *genocidaires*. Why the U.S. forces remained anchored safely off the coast of Liberia when that country, the nearest thing America ever had to an African colony, faced brutal disintegration in 2003? Why the U.S. has not supported the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and instead supported the Ethiopian intervention through airpower from CJTF-HOA stationed in Djibouti? Is the U.S. really interested in addressing the felt security needs of Africans, or does its proposed military presence foreshadow the kind of destruction we have seen recently in Somalia? Is Africa to become merely another theatre of operations in which winning the “hearts and minds” forms an essential component of a “security” driven agenda? Why should ordinary Africans welcome an American presence that will create African targets for

extremists where none existed, and add an unwelcome dimension to already complex local conflicts? Why is Washington not able to do something to address Africa's needs by modifying its trade policy? If the U.S. is really committed to participating in the continent's development why not support the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)? This would surely have a greater developmental impact, if improving the livelihoods of the people is what the U.S. wants; maybe this has not been clearly stated as such in the previous definition of Africa's needs.

Sixth, Africans were never consulted during the conceptualization of AFRICOM. Rather AFRICOM was announced and has been presented as a *fait accompli*. Africans are presently experiencing the exuberance of self-importance and confidence to drive their own destiny. There is a prevailing mood on the continent to reassert African self-worth and self-determination. This is why "consultation" has become a common cliché on the continent.

Seventh, there is also a concern that AFRICOM will suffer from mission creep by being transformed from engagement in humanitarian missions to an interventionist force, as was the case with Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1992. The change of the humanitarian objectives could also come about due to the nexus of energy, poverty, and terrorism. Despite the oil wealth of African countries, 23 West African nations are ranked bottom on the UN human development index on poverty. The test case for this mission would be the Niger Delta region where an insurgency has been taking place since 2004, when unemployed youths took up arms to demand an equitable distribution of Nigeria's oil wealth. Besides using violence, sabotage and kidnapping tactics, these youths under the Movement for the Emancipation

of the Niger Delta (MEND), have shut off approximately 711,000 barrels per day (bpd) of Nigeria's output of 2.5 million bpd. There is a strong feeling that if such activities interfere with U.S. oil supplies in Africa, there is a high likelihood that AFRICOM could be used to protect U.S. interests.

Eighth, militarization of U.S.-Africa relations—Africans are wary of the U.S. record in Iraq and concerned that the Pentagon is taking the lead role in the promotion of U.S. interests. Establishment of AFRICOM could be seen as President Bush's approach of using military force to pursue U.S. strategic interests. AFRICOM will not only militarise U.S.-African relations but also those African countries in which it will be located. This could have far-reaching consequences, as the presence of American bases in these countries will create radical militants opposed to the U.S. and make Americans targets of violence.

Ninth, the mixed messages being relayed to Africa by the U.S. government have compounded the confusion and heightened the suspicions Africans have of AFRICOM's objectives:

- In 1995, the DOD in its *U.S. Security Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa* stated that the U.S. had “very little traditional strategic interest in Africa.” But Theresa Whelan, the Assistant Secretary for Defence, has recently argued that Africa is providing “tens of thousands of U.S. jobs, ...possesses 8% of the world's petroleum; and it is a major source of critical minerals, precious metals and food commodities.”
- Ryan Henry, the Principal Deputy Undersecretary of Defence for Policy and Pentagon pointman on AFRICOM, has stated that its

purpose is not to wage war but “to work in concert with (U.S.) African partners for a more stable environment in which political and economic growth can take place.” However, Gen Wald minced no words when he stated that: “I’d like to have some forward bases in Africa. The world has changed and we are going to make our security. The Halcyon days are over.”

- General Bantz Craddock, the EUCOM Commander, told journalists in Washington in June that protecting energy assets, particularly in West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, would guide the focus of AFRICOM. Gen Craddock added that AFRICOM will “enable countries (in West Africa) to improve their security of any type of production—oil, natural gas, minerals.”
- These intentions are reflective of the bold recommendations made by Vice President Dick Cheney’s National Energy Policy Development Group, in 2001, that the Bush administration “make(s) energy security a priority of (U.S.) trade and foreign policy.” One year later, the Bush administration rolled out its “West Point Doctrine” that essentially stated that the U.S. would not allow a major economic, political or military competitor to emerge.

Almost all African countries are reluctant to host AFRICOM; some have made it clear that they do not want anything to do with it while others have even warned that it should not be stationed in any country neighbouring them. These countries are aware that the generosity of providing military advisors can easily turn into sending of conventional forces and a full-blown military intervention. For instance, AFRICOM could provide Nigerian armed forces training to combat the Niger delta insurgency, which could

later be upgraded to limited special operations to rescue American hostages and hunt down those who have attacked American economic interests.

Different regions in Africa have their respective concerns. For instance, the states of North Africa fear that their sovereignty could be easily undermined, similar to what happened to Libya in 1987 when it was bombed in the aftermath of the Berlin disco attack in which it was implicated. Most North African countries are also unable to engage too closely with the U.S. because of the Middle East policy that is widely perceived as too pro-Israel.

Furthermore, as a result of the U.S. military estimate that about a quarter of all foreign fighters in Iraq are from Africa, mainly Algeria and Morocco, there is a likelihood that AFRICOM could be used to block these terrorists from moving to the Middle East. Additionally, these countries are worried that AFRICOM could open the door to Israeli military and intelligence presence in Africa.

Ten, African governments lack the political spine to accept a permanent U.S. presence. Egypt, one of the closest American allies, is out of the picture because it is to remain in CENTCOM and is generally considered as an Arab rather than African nation. Kenya would be reluctant, as it has previously been targeted by transnational terrorism because of its closeness to the West and hosting Western interests, both military bases and businesses. Only President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has enthusiastically offered Liberian territory to be used for the establishment of AFRICOM headquarters on the basis that it “would undoubtedly have a most beneficial effect on the West Africa sub-region, as well as the entire continent.”

Misconceptions of Americans

In view of the above, it is apparent that Americans have a number of misconceptions that need to be addressed before prescribing ways of how to address African concerns about AFRICOM.

1. *Muslims in Africa are attracted to radical ideology promoting violence against Western interests.* This is not true, as Muslims are desperate to have education for their children so that they can compete in the globalized world. They want the basics of life like other people and there are many of them who would prefer to live in the U.S. rather than Saudi Arabia if given a choice.

2. *Terrorism is a threat to African interests.* Terrorism is not generally regarded in Africa as a major threat to the livelihoods of the people. Addressing it is not a top priority in security matters—compared to urban violence, pastoralist conflicts, proliferation arms and state violence. Africa is being terrorised by hunger, diseases (HIV/AIDS, malaria, etc), lack of life basics, oppressive laws, bad leadership, poor governance, unfair terms of international trade, foreign debt, conditionalities of international financial institutions, etc. Africans are afraid that AFRICOM, in the guise of development assistance and combating terrorism, could be used to destabilise African countries, whose leaders and governments the U.S. does not get along with.

3. *Africa is incapable of addressing its problems.* Africans have been trying since 2000 to come up with strategies to address its underdevelopment,

violent conflicts, and many threats to human security. These efforts have seen the formation of the New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU). The AU has adopted an ambitious conflict prevention, management and resolution agenda that it is implementing through structures such as the Peace and Security Council. Other relevant structures include an African Standby Force (ASF) that would be based on 5 regional brigades. This is where the U.S. should play a critical role in building the capacities of these structures to promote peace and security in Africa.

4. *AFRICOM “will enhance (American) efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote (American and African) common goals of development, health, education, democracy and economic growth in Africa,”* according to President Bush. Some Africans think AFRICOM would instead bring to them “military development, military health, military education, military democracy and military economic growth.” U.S. bases have produced a dependency culture in places such as the Philippines that increased poverty and disadvantaged women. U.S. military bases have brought unstable and uneven development to areas in which they were established. In countries with high unemployment and where most of the unemployed are women, sex work flourished, as it became a common means for women to feed their families.

What can be done to address African misconceptions of AFRICOM

The U.S. needs to pay a keen attention to the following in order to overcome the serious concerns that Africans have of AFRICOM.

- Open dialogue with civil society on the rationale, mission objectives and specific benefits that AFRICOM would bring to the African human security agenda.
- Demonstrate opportunities within the proposed structure that would guarantee links with civil society to ensure participation and contextual relevance. Additionally, reconceptualize AFRICOM to complement the African Standby Force and the work of the AU and Regional Mechanisms to prevent, manage and resolves conflicts in Africa.
- Share the exit strategy and phase-out plans and the milestones of AFRICOM activities and encourage civil society to monitor them during the implementation phase, with specific focus on their outcomes.
- Define, elaborate and clarify AFRICOM's relationships with the AU (Peace and Security Council, AU Commission) and Regional Mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution.
- Guarantee that the interests and sovereignty of African states will not be compromised or undermined by AFRICOM.
- Seek AU endorsement of AFRICOM by the Executive Council and the Assembly of the Heads of State and Government.
- Since AFRICOM is viewed within the wider context of the Global War on Terror and the likelihood of the theatre of terrorism shifting from the Middle East to Africa, it may be wise to review the timing. It could be even much better to wait until a time when the U.S. has an administration that is not regarded as arrogant and uncaring about other countries' interests.

- Fully implement existing commitments, particularly the U.S. foreign assistance and public diplomacy programs in Africa: AGOA, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), USAID programs/projects, etc.
- Last but not least, the U.S. should seriously think of changing its international engagement and posture, which is increasingly espousing American exceptionalism and unilateralism. Whatever the virtues of the assault on Saddam Hussein's Iraq, it, and its consequences, have impacted very negatively on U.S. prestige. Most African governments have expressed their deeply felt opposition to the enterprise. Those that have not are often seen to be seeking U.S. complicity in their own violations of human freedoms or hoping for some form of reward for their silence. The refusal of the U.S. to countenance the involvement of its armed forces in UN operations unless under U.S. command is also irksome, as are insistences on exemptions for U.S. citizens from prosecution in the ICC, and other objectionable elements of Status of Forces Agreements. This exceptionalism is also exhibited in the way US embassies are built to appear like barracks barricading American diplomats and making embassies no-go zones.

Conclusion

AFRICOM will not be accepted in Africa if it does not take into account the desires and aspirations of the African people for peace, security and development. The policy that AFRICOM aims to enhance should be reflective of the African realities: growing multipartism and democratic consolidation, the continuing quest for sustainable development, the need to enhance state capacity, the craving for good governance, promotion of

human security, etc. Any foreign assistance to Africa must incorporate these realities, as well as the desires and aspirations of the African people. AFRICOM will have a win/win outcome if it is reflective of these facts and is presented as a mutually beneficial partnership.

The hostility that it has faced so far points to the fact that AFRICOM could turn out to be an expensive endeavor, both in terms of resources and long-term U.S.-Africa relations. It should not come as a surprise that Washington's designs for Africa are now viewed with skepticism. Oil, China and terrorism are being seen to be the principal concerns of the U.S. initiative. If the coordination of a securitized development policy for Africa is part of the U.S. strategy, then it is seen by many local observers as essentially secondary and subordinate to the main aim.

Thank you for the honor and opportunity to share with you my views on this important issue. I would be more than glad to answer any question that the Subcommittee may have.