



The establishment and implications of the United States Africa Command

An African perspective

INTRODUCTION

This paper is designed to describe and evaluate the foreign policy making of the United States (US) in relation to Africa, and also to offer an early assessment of the nature, leadership, features and purposes of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) from an African perspective. It explores how AFRICOM is supposed to oversee security and conduct military operations, when necessary. The paper also examines whether AFRICOM will pick its way through a minefield of misunderstandings in both the US and Africa, and worsen or improve Africa's environment of peace and security. It advances the argument that AFRICOM is a combatant command set up by the US in an attempt to make more efficient its diplomatic and military activities in Africa. Yet, AFRICOM has unintentionally come to be regarded by many Africans as an unsettling militarisation of US-Africa relations which will only compound their continent's multifaceted problems.

In order to consider all these issues in the most adequate and balanced way, the paper draws on primary documents and secondary resources. These consist of books, journal articles, consultancy studies, government reports, conference papers and media publications. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part assesses the structures and patterns of US foreign policy making in dealing with issues related to Africa. It also addresses the perceived interests of the US in Africa, which is second only to Asia in vastness. This serves as a background for the second part, which examines the origins and configuration of AFRICOM, and then summarises its intended activities. The third and final part evaluates the interrelated and inherently contradictory implications of AFRICOM for the US and Africa. The paper concludes in an admittedly tentative way with an estimation of the realistic possibilities for AFRICOM's effectiveness and its prospects for achieving credibility in Africa under the Obama administration.

US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS AFRICA

US foreign policy making relating to Africa

The charge of making US foreign policy is constitutionally conferred on the president. In other words, US foreign policy making is concentrated in the hands of just one person, the president.¹ Such a monopoly of foreign policy making was facilitated by the near-paralysis of the other actors of foreign policy. Indeed, with a Congress uninterested and uninformed on Africa-related issues and only partially exercising control through committee hearings and granting appropriations,² the president is relatively free to make unchecked foreign policy decisions with regard to Africa, which remains insignificant as an outlet for trade and investment. This presidential command of African foreign policy issues is further enhanced by the all-too-apparent apathy and laxity of the US public, who are generally uninformed about pressing problems in Africa, and the lack of aggressiveness on the part of the media.³

Each president defines 'his role and responsibilities somewhat differently and fulfils them in a manner that reflects or is at least compatible with his own needs, temperament, and operating style'.⁴ The Department of State and the secretary of state are traditionally expected to be the president's sole foreign policy advisors and executioners. Apart from the Department of State, the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provide information and analysis to the president. The National Security Council provides the mechanism whereby the vice-president, the secretary of state and the secretary of defense, and other senior officials participate in foreign policy making. The national security advisor, supported by a small staff, oversees the preparation of policy analyses and proposals, which serve as a basis for discussion in the National Security Council.⁵

It is apparent that for the last five decades the successive presidents of the US – Republican and Democrat alike – and their senior advisors almost never had concern for, knowledge of and experience of managing relations with Africa.⁶ In any case, Africa represents only a tiny portion of the vast range of states, regions and issues involved in the formulation of US foreign policy.⁷ And Africa lacks ‘a strong and organised domestic lobby to push the continent’s issues onto the US foreign policy agenda’.⁸ Actually, except under conditions of crisis, one has ‘to move down to the level of the Assistant Secretary to find an individual with a large reservoir of knowledge and deep-seated interest in Sub Saharan Africa’.⁹ Accordingly, ‘African issues, more so than other regions, remained the esoteric concern of a few ... By default, African questions remained the domain of middle levels of the executive branch’.¹⁰ For instance, George Bush Snr’s secretary of state, James Baker, ‘spent very little time worrying about Africa, essentially leaving policy to (Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Cohen)’.¹¹

Decisions on African issues
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Thus, the issues that emerge from day to day in Africa are usually handled by lower-layer officials who are supposed to be guided by an understanding of the rather vague priorities of the president, and translate them into concrete initiatives.¹² The National Security Council’s Interdepartmental Group for Africa assesses US interests in Africa, and formulates options accordingly. It is commonly chaired by the assistant secretary of state for African affairs, and draws members mainly from the Department of State, the Department of Defense and the CIA, all three of which are involved in Africa.¹³ It follows that the Department of State exercised full foreign policy primacy on Africa, and the assistant secretary of state for African affairs was always the ‘lead policymaker in the US government on African issues, including regional security policy’.¹⁴ Yet, the persistent rivalry between these bureaucratic outfits, interagency networks and officials dealing with Africa¹⁵ constantly led to ‘a fragmented policy unable to articulate clear goals and interests’¹⁶ and was thereby characterised by an inconsistency of major proportions.

One other major problem in the conduct of relations with Africa is the ad hoc approach of US administrations of both political parties. When a new president assumes office, he replaces the whole upper layers of officials concerned with foreign policy, from the secretary of state and national security advisor down to the assistant secretary of state for African affairs. The turnover of officials means that conceptions of US interests are incessantly redefined, with an unfortunate and ‘continuing preoccupation with the current and the immediate’,¹⁷ and the strategies for protecting them equally change. Foreign policy initiatives clearly suffer, since there is insufficient time for them to take root, and for their authors to know their shortcomings and to see the reactions of other states.¹⁸

The professionals in the Department of State (including its 44 embassies¹⁹), the Department of Defense and the CIA are the main sources for specialised knowledge and analysis of African issues. There is no shortage of in-depth expertise on Africa, in the form of political and intelligence analysts, economists and defence planners, because sound policies often require insight and on-the-ground understanding of the political and social forces and the setting of African states in order to analyse military and political situations, inclinations and actions.²⁰ That kind of knowledge about a state or region comes from specialised study, living there, and mastery of the language. Such specialisation is usually available,²¹ but either is not ‘always [as] full or accurate as it might be’²² or is self-evidently neglected and underutilised. In fact, ‘decisions on African issues often ignored the empirical evidence that could have been acquired from consultation with specialists on Africa’.²³

US INTERESTS IN AFRICA

Despite Africa’s varying geographical and political scope, US officials and analysts generally view the continent in terms of the global strategic situation.²⁴ They usually divide US interests in Africa into three broad levels, but these interests were evidently limited in comparison with US interests in other areas, and ‘had not been clearly defined’.²⁵ Consequently, ‘the absence of clear US interests has left Africa at the bottom of foreign policy concerns’.²⁶ On the strategic level, Africa is near world sea lanes, such as the Straits of Gibraltar, the Red Sea and the Cape route, through which oil and vital minerals are shipped, and which could be possible targets of terrorism and piracy. Furthermore, dating back to the Cold War years, African states provide useful communications, and air and naval facilities through which US troops could be transported and a variety of combat and covert operations launched.²⁷

On the political level, in Africa there are more than fifty states, which play a substantial role in international forums and possess a consequential voting strength in the United Nations. Indeed, African states comprise 25

% of UN membership and engage in bloc-voting. China has come to rely on their support to heed its policies and overcome international criticism.²⁸ There is also constant concern that the political instability of African states could invite external intervention, to the detriment of US interests and security. For instance, following the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, the 2002 attacks in Kenya, and especially after the September 2001 attacks on US soil, US interests almost exclusively related to the prevention of terrorism of Africa.²⁹ 'Foremost in many American minds is Africa's potential as a haven for international terrorist organisations. Extreme poverty, ethno-religious divisions, corrupt and weak governance, failed states, and large tracts of ungoverned space combine to offer what many experts believe to be fertile breeding grounds for transnational Islamist terror'.³⁰

On the economic level, Africa's importance to the US is obviously minimal by European, Latin American or Asian standards. It is one of the largest, but most conflict-prone continents in the world.³¹ And it 'remains the poorest continent and the least integrated into the world economy – with slow growth rates, declining levels of per capita income, limited capital markets, and relatively small international and interregional trade flows'.³² Yet the US has a significant stake in Africa, which continues to be a source of oil, which has become 'a vital national security interest of the United States'.³³ The US is very interested in Africa's oil, given that the continent 'has 10 % of the world's proven oil reserves'³⁴ and has become a substantial supplier of the US, that there is growing instability in the Middle East, which called for a 'diversification of supplies in order to diminish dependence on any single area',³⁵ and that US and international demand for energy will continue to increase in the longer term.³⁶ 'North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 18.6 % of US oil import in 2005 compared to 17.4 % from the Middle East'.³⁷ Moreover, within the next decade, 'Africa's production is expected to double, and US imports of oil from West Africa alone are forecast to increase to 25 % of total US oil imports'.³⁸

In addition, China 'is establishing itself as a major external power in Africa ... [and] Sino-African trade has grown with breath-taking speed and amounts to over US\$70 billion',³⁹ and 'that number could rise to US\$100 billion by 2010'.⁴⁰ Indeed, China has gained unprecedented access to African markets for its export-driven economy, which is the world's third largest, 'growing at roughly 9 % per year'.⁴¹ It obtains 30 % of its oil from African sources, especially Sudan, Congo-Brazzaville and Angola.⁴² What is more, about 100 000 Chinese nationals and over 700 Chinese companies currently conduct business on the continent, making China Africa's second largest trading partner, behind the US.

Furthermore, China offers generous and unconditional financial support in exchange for diplomatic support,⁴³

sensibly undermining the political influence of the US in Africa,⁴⁴ as well as the competitive advantage of US companies, and maybe challenging US access to major African ports and its related ability to trade and receive oil.⁴⁵ The increasing competition from China has forced the US to revisit its trade relations with African states. It led the Clinton and Bush Jnr administrations to introduce and expand the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in order to facilitate commodity transactions between the US and African states, especially oil and cotton.⁴⁶

ESTABLISHMENT OF AFRICOM

The origins of AFRICOM

Combatant commands were established during the Cold War, specifically in 1946,⁴⁷ in order to 'better manage military forces for possible armed confrontation with the Soviet Union and its proxies. Today, they are prisms through which the Pentagon views the world. Each command is responsible for coordinating, integrating, and managing all Defense assets and operations in its designated area of responsibility'.⁴⁸ However, in previous decades, the Department of Defense paid little attention to Africa in its combatant command structure. In fact, 'until 1983 sub-Saharan Africa was not included in any of the geographic combatant commands ... [Even when] it was finally included in the combatant command system, it simply became a much-ignored component of over-stretched commands'.⁴⁹

Map 1 Africa divided among EUCOM, CENTCOM and PACOM



Source AFRICOM

Indeed, responsibility for Africa was divided among three geographic combatant commands, none of which was based on the continent: the United States European Command (EUCOM); the United States Central Command (CENTCOM); and the United States Pacific Command (PACOM). EUCOM, based in Stuttgart, Germany, included over 90 states, encompassing all of Europe, as well as 42 African states and Israel under its area of responsibility.⁵⁰ CENTCOM, established in 1983 and based in Tampa, Florida, covered most of south-west and central Asia, and eight states in Africa (Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia and Sudan), all deemed to be ‘having closer ties to the Middle East’.⁵¹ PACOM, based in Hawaii, spanned the west coast of the US to the east coast of Africa, and incorporated 43 African states, including the islands of Comoros, Madagascar and Mauritius.⁵²

No other continent was divided among a panoply of combatant commands in such a disjointed way.⁵³ In effect, in this Cold War-based combatant command structure, Africa was ‘never a number-one priority for any unified command. Each viewed its strategic imperative as being elsewhere, leaving Africa as a secondary or even tertiary concern’.⁵⁴ Indeed, African concerns were subordinated to inevitably higher priorities in Europe and the Middle East. For instance, CENTCOM gave most of its attention in terms of resources to the twin wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as fighting the long-drawn-out war on terrorism, and focused on the threat of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, and the future of the US military presence in the Middle East. Similarly, EUCOM has been preoccupied with the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), European allies, the political and territorial aspirations of resurgent Russia, which outgunned Georgia in August 2008, and the downsizing of US forces based in Europe. Also, PACOM’s focus is still Asia, including a bolder China, as well as an unpredictable and near-nuclear North Korea.⁵⁵

As a result, these combatant commands became unmistakably overstretched, and were unable to effectively perform their responsibilities in Africa. The division ‘has reportedly created problems in coordinating activities, and allegedly has increasingly become too great a burden on EUCOM and CENTCOM staff’.⁵⁶ More disturbingly, owing to their lack of concern, the combatant commands never developed a sizeable cadre of experts dedicated to Africa,⁵⁷ which was not a ‘priority for the senior officers whose career prospects depended on their services in Europe, the Gulf, and the Pacific’.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, after September 2001, the Bush administration recognised Africa ‘as a key area for its counterterrorism operations, specifically against al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in various sub-regions within Africa’.⁵⁹ This new-found concern was

reflected in the 2006 National Security Strategy, which forcefully notes that Africa ‘is of growing geo-strategic importance and is a high priority’.⁶⁰ Hence, the US believed that this challenge and its interests could best be addressed by establishing a single combatant command for all African states.

Composition and organisation of AFRICOM

After operating for a year as a sub-unified command under EUCOM, and regardless of African opinion on the matter, AFRICOM became a fully operational combatant command on 1 October 2008, just 34 days before the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency. AFRICOM will be responsible to the secretary of defense for US military relations with all African states ‘minus Egypt’,⁶¹ which remains within the area of responsibility of CENTCOM.⁶² It is estimated that AFRICOM has approximately 400 personnel, even though its website affirms that it plans to have a staff of 1 300.⁶³ The first commander of AFRICOM is General William Ward, a four-star African American general. He previously served as deputy commander of EUCOM. Scheinmann reveals that he ‘has served in both Egypt and Somalia, and his most recent position was US security coordinator, Israel-Palestinian Authority, in 2005. Well-versed in the region’s dynamics and threats, Ward would bring a seasoned hand and deep understanding to the new position’.⁶⁴

Map 2 Africa under the responsibility of AFRICOM



Source AFRICOM

General Ward has two deputies. First, the post of deputy to the commander for military operations is filled by a military flag officer, a three-star general. At present, it is Vice Admiral Robert Moeller. He supervises all matters relating to AFRICOM operational implementation and execution. In addition, he will exercise the command's authority in the absence of the AFRICOM commander. AFRICOM also has a deputy to the commander for civil-military activities, a position filled by a senior State Department Foreign Service officer. At present, it is Ambassador Mary Carlin Yates. The deputy to the commander for civil-military activities is responsible for directing the command's civil-military long-range planning, and programmes associated with health, humanitarian assistance and security sector reform.⁶⁵

AFRICOM is based at Kelly Barracks,⁶⁶ on the outskirts of Stuttgart, Germany, where EUCOM is located. There are concerns that locating the command on the African continent could be perceived as a negative move, enabling the US to introduce a larger military presence in Africa.⁶⁷ US officials have repeatedly asserted that AFRICOM will not 'have a large single headquarters in Africa, rather small regionally based staff presences',⁶⁸ with the possibility that they may turn into military bases in the future.⁶⁹ Unlike traditional combatant commands, AFRICOM is said to be innovative, and will have an integrated staff of permanently assigned military and civilian Department of Defense and non-Department of Defense government personnel, as well as officers and staff from foreign military and civilian organisations.⁷⁰

AFRICOM's sphere of activities

According to US officials, the full-time focus of AFRICOM is supposed to be the provision of military aid and training for African states in order for them to viably secure their borders and regulate their internal environments on a sustained basis, and also enhance interregional cooperation. Accordingly, it will supervise the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, which was established in 2002 to detect and disrupt terrorist activities in the Horn of Africa, and the Pan-Sahel Initiative, which was established in 2002 to improve counter-terrorism cooperation in North and West Africa. AFRICOM will also conduct security cooperation in order to support regional organisations as well as building capacities in areas such as crisis response, border and maritime security, especially in the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa.⁷¹ Furthermore, it will play an important role in training African peacekeepers.⁷² Moreover, AFRICOM is meant to play an equally significant role in the area of humanitarian assistance, including school building and medical support. Indeed, a branch within AFRICOM will be focused on better

planning and coordination of sustainable support to such kinds of humanitarian efforts.⁷³ AFRICOM may even be engaged in activities countering the use of child soldiers, and focus on HIV policy development, for instance ensuring that sufficient infrastructure is in place for HIV testing and counselling.⁷⁴

IMPLICATIONS OF AFRICOM

Positive implications of AFRICOM

For the US

AFRICOM undoubtedly offers a better and more integrated framework for pursuing US interests in Africa in the light of the rapid changes engendered by the end of the Cold War and the September 2001 terrorist attacks. AFRICOM enabled the Bush administration to

... go to the US Congress and argue that the establishment of AFRICOM demonstrates the importance of Africa for US national security and the administration's commitment to give the continent the attention that it deserves. If Africa is so important and if the administration's actions show that it really wants to do all sorts of good things for Africa, it hopes that the next president will be in a much stronger position to make a convincing case that the legislature must appropriate substantially greater amounts of money to fund the new command's operations. And, within the Pentagon, the establishment of AFRICOM as a unified command under the authority of a high-ranking officer with direct access to the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff will put the new command in a much stronger position to compete with other commands for resources, manpower, and influence over policymaking.⁷⁵

The decision of the Bush administration to give Africa a higher priority in the combatant command structure will at least put an end to 'an organisational arrangement [which was] a vestige of both the continent's colonial legacy and the Cold War, during which the concerns of Africa were subordinated to interests in Europe [or the Middle East]'.⁷⁶ More significantly, AFRICOM may perhaps 'provide American political leaders with more thoughtful, informed military advice based on an in-depth knowledge of the region'.⁷⁷ It could thus enable the US 'to exercise a consistent policy over the region rather than inconsistent or multiple policies arising from two or more commands, with different priorities, responsible for the region'.⁷⁸ AFRICOM may also enable the US 'to improve intelligence and contingency planning, and enhance military-to-military relationship and training'.⁷⁹ Under such circumstances, the US could more effectively secure better access to oil, curb China's growing

political, diplomatic and economic influence, oversee counter-terrorism undertakings and anticipate security challenges in Africa.⁸⁰

For Africa

The establishment of AFRICOM could be taken as a credible symbol of US commitment, notionally indicating the newly emerging strategic importance attached to Africa by the US.⁸¹ It could also signal an attempt by the US to better understand historical legacies, multiple circumstances, wider security concerns and geopolitical parameters of African states.⁸² Beyond that, AFRICOM was not designed to address ongoing conflicts and even prevent nascent crises from intensifying in Africa. But it could provide the context and guidance for solving Africa's political and military crises early enough for them to be meaningful, or at least for damping down unwelcome developments and reversing external disruptions in Africa.

It could help in particular with training deployable African peacekeeping battalions and building relatively more professional African militaries that are able to fend off external threats, foil planned terrorist attacks, and protect sensitive areas such as oil installations. It could also provide a channel of communications, and even seek reciprocal restraints and develop mutual trust between warring sides. Finally, it could enhance maritime security along Africa's coastlines in order to reduce criminality through the provision of effective training, intelligence and technical support, as well as conducting occasional joint exercises.⁸³

Negative implications of AFRICOM

For the US

The Department of Defense⁸⁴ has a comparative advantage in the US government structure in terms of superior organisational, financial and logistical resources⁸⁵ and when measured against the relatively less assertive Department of State, which is essentially dissociated from military operations aimed at establishing positions of influence. An AFRICOM that is answerable to the Department of Defense, given wide discretion and granted operational autonomy, as well as possessing a relatively better understanding of Africa's strategic realities, may ultimately become the major, at times even dominant, influence on the substance of US foreign policy towards Africa. It may, by default, come to participate in many crucial aspects of day-to-day implementation of that policy, and even dictate principles and policies to African governments.⁸⁶ It could inevitably overshadow the civilian-led policy research and policy making leadership as well as the interagency process, ultimately shifting the initiative away from the Department of State.⁸⁷

It could also lead to a blind endorsement by the US, as occurred during the Cold War,⁸⁸ of institutionally ineffective, economically corrupt and politically repressive regimes which are led by astute and ruthless leaders. These regimes would enthusiastically cooperate with AFRICOM, a deceitful alibi for them to commit heinous human rights abuses using Cold War tactics with some modifications.⁸⁹ Despite its rhetoric about spreading democracy,⁹⁰ the US could thereby be held responsible for the erosion of gains towards multiparty democracy and the derailment of internal motors for political change in Africa. The greater the association of the US with an African state, the greater its identification with the prevailing regime, which would be emboldened either to resist settlements in unresolved internal and external conflicts or simply to avoid making necessary reforms or to reach out to opposition parties excluded from power.⁹¹ An overt US presence or connection could thus transform the stakes of African conflicts and make them more impervious to diplomatic solutions.⁹² It could exacerbate regional tensions, as rival states compete to host AFRICOM facilities, rather than contribute to compromise solutions.

For Africa

With, on balance, a mixed record of US relations with Africa, most Africans have always been deeply suspicious of US involvement in the continent's affairs. Furthermore, the prevailing image of the US military is grimly conveyed to them by images of the Iraqi war, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens. Africans are also particularly concerned that AFRICOM will somehow become the lead US government interlocutor with Africa, representing the definite militarisation of US foreign policy towards the continent, despite the 'brave attempt to put a civilian mask on the face of [the] combatant command'.⁹³ They are also afraid that an increase in such involvement and militarisation would 'only fuel the terrorism which it was meant to stop and increase anti-American sentiment in Africa'.⁹⁴ Many Africans think that military power is absolutely no panacea for terrorist threats, and that, in most cases, it will backfire and attract them after building animosity and allowing conditions to deteriorate, as in Somalia, where events speak for themselves.⁹⁵

It is also highly doubtful, from the viewpoint of Africans, that an undermanned AFRICOM would better understand and effectively respond on any scale and in a more direct manner to the security priorities of African states and peoples.⁹⁶ It could, on the contrary, produce many unintentional and adverse costs, which will linger on for the coming decades, including the risk of triggering a reciprocal militarisation of China's Africa policy. China could conceivably in the coming decades, and

regardless of the associated hassle, vigorously expand its military cooperation with African states through pacts, joint exercises, intelligence exchange and training; pay its oil bills with increased sales of weapons; deploy its military forces; establish military facilities in Africa; and even set up its own Africa Command. Thus, African interests could, once again, be trampled by a revised version of the Cold War between the US and China.⁹⁷ In sum, it could unwittingly send the message that Africa is still viewed by the US as a strategic prize in a Cold War-style geopolitical struggle, causing damage to US-Africa relations which will take time to mend.

CONCLUSION

It is the understanding of the author of this paper, after extensively and carefully reading what other experts wrote about the rationale and establishment of AFRICOM, that the structure of the three combatant commands dealing with Africa made it hard for the US to design and consistently implement a coherent policy which aims primarily at enhancing its energy security and counter-terrorism activities on the continent. Thus, while paying lip service to the rather hollow concept of humanitarian assistance, AFRICOM will focus practically on providing better support for the pursuit of renewed US interests in Africa, which can be accurately summarised in three words – ‘oil, China and terrorism’.⁹⁸

AFRICOM will practically focus
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for the pursuit of renewed
US interests in Africa

Deeper analysis suggests, however, that the conception of AFRICOM was – partially owing to a thinness of ‘American understanding of diverse and complex African societies’⁹⁹ – very poorly thought through and badly implemented,¹⁰⁰ for instance leaving out Egypt, which is a major player in the international relations of Africa and key to its stability. Moreover, the name of the combatant command carries a strong colonial overtone. Basing it in Germany was a rather ominous choice, reminiscent of the 1885 Berlin Conference, after which the infamous scramble for Africa by European colonial powers got under way.¹⁰¹

It is also increasingly becoming apparent that even a determined, well-staffed and better-prepared AFRICOM

will reflect the longstanding contradiction of US policy towards Africa, which perpetually suffers from institutional rivalry and hypothetically requires strengthening democracy. Yet this last concern, traditionally regarded as the centrepiece of US foreign policy, seems to have been thwarted by more immediate and narrower security requirements designed by the Department of Defense.¹⁰² It is in this context that the pragmatist Obama was elected president of the US.

Every incoming US president would like to distance himself from his predecessor’s foreign policy course, especially one from the opposite party, and cut a new path in foreign policy.¹⁰³ Yet foreign policy expert Robert Kagan, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, predicted as early as in 2006 that ‘if the Democrats did take office in 2009, their approach to the post-September 11 world would be marginally different, but not stunningly different from Bush’s ... In fact, the options open to any new administration are never as broad as its supporters imagine, which is why, historically, there is more continuity than discontinuity in American foreign policy’.¹⁰⁴

It is evident that the foreign policy of the incoming administration can only proceed along these lines. To be sure, Obama has inherited countless domestic and international problems, including the recent financial crisis and economic downturn; contentious free trade; negative climate change; illegal immigration; Mumbai-like terrorist threats; the resurgent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq; and the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.¹⁰⁵ As he grapples with the numerous practical and immediate political and military necessities related to these problems, the range of options open to him will be limited, and he may, from day one, find it impossible to dispense with military power.¹⁰⁶ Thus, even though he seems to understand the need for ‘less emphasis on military power and more on using diplomacy and foreign aid to bend other nations toward US interests’,¹⁰⁷ Obama will be obliged to somewhat ‘follow the path marked out by the Bush administration’.¹⁰⁸

The case of AFRICOM will be no different, especially since no other acceptable alternative exists to it in the short term, and if initial policy reviews come to suggest that the costs of making use of it could be greater than the risks of not using it. This was clear from the statements Obama made about AFRICOM during the campaign. Obama maintained that AFRICOM ‘should serve to coordinate and synchronise our military activities with our other strategic objectives in Africa’, contending that ‘there will be situations that require the United States to work with its partners in Africa to fight terrorism with lethal force’. He then asserted that ‘having a unified command operating in Africa will facilitate this action’.¹⁰⁹

It would, nonetheless, be wise of the Obama administration to attain a clear definition and ordering of US interests in Africa. It should also ‘adopt an intelligent approach by realising that dealing with Africa’s crises requires more than just brute military force, but in fact demands a measured and calculated response to deal with any potential threats on the African continent, albeit directly or indirectly related to security’.¹¹⁰ In the first place, Obama should use the good will which he so skilfully generated during the campaign to dispel the chasm of mistrust among Africans.¹¹¹ This chasm of mistrust was directly caused by the unilateralism and equivocation so characteristic of the eight years of the Bush administration, during which Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, two African Americans who had both served as national security advisors, paradoxically occupied the post of secretary of state.

The Obama administration should then make sure that AFRICOM is subordinated to a relatively more enlightened policy formulated by the Department of State, which ought to strengthen its organisational capacity, including enlisting more expertise on Africa. It will also have to ensure that AFRICOM’s presence on the continent remains as low-key as possible, avoiding the uproar created by basing Pershing missiles in Germany in the mid-1980s. It should unambiguously rule out building and maintaining a permanent base structure on African soil. Two arguments can be used against stationing troops on African soil. First, stationing troops in Africa will be regionally disruptive,¹¹² and will politically undermine the host state, exposing it to intensified criticism that it is just a puppet, while depicting the US as being unnecessarily aggressive. Second, the creation of such capabilities would create incentives for their use by the US military for other purposes, including counter-productive interventions. Thus, the Obama administration should focus more on how to incrementally shore up US interests and influence in Africa, based on the political performance of African states, including their observance of internationally accepted principles of democracy, without further destabilising them and jeopardising their long-term cooperation.

NOTES

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- 42 C Hurst, China's oil rush in Africa, Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, 2006.
- 43 China has adopted a no-strings-attached policy towards African regimes such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, which it has embraced, but may not be able to control. These regimes are coincidentally pariah regimes which constitute, one way or another, a threat to US interests and opportunistically seek to play off the US against China.
- 44 There is an increasingly potent perception in the US that 'China has achieved great strategic success in Africa and has profited handsomely from America's disjointed efforts on the continent ... [that] the establishment of AFRICOM will challenge the status quo in Africa, and [that] Beijing is not pleased', Sprance, The new tournament of shadows, 14. This perception is shared by many well-informed and well-placed alarmists who think that the US ought to treat China, over which it has only modest leverage, as a permanent strategic competitor and adopt the containment policy which it had applied to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It overlooks the fact that China's engagement may have offered African states real opportunities for sustainable economic development. It also overlooks the fact that China does not have, at the moment, either the political will, the material capacity, or the ideological appeal or the social stability of the defunct Soviet Union. It has, nonetheless, led to the decision to raise, through AFRICOM, the price of security for China, in the process countering and even nullifying its strategic gain and forcing it to cooperate with the US on any but China's own terms, D Volman, 2008, AFRICOM: From Bush to Obama, www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/52409 (accessed 27 December 2008); M Swaine, Does China have a grand strategy? *Current History* (2000), 27; K Leberthal, A new China strategy, *Foreign Affairs* 74(6) (1995), 36–37. This perception provides sufficient evidence that the US is settling back into a Cold War frame of mind, with the potential of disrupting other areas of US–China relations and future expectations.
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- 60 Bush, *The national security strategy of the United States*, 38.
- 61 Department of Defense, Unified Command Plan 2008 (2008), 6.
- 62 A few researchers have tried to compellingly argue that the exception of Egypt is understandable, given its historical and strategic ties to the Middle East in general and Israel in particular, as evidenced by the Gaza events, Schaefer, Creating an Africa Command, 4; McFate, US Africa Command, 11. Yet, as the only African state to remain in CENTCOM, given its acute dependence on the US for economic and military assistance, despite the assurance that it 'will be considered as a country of special concern for AFRICOM', Frazer, AFRICOM, public diplomacy, and US strategy in Africa, 1. And as long as its hydro-political security depends solely on Africa, Egypt will feel some discomfort and would imperatively wish to influence any thorough rearrangement of US regional military posture and policymaking, especially one related to African

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- 74 McFate, US Africa Command, 17; D Volman, AFRICOM: From Bush to Obama, 2008, www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/52409 (accessed 27 December 2008); Whelan, Why AFRICOM, 8.
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- 80 Even ultra-sceptical Ruiters acknowledged, in the end, that 'it is generally accepted that governments act to protect their interests in various ways', AFRICOM bodes ill for Africa, 5.
- 81 D Dehez, Washington's Africa gambit: New thinking in US strategic policy prioritises Africa, *IP the Journal of the German Council on Foreign Relations* 9(1) (2008), 50.
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- 84 E Cohen indicated that the Department of Defense is led by 'competent but hurried men and women who have neither the time nor the inclination to question their institution's methods of doing business', Defending America in the twenty-first century, *Foreign Affairs* 79(6) (2000), 42. Moreover, the Pentagon staff usually view African militaries as the most capable and reliable allies in the war on terrorism, eventually undermining efforts to promote democracy. They also hope that African militaries could 'act on behalf of the United States ... at a time when the US military is so deeply committed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan', Volman, AFRICOM, 3.
- 85 Sieber, Africa Command, 5.
- 86 B Schaefer, and M Eaglen, Clarifying the future of AFRICOM, Heritage Foundation WebMemo 1644 (2007), 3.
- 87 Okumu, Africa Command, 12; R Copson, *The United States in Africa*, London: Zed, 2007, 119–120; D Volman, and B Tuckey, Militarising Africa (again), *Foreign Policy in Focus* (2007), 2; C Lord and H C Dale, Organising the US government for national security: Overview of the interagency reform debates, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 2008, 8; The American Academy of Science, A foreign affairs budget for the future: Fixing the crisis in diplomatic readiness, study sponsored by the American Academy of Science and the Stimson Center, 2008, 4 and 22; J Campbell, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Unified Command Plan, *JFQ* (Autumn–Winter 2002), 74.
- 88 Schraeder rightly observed that during the Cold War, 'the domestic nature of an African regime [was] not perceived as an impediment to military cooperation as long as it [was] pro-West in nature', Speaking with many voices, 378.
- 89 T Mentan, Beyond America's war on terror: Exempting state repression in Africa from scrutiny, *Journal of Business and Public Policy* 1(2) (2007), 52.
- 90 This ideologically driven policy of advancing democracy throughout Africa is likely to fail because it is selectively applied, self-defeatingly conditioned by what Moss described as a profound misunderstanding of the nature and features of Africa politics, US policy and democratisation in Africa, 205–208. And based on the naïve premise that democracies are supposedly inclined towards peaceful relations with each other. I Parmar, The knowledge politics of democratic peace theory, paper prepared for presentation at the BISA Conference, University of Exeter, 2008, 17; C Moore, Democratic governance and peace: Two sides of the same coin? Centre for Policy Studies Policy Brief 27 (2003), 1. Nonetheless, 'the next administration in the United States must not succumb to the temptation to simply dismiss the idea of democracy promotion ... [and] cannot simply go back to a policy of supporting friendly regimes no matter what their domestic policies are', M Ottaway, A new US president shouldn't dismiss democratisation, *The Daily Star*, 8 July 2008, 1. The policy of supporting such regimes is not the expression of the democratic values which the US is supposed to stand for, but the repudiation of them. According to Ottaway, a new policy with three useful steps should be implemented by the next administration in order to move in a newer and better direction. 'The first step is ... for the US to set modest goals and pursue them consistently ... The second step, admittedly a difficult one, is to tailor goals to the conditions of individual countries ... The third step, intellectually easy but politically difficult, is for the US to recognise that it does not always know what the next step is in many countries. Thus it cannot prescribe or, worse, dictate. It can only work with democracy advocates, but also with the more open-minded members of ruling establishments to devise and then support a process of change that is tailored to conditions', *The Daily Star*, 8 July 2008, 1–2.
- 91 Dehez, Washington's Africa gambit, 51.
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- 93 M Malan, AFRICOM: A wolf in sheep's clothing? Testimony given to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Africa, Exploring the US Africa Command and a New Strategic Relationship with Africa, 2007, 2.
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- 95 Mentan, Beyond America's war on terror, 3; S Bah and K Aning, US peace operations policy in Africa: From ACRI to AFRICOM, *International Peacekeeping* 15(1) (2008), 128.
- 96 For millions of ordinary Africans hoping for the best, but expecting much worse, the most important question is whether AFRICOM was really the outcome of an objective analysis of Africa's proper and long-term security requirements? Another question is how AFRICOM will responsibly deal with Africa's diverse and unforeseeable conflicts among multiple groups quickly mobilising thousands of supporters? These conflicts usually explode as a result of colonially crafted internal ethno-religious tensions, extreme deprivation and growing inequality spawning rebel movements as well as ill-advised external intervention, and give external powers little warning or reaction time. They sometimes involve Western-trained predatory militaries, strain fragile economies, lead to the complete breakdown of political order and threaten regional security by spreading to neighbouring states, drawing them into the conflict and generating refugee and IDP flows as well as an illegal arms trade. Finally, Africans wonder whether AFRICOM will look at Africa in a long-term framework, as much as a decade ahead. In fact, even the most zealously pro-US African regimes are sceptical about the US long-term commitment to the degree that they forge close ties with China and potentially act against US interests. They are usually eager to get as much out of US engagement as possible, trading short-term benefits for themselves at the clear risk of their states' long-term security and the related risk of undermining the African Union's attempt to assume responsibility over security on the continent.
- 97 Giroux, Africa's growing strategic relevance, 3.
- 98 Okumu, Africa Command, 19.
- 99 Copson, *The United States in Africa*, 124.
- 100 Morrison argued that 'much of the blame for the controversy currently embroiling AFRICOM can be laid at the feet of the Defense Department, whose belated and clumsy outreach generated suspicion about the military's true motives and raised questions about the Command's ability to deliver value to Africans and US taxpayers', S Morrison, AFRICOM, Centre for Strategic and International Studies Commentary, 2007, 1. L Mazel, the director of the Department of State's Office of African Regional and Security Affairs, honestly recognised that messages about AFRICOM have been mixed, 'starting out it was described as merely a bureaucratic realignment within the US government; then it was described as a radical new experiment in how the US government conducts foreign policy on the continent. The mixed messages coupled with the innate suspicions that many African opinion leaders have had about the motives of this new command have led to misconceptions and negative perceptions'. Remarks, AFRICOM: The American Military and Public Diplomacy, 2008, 3-4.
- 101 According to Ploch, some observers even 'suggest that an Africa Command located in Europe would perpetuate African perceptions that the West views Africa through a colonial lens', Africa Command, 8. Others assert that 'the potential certainly exists for a second scramble that will lead to Africa's partitioning into docile political entities that lack any genuine capacity for autonomous action'. Christopher Isike and Lysias Gilbert, The United States Africa Command: Enhancing American security or fostering African development? *African Security Review* 17(1) (2008), 35.
- 102 As usual, the US is faced with what Forsythe called 'the traditional conflict between commitment to human values and exercise of power for other interests', D Forsythe, Human rights in US foreign policy, *Political Science Quarterly* 105(3) (1990), 435.
- 103 Schraeder, Speaking with many voices, 375.
- 104 R Kagan, If power shifts in 2008, *The Washington Post*, 28 May 2006.
- 105 The first two or three years of his four-year term, Obama will be forced to focus more on the battered US economy and may not be able to devote much of his time, energy and attention to foreign policy in general and African matters in particular. Then, during the final one or two years of his term, his main concern will probably switch back to re-election. However, the possibility that Obama could significantly re-examine the premises and instruments of the prevailing US policy towards Africa, including the adjustment of the purposes and activities of AFRICOM, should not be ruled out. Such a re-examination in foreign policy could occur as a result of the interplay between the president's personal conviction, the restructuring of domestic politics, shifting bureaucratic policy preferences and unpredictable cataclysmic events. C Hermann, Changing course: When governments choose to redirect foreign policy, *International Studies Quarterly* 34(1) (1990), 11-12.
- 106 Obama gave a hint of his view when he wrote that he 'will not hesitate to use force, unilaterally if necessary, to protect the American people or our vital interests whenever we are attacked or imminently threatened'. B Obama, Renewing American leadership, *Foreign Affairs* July-August 2007, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070701faessay86401/barack-obama/renewing-american-leadership.html> (accessed 19 December 2008). Such a position would have been applauded by M Howard, who consistently argued that military power may be undoubtedly the most applicable instrument to deal with certain intractable problems and pursue vital interests. Military power and international order, in J Garnett (ed), *Theories of peace and security: A reader in contemporary strategic thought*, London: Macmillan, 1970, 46. He then posited that 'no cheque in international politics can be honoured unless there is a full supply of military power in the bank to meet it', *ibid*, 48. But, despite the validity of this Cold War-proven understanding, the success of military power will ultimately depend on how it is used and perceived equally to its availability and flexibility.
- 107 K Tumulty and M Thompson, A new world order, *Newsweek* 15 December 2008, 27.
- 108 Volman, AFRICOM, 14.
- 109 *Ibid*.
- 110 G Swart, A non-kinetic approach to Africa: The role of AFRICOM: observer, enforcer or facilitator of peace? Consultancy Africa Intelligence 2007, 2.
- 111 Bah and Aning, US peace operations policy in Africa, 130.

112 Wafula Okumu, a prominent African affairs analyst of the Institute for Security Studies, explained that 'AFRICOM seems to be a unilateral approach that would be counter to the current trend towards unity on the continent ... [and that] any country

hosting the command will be criticised for violating common positions on African defence and security, which discourages the hosting of foreign troops on the African soil,' Africa Command, 7-8.



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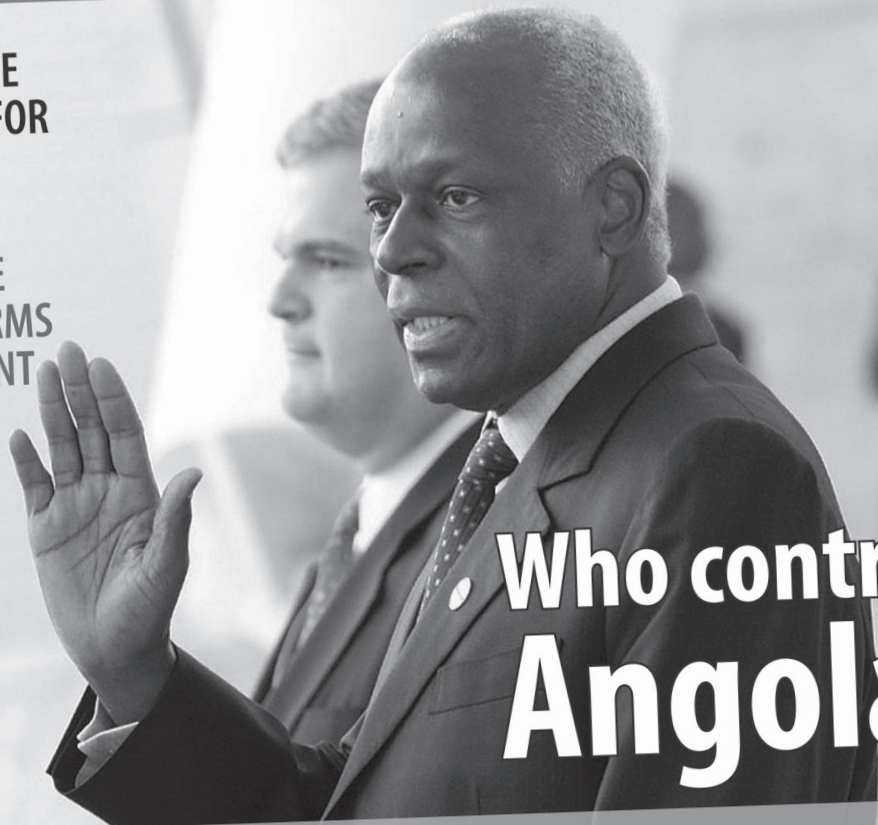
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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper contains the reflections of an African researcher who has thought hard for some time about the latest US security initiative that is AFRICOM. The first part evaluates US foreign policy making towards Africa. The second part considers the starting point, design and activities of AFRICOM. The third part analyses the positive and negative implications of AFRICOM for the US and Africa. As such, this paper could add to the current state of knowledge about issues related to US policy towards Africa in general and AFRICOM in particular, as well as future trends. Accordingly, it could serve as a valuable source of information for civil and military officials of African governments, as well as those of the US government, African civil society organisations and academic specialists.

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Berouk Mesfin is currently a senior researcher with the Conflict Prevention Programme at the Institute for Security Studies, based in Addis Ababa. He has worked as a defence analyst at the Ethiopian Ministry of National Defence, where he headed the North Africa Division of the Research and Analysis Directorate; and as political adviser to the US Embassy in Ethiopia. He has also held several positions at the Addis Ababa University: assistant dean of the College of Social Sciences; lecturer in political science and international relations; and as a research associate at the Institute of Development Research and the Institute of Federal Studies. His teaching and research interests are in international relations, with special emphasis on foreign policy, civil-military relations, conflicts and terrorism in Africa, and in comparative politics, with special emphasis on elections, political parties and federalism.

FUNDER

The paper was published with the support of Humanity United (United States).



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