

The Obama Administration: Revisiting and Reconsidering AFRICOM

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It is essential that we as two “Black” intellectuals and persons of African descent indigenous to the United States, Faraji from Philadelphia and Issa from St. Louis weigh in on the current debate regarding AFRICOM—the new Unified Combatant Command for Africa – US established by former President George W. Bush in February of 2007. Our observations are not simply rooted in some naïve allegiance to the continent of our ancestral origins, but more important as thinkers and leaders who have seriously engaged the complex challenges that the African continent faces today. Over the past 15 years we have made more than two dozen trips to various African countries and have conversed and worked with women, men and children from all walks of life, including agriculturalists, educators, kings, queens, statesmen and stateswomen. We have both married West African women and have heard firsthand the hopes, aspirations and visions that many Africans have for their future. We have also written scholarly articles and books about African history and culture and currently participate in leading humanitarian and development projects on the African continent. In view of our unique experience and positioning, we believe it is important to enter in on the debate regarding American foreign policy toward Africa.

Over the past year there has been a plethora of essays on AFRICOM. Those in favor of AFRICOM argue that the new strategic interest in Africa is mutually beneficial to Africa and the United States since the U.S. will be collaborating with African states to curtail instability and secure peace—the conditions necessary to maximize democracy and minimize the potential for terrorism. Those who oppose AFRICOM argue that to a very large extent United States military policies do not measure up to Africa’s needs and could in all likelihood amount to U.S. imperialistic control over Africa and its people. In addition opponents say the U.S. is attempting to counter Chinese influence on the continent and secure African oil supplies which will account for 25% of its energy demands by 2015. Realistically most African leaders see AFRICOM as nothing more than a mechanism of war, a kinder, gentler military intrusion designed to appear less combative than other military operations on the African continent such as *Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans-Sahara* and the *Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa* which are connected to the Global War on Terrorism. The fact that AFRICOM is integrating its aims through the U.S. State Department and USAID does not camouflage its primary militaristic thrust; and it is for that reason that no amount of positive “Public Relation” will convince African leaders otherwise.

More important however, it is our assessment that both the proponents and opponents of AFRICOM fail to view African leaders and states as actors and sovereign equals on the world stage of international economic and security cooperation. The United States continues to regard Africa as a regional backwater on the periphery of its central concerns and in spite of efforts such as the Millennium Challenge Account, HIV/AIDS, Malaria intervention and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the attitude toward Africa remains basically condescending and patronizing. The approach to Africa is oriented toward crisis intervention and preemptive policies that view Africa as an empty theater by which the major players compete for high stakes—in other words Africa functions as a backdrop for the U.S. to neutralize its enemies such as communists during the Cold War era and the terrorists of today. If AFRICOM is about mutual cooperation, it must raise a fundamental question in formulating policy, are African interests at the center of AFRICOM’S aims?

The opponents of AFRICOM argue that the U.S. is moving toward a neo-colonialist stance with regard to the continent which reeks of militarism and imperialist ambition. The bottom line is that the U.S. needs to secure its oil and other natural resource interests and create an environment conducive to business. This in part reflects the new scramble for Africa in the 21st century and a continuation of Western colonialism in a new guise—business as usual or here we go again. Although their concerns are justifiable in light of the history of enslavement and colonialism, this perspective is basically reactionary and continues to view the West as the oppressor and Africa as the oppressed. Africa is not America’s or the West’s victim, but their counterpart with its own strategic interests and resources which can be leveraged through negotiation between sovereign equals.

If the United States is to compete peacefully in Africa it may want to acknowledge that its interests in Africa is not about benevolence or altruism, and to suggest that it is could be more damaging to its credibility. Second the U.S. should openly recognize that China's influence in Africa is only a part of a new emerging world order that has peacefully replaced it and Europe as traditional major players in global trade as indicted by Fareed Zakaria in his book *The Post-American World*. It may want to consider that none of these new global players are using the military to advance their interests in Africa. As Thomas Friedman elegantly states it, the "world is flat" and other nations have recognized this, and have taken full advantage of this fact for quite some time.

Our suggestion is that President Obama selects an Assistant Secretary of State for Africa who is culturally competent and attuned to the needs of the African continent. Hopefully this person would have been seasoned enough to know the importance of bringing Africanists and other scholars from the private and public sectors together to form a team geared toward providing the best solutions as to how the U.S. could strategically and positively increase its influence in Africa. This person must also recognize that China is not the only nation with increasing influence on the African continent. Countries such as Brazil, India, Russia and Turkey are also increasing their influence in Africa.

Considering the above, we think the Obama administration may be forced to revamp AFRICOM, thus we recommend that President Obama demilitarize AFRICOM and utilize agencies such as the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) to achieve its security and defense aims. This of course should be secondary to other U.S. agencies in Africa. For instance the Departments of Education, Commerce and Transportation could also have similar programs to ACSS to provide venues for African leaders in each of these respective areas. Instead of relying solely on our military strength, we could do more to support Africa as it defends itself against instability and volatile situations through our endless supply of intellectual and technological capacities; hence we recommend the following:

- U.S. president should organically tour Africa once a year.
- Train more African doctors and nurses and make sure they return home. Increase more scholarships for Africans to study abroad in the U.S.
- American basketball, football and baseball players and other athletes as well as artists should do more cultural tours of Africa to heighten visibility (China cannot compete with American popular culture).
- More partnerships with U.S. Blacks, especially HBCUs.

- Change policy toward building in Africa.
- American leaders should be much more viable/visible in Africa.
- U.S. (HBCU's) college presidents should tour and provide technical assistance and capacity building in Africa.
- Increase the Millennium Account's and USAID budget and invest more in African physical and technological infrastructure.
- Asheshi University, a liberal arts institution founded by Patrick Awuah with the support of American universities and companies (after working for Microsoft for several years, Awuah resigned and returned to Ghana to establish the university in 2002) can serve as a model to bring ethical, entrepreneurial leadership to Africa.

It is obvious that Africa is strategic to United States interest. Africans want the United States to engage in equal trade, buttressed by their increasing young population, oil and other natural resources exports, and an increasing middle class. If we continue to have a myopic vision concerning Africa, we risk the chance of engaging Africa unilaterally, and increasing China's and other emerging powers continuing influence on the continent.