Dealing with Africom: The Political Economy of Anger and Protest

by

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Abstract

This paper derives from the assumption that US African Command is a continuation of American militarization of Africa and should be addressed as such. It hypothetically contends that: (1) the militarization of Africa is changing the local culture of violence for the worse. (2) The fight against Africom is very important to be left solely in the hands of mostly illegitimate African Head of States and the efficient approach to checkmate the implementation of Africom on the continent should go beyond foreign policy options. It suggests that, in order to stop the madness, Africa must harness the talents of civil society (in and out of Africa), African Diasporas, African intelligentsia, anti-Africom movements, artists, NGOs, leading African commentators, etc. Last but not least, they should address US public opinion (including US-based corporations and activists, etc.), US Congress and take advantage of the Obama administration.

Key words: Africom; War on Terror; US militarization; culture of violence; US imperialism

Introduction

The African continent has shifted from the periphery towards the center of international concern. Africa has entered radar screen of the United States as a strategic military and economic interest. Despite the fact that security and humanitarian aid are often presented as the driving forces behind America's push into Africa, the growing interest in Africa is shaped not only by global strategic concerns but also and most importantly the growing demand for oil coupled with the quest for access to foreign markets.

This new engagement with Africa is informed by global competition between the US and China and the post-Cold War challenges that are remapping the global environment. America is creating new institutions to implement its wide range of strategic goals in Africa; the most controversial is the Unified Combatant Command for Africa (Africom). Is Africom signaling the official beginning of post-Cold War American imperialism and hegemony in Africa?

This study is derived from the African peoples' desire to understand and express their discontent with the ongoing militarization of their continent. We seek to understand Africom above and beyond the official rhetoric as well as address the hidden agenda of the US's new foreign policy toward Africa. The hypothesis is that the appropriate and efficient approach to checkmate the implementation of Africom on the continent should go beyond foreign policy options. Our purpose is not to underplay the threat of terrorism or other security concerns that exist in Africa. However, this study posits that America's new and "altruistic" engagement with Africa is in fact a strategy to exert control over the continent to serve its own foreign policy agenda.

The first section of this article explains Africom as a new institutional body in the foreign policy arena. Although Africom is a nascent institution, its function will be a continuation of American militarization. The second part illuminates the devastating impact of American militarization of Africa with particular attention to how it changes local cultures of violence. The third section sheds light on strategies Africa can employ to counter Africom and broader militarization of the continent.

Mapping Out Africom: A Small Portrait

A brief background of the US military is necessary to better understand why and how Africom came into being. The military cartography of Africa prior to Africom was informed by Washington's Cold War lens of geopolitics. U.S. defense operations for Africa were overseen by three different commands: the European Command (EUCOM) based in Stuttgart, Germany, which covered West, Central, and Southern Africa; Central Command (CENTCOM) located in Tampa, Florida-USA whose main field of coverage is

the Middle East but also the Horn of Africa; and the Pacific Command (PACOM) located in Honolulu, Hawaii-USA which covered the islands of the western coast of Africa.[1] The birth place of humanity was a low priority for America during the Cold War despite the numerous proxy wars it tacitly or directly supported.

The Cold War ended in 1989 and the logic and rationales governing it became obsolete. Africa had progressively entered the radar screen of the US as "a continent emerging in importance, 22 percent of the earth's surface, … approaching 800 million inhabitants, growing in political clout… rich in human capital and natural resources."[2] America's policy planners wanted to reconstruct African military cartography to align with America's post-Cold War geopolitical interests. Africa was now seen as a unique "region" and a new command was to represent "a realignment of our organizational construct on how we deal with Africa. And so instead of having three commanders that deal with Africa as a third or a fourth priority, we will have a single commander that deals with it, day in day out, as his first and only priority."[3]

Africom was officially announced by former President George W. Bush on February 6, 2007. According to its genitor, Africom is a unified command that aims to bring together all the security programs the United States supports on the continent. The Pentagon expected the new command to be headquartered inside the continent and fully operational by the fall of 2008. However, under a cloud of heavy international criticism and African skepticism, the US military failed to find a country on the continent willing to host its new pet project. Liberia offered to host the new command but did not match the Pentagon's strategic requirements. Africom is "temporarily" based in Stuttgart-Germany.

It is worth noting that Egypt, which is geographically part of the African continent, will remain associated with America's Central Command. This is due to Egypt's strategic importance to US foreign policy in the Middle East. Egypt's exclusion from Africom is proof that Africom's primary goals are military, geopolitical, and economic; not diplomatic or humanitarian as the official rhetoric insists.

Africom's stated mission is to support humanitarian assistance, civic action, professional development of militaries, assistance in border/maritime security, and natural disaster response. This support is bilateral, sub-regional (ECOWAS for example) and multilateral via the African Union. Such a broad and bold plan of engagement aroused suspicions among African governments. These suspicions were reinforced by America's negative global image under former President George W Bush. The US Military held several informational sessions around the African continent to explain the goals and philosophy of Africom in hopes of finding a host country for the command. Official and unofficial contacts were made with African leaders. Nigeria, South Africa and Libya, were among Africom's most outspoken critics and ostensibly stood against the project.

Skeptics of Africom cite previous US military forays in Africa which led to a disproportionate development of military institutions relative to instruments of civilian rule. Others see Africom as a naked attempt to exert American control over Africa's valuable natural resources.[4]

Many Africans simply believe Africom will hurt Africa[5]. There is widespread suspicion (and rightfully so) that America's policy is primarily driven by a need for resources. The high profile US interventions in the Horn of Africa, Middle East, and Asia—which are perceived as resource grabs—have left Africans wary. Furthermore, Africa already contains many volatile regions where militarization could worsen instability and/or undermine peace-building efforts.

For America, Africom represents militarization for benign purposes. But how far back does American militarization span on the continent? What are the results of previous military adventures in Africa? And how has American militarization impacted local cultures of violence?

The Militarization of Africa

Although American militarization[6] of Africa has received more attention in the post-9/11 era as part of the "War on Terror," Africom's origins can be traced back to the early 1990s when the Pentagon created a Special Forces Group oriented towards special operations in Africa[7]. The militarization of Africa must also be understood as part of America's global militarization effort to sustain its hegemony[8] and imperial ambitions[9]. Even if presented as preemptive and altruistic (if not benevolent!), American empire is backed by fierce ideology. This foreign policy framework claims that America has the right to define its national security interests and unilaterally assert itself in the global arena. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 drew Africa closer to the center of American foreign policy because of terrorism concerns. However, America's concern has mainly been expressed in terms of further militarization and the creation of Africom to manage it.

The George W Bush administration embarked on a long-term push into several parts of Africa to counter what it perceived as sprawling inroads made by Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks operating in poor, lawless, and predominantly Muslim regions[10]. The US is presently sending military officers to Africa to bolster intelligence gathering and sharing, case austere landing strips for emergency use, and secure greater access and legal protections for American troops in the region[11]. In 2002, the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) was launched in Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to protect the region's porous borders, track movements of people, combat terrorism, and enhance regional stability in these vast and largely uninhabited lands.

The US military equipped and trained each participating country's military under the auspices of PSI. In 2005 PSI was replaced by the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorist Initiative (TSCTI) which added Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Senegal to the list of participants. TSCTI receives up to $100 million per year in American funding, instead of the scant $6.25 million spent annually on PSI[12]. The Department of Defense runs the Trans-Saraha Initiative which continues PSI's military training, but also distributes sophisticated weapons technology.

Similarly, the East African Regional Security Initiative (EARSI) was implemented in East Africa with the same goals as TSTCI and the East African Counter-Terrorism Initiative (EACTI) was employed in Kenya and neighboring countries to train local law-enforcement officers. Since 2002, the US has stationed between 1,200 and 18,000 troops in Djibouti under the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA)[13].

Maritime security is becoming increasingly important. Through Africom's deployment of the African Partnership Station, U.S. is building the capacity of West and Central African states to protect their territorial waters, respond to oil spills and other disasters, and patrol vital oil and gas platforms[14]. The Gulf of Guinea and the Gulf of Aden are areas of particular concern for U.S. maritime protection programs. U.S. officers are building the capacity of African armies in order to patrol their coastal areas, improve their intelligence so that movement of dangerous personnel, arms, money, and other forms of support coming from the Middle East into the Horn and moving along the coast of Africa can be blocked[15].

In Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and South Sudan, U.S. is helping to rebuild professional military forces and is looking to engage in similar Security Sector Reform (SSR) activities in Somalia[16]. The International Military Educational and Training (IMET) Program and the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) Programs are ongoing as well. Over 100,000 African peacekeepers have been trained within these programs and eight African nations are now in the top 20 of all contributions to UN peacekeeping operations[17]. Beyond this military and civilian capacity building, US is providing logistics support and equipment to some African countries. ACOTA also focuses on training trainers and programs tailored to individual country needs, while IMET programs additionally promotes professionalism and respect for democracy and human rights[18].

The Flawed Logic of America's War on Terror

The war on terror is often presented as one of the main reasons for the U.S. militarization of Africa. The Bush administration's engagement in Africa officially claimed to bring peace and security to the African people. Furthermore, the fight against Global Terrorism has become the epicenter of U.S. policy and the obsession of American decision makers. However, the gap between the official rhetoric and the reality in the field reveals America's policy is in fact counterproductive. It is astonishing to witness America's general misunderstanding of terrorism[19].

Looking past Washington's simplistic definition of terrorism (which misinforms policy in the Penatgon's Africa programs), several underpinnings of America's counter terrorism foreign policy is flawed. However, erroneous policy has and is still governing U.S. action against this threat. The first flaw is America's tendency to over generalize when analyzing unique terrorist threats, while filtering information through Homeland Security's singular lens. The second is the U.S. government's misunderstanding of the relationship between terrorism and Islam. The Bush administration also gave the unfortunate impression that the War on Terror was a war against Islam by conveniently labeling violence in the Islamic world "terrorism" when it served America's perceived interests. Thirdly, as Adam Garfinkle rightly puts it:

Two Post-Cold War US administrations have misconstrued the implications of a unipolar world. Lacking a sense of historical irony, the administrations of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush thought American influence would grow as a result of the US victory in the Cold War, but the opposite has been the case."[20]

Post-Cold War delusion generally ignored the unexpected challenges that could arise from U.S. foreign policy competitors. Lastly, Washington's arrogant belief that it understands the roots of terrorism in every respect and has the tools to unilaterally defeat the threat is a misnomer to say the least.

These inaccuracies inform the U.S.'s approach towards *"Islamist apocalyptical terrorism"*[21] and clearly explain the widespread confusion and poorly formulated policy that characterizes U.S. war on terror.

It is even more difficult to understand how an informal, underground and clandestine phenomenon can be fought with formal weapons of war. In this very unconventional war, one side knows their targets quite well (the terrorists). Their plans are largely secret while their strategy, articulation, and grammar are rooted in specific idioms that are unintelligible to people outside their niche. Their willingness to martyr themselves makes them extremely difficult to confront using conventional methods.

Conversely, their competitors (the West, led by America) do not understand the logic of their opponents, their targets, schedules, or even the geographic region where the battle is taking place. These asymmetries give terrorists a huge advantage over their enemies.

The Disastrous Effects of the Militarization of Africa

America's flawed understanding and obsession with terrorism has led to a foreign policy of militarization throughout Africa. These military programs, now consolidated under Africom, comprise a great threat to African peace, security, democracy and sovereignty. Training and weapons are being provided to phantom, failed, corrupt, and undemocratic regimes. Freedomhouse's 2008 report (covering the year 2007) rated only 2 of the 9 African governments benefiting from TSCTI as "free."[22] Some of these countries civil liberties rating declined and human rights condition deteriorated considerably after 2007. Chad and Mauritania, two countries supported by the Pentagon's Program have experienced military coup d'Etat. American anti-terrorist programs are supporting and legitimating criminal governments who often terrorize their own people with impunity. It consolidates African governments' coercive and repressive apparatus and its capacity to resist domestic opponents' demands for a full democratization[23].

Militarization is also responsible for drastically worsening local cultures of violence in Africa. The proliferation of weapons, training of local armies and intelligence sharing are introducing new forms of insecurity. *"Zaguina,"* (highway robbery), hostage taking for ransom, and the development of mercenary and rebel groups have all increased activity in the criminal economy and strengthened violent non-state actors which are notoriously difficult to control. Politicians, police, and military officers are frequently implicated in these schemes. Africa is also fast becoming an important way point for international drug trafficking. South American drug cartels are routing drugs destined for the European market through West Africa. Ironically, American counter-terrorist training is likely being used to form paramilitary criminal gangs and undermine the American war on drug[24].

Recent American interventions in the Horn of Africa have had devastating consequences for the region. The US bombing of Somalia in January, 2007 resulted in civilian casualties and a mass exodus of refugees into neighboring countries. The Bush Administration claims it killed Somali terrorists in the strike, but at a great humanitarian cost. Somalis generally resent America for its support of Ethiopia's occupation and disregard for Somali suffering. This animosity and regional instability may turn the Horn into a fertile ground for terrorists.

Somali instability has allowed piracy to run rampant off the Horn of Africa and in the Gulf of Aden. In 2008, pirates attacked 111 ships in the region's waters, compared to just 37 in 2007. Not less than 80 attacks were carried out during the first four months of this year (2009) according to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB). This issue has received plenty of international attention since ships carrying 12% of world trade and 1/3 of crude oil pass the coast of Somalia. The US and Europe have increased patrols, but to no avail as piracy continues to worsen in 2009. But the issue is more complex than Washington or the UN Security Council would like to admit. Many Somali's only turned to piracy after the local fishing industry floundered due to nearly twenty years of illegal overfishing coupled with the toxic waste dumping in Somali water by Italian companies. The international community turned a blind eye to the environmental destruction, violations of international law, and disrespect of Somali territorial sovereignty. Thus piracy must be seen as politico-economic dissension by the Somali population and civil society; a response to the illegal exploitation of resources and disregard for their human suffering.

Brokering peace in Somalia by engaging local fisherman, NGOs, and civil society would be a more effective solution to the terrorist and piracy problems than further militarization of the Horn. However, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently announced American "Counter Piracy Initiatives"[25]—which is code for greater US militarization and imperialism.

America's imperial ambitions in Africa are based on short-sighted and opportunistic policies to control the extraction of valuable natural resources. Africa has become a key supplier of oil to the United States in recent years. The continent currently provides about 15% of America's crude oil imports and this percentage is expected to increase in the near future. Africa also hosts rich reserves of Timber, Bauxite, Uranium, and other minerals. The US, Europe, and China are all competing to control these resources.

Strategies to Counter Africom and American Imperialism

Developing conventional foreign policy solutions to counter the relocation of Africom appears to be over-simplistic and inefficient. Africom merely represents the apex of a long-lasting American imperial effort to exert control over the continent. In this respect, the paramount question is not how do we stop Africom relocation, but how do we stop American militarization and imperialism on the continent? The African response must send a clear message that we are ready to "stand up to the US madness!"[26]

First and foremost, we cannot leave this challenge solely in the hands of African Heads of State. Generally speaking, African leaders are not accountable to their citizens and are to that extent illegitimate.

Their singular goal in domestic and foreign policy is to remain in power. African leaders will support US (European and Chinese as well) militarization and imperialism in the short term if it increases their prospects of political control. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the Liberian President, even publicly expressed willingness to host Africom. Simply put, African leaders lack the political will necessary to evaluate and counteract the devastating impacts of US militarization. Though a small minority of African leaders should be recognized for taking a vocal stand against Africom. The current president of the African Union (A.U.), Muammar Qaddafi, has consistently opposed Africom. The AU must use all appropriate diplomatic tools at the UN, and other international bodies, to impede further militarization. Africa's growing importance in global geopolitics should provide additional bargaining leverage for Qaddafi and his peers.

The African people must call for the creation of an international task force to stop Africom and militarization. Its work is to coordinate Pan-African policy to halt imperialism and militarization, especially Africom. The task force should formulate geo-strategic policies that consider Africa's diversity and entanglement in regional and international affairs and should include Africans and the African Diasporas. The task force must also publicly shame opportunistic African leaders who ally themselves with imperial policies to serve their individual interests.

A successful African action plan against militarization must go beyond institutional and formal diplomacy. We must harness the talents of civil society (in and out of Africa), African Diasporas, African intelligentsia, anti-Africom movements, artists, NGOs, leading African commentators, etc.

The role and input of the African intelligentsia is crucial. New generations of African intellectuals have proven their competence worldwide and are now some of the world's leading researchers and academics. The era when African intellectuals, in the name of objectivity or neutrality, refuse to comment on politics must end now. Intellectuals cannot escape their responsibility to combat the inhumane treatment of our continent and enlighten the public about the devastating consequences of imperial militarization. Conferences, seminars, public lectures, and petitions should be held and publicized in the media to raise awareness. The issue must be addressed at all levels of government and society. We must reach out to Americans as well; many of whom are ignorant about the dubious impact of American foreign policy. American youth and students are particularly willing to critically evaluate their government's actions. As Africans, we must take a stand. Exercise your right to speech so we can be heard!

Artists must play a role as well. Through paintings, cartoons, music, performing arts, songs, movies, etc., artists can express their displeasure with Africom. Entertainment and comedy can be turned into pedagogical instruments to educate the world about America's apocalyptic policy in Africa and the plight of African peoples.

It is imperative that Africa's spiritual and religious leaders speak out on behalf of their people. Priests, Pastors, Archbishops, *Imam*, *Modibe* should use their platforms to inject these issues into the public consciousness. Religious leaders should ally themselves with non-religious civil society organizations to build the necessary awareness and competence to stop military imperialism.

Africans need to target US public opinion and the African Diasporas as well. Activists should sensitize the American public, Congress, and Churches. Many American Non-profits and NGOs are sensitive to African issues and well connected to American decision-makers.

US-based corporations and their investors should be among the main targets of this campaign. Many of them benefit monetarily from American militarization, but are unaware of the negative consequences associated with their profit-making. Furthermore, militarization can actually threaten their investments as is the case with oil companies in Nigeria.

Last but not least, Africans and American activists willing to "stand up to the madness" should take advantage of the new US Presidential Administration. It goes without saying that Barack Obama represents a shift away from many Bush era policies. The immediate past administration's blind obsession with terrorism and military solutions was too strong to overcome. However, the current administration is more open to consultation and reconsidering American policy. But does Obama feel enough solidarity with the African people to betray the hidden agenda of the American state and end his country's destructive military imperialism? Is the new U.S. President willing to revisit and reconsider Africom?[27]

There are two arguments which could convince Obama to change course: 1) Humanitarianism—articulately demonstrating the enormous human suffering that results from American militarization could convince Obama to reverse US policy; 2) American Self-Interest—The long-term success of American policy in Africa will depend on America's ability to balance the interests of African peoples (distinct from African governments), security issues, and American economic interest. We have already seen American policy fail in Nigeria, Somalia, etc because US actions were not mutually beneficial to the local people and America. Obama must understand that Africa seeks a partnership, not another colonial experience.

It is both humiliating and frustrating to listen to official rhetoric that claims Africom will enhance US efforts to "bring peace and security[28] to the people of Africa." This shameful paternalistic policy proves the US has dubious intentions for Africa and/or is completely ignorant of realities on the continent. Instead of "protecting" Africa from terrorists, militarization is opening up the continent to terrorists, inflaming local conflicts, and even destabilizing entire regions.

Conclusion

This paper does not underplay the threat of terrorism or other security concerns that exist in Africa. It goes beyond US official rhetoric of altruistic and humanitarian policy and uncovers the military, economic and geopolitical goals of Africom. It reveals that US new engagements with Africa are primarily driven by a need for resources together with new geopolitical challenges. Africa already contains many volatile regions. The US militarization will worsen instability, sustain insecurity and undermine peace-building efforts. Therefore, Africom appears as a threat that is drastically changing local culture of violence and exposing vulnerable African populations to terrorism. As a result, Africa and all those who care for the continent should take action, not only to prevent the relocation of Africom but to stop the US military imperialism.

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