

AFRICA INSIGHT: Global cop USA seeks more presence in Africa

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The US is frenetically marketing and scouting for a host to its recently-created Africa Command (Africom). The new military edifice signifies Africa's emerging strategic importance in the superpower's economic and security calculus to contain terrorism and secure global oil wealth. But pundits are wary of the implications of the new command on Africa's sovereignty.

Africom represents a reworking of the Cold War era structure that split it among America's three commands — the European Command (EUCOM), the Central Command (CENTCOM), and Pacific Command (PACOM).

"The old command structure treated Africa as an afterthought," says Thelesa Whelan, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense.

Africom, which covers all African countries, except Egypt, under one command starts from October 2007, and develops full operational capability by October 2008, with an African-American, Gen William E. Ward, as its chief.

The command is more than a routine tweaking of the superpower military structure. Through it, America is embracing the 'global Cinderella'.

With 22 per cent of the total land area and 14 per cent of the world's population, Africa has acquired new geographic and demographic importance in the eyes of the sole superpower. US jobs are increasingly inter-linked to Africa's economy, which has experienced a five per cent annual growth in recent years.

Besides its fabulous wealth in minerals, precious metals, and food products, Africa contributes eight per cent of the world's petroleum. The growing energy market in Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea has also proved irresistible to the US, which already receives 15 per cent of its oil from the continent. Furthermore, with three of the 10 elected members of the UN Security Council coming from the continent, Africa is also politically important.

Africom is an attempt by the US to catch up with the emerging African peace and security architecture that African leaders have been erecting around the African Union and its regional economic communities. It is envisaged to provide African nations and regional organisations an integrated focal point to coordinate security issues of mutual concerns.

The command has the potential of expanding the space for cooperation in training of the African Standby Force (ASF). One challenge is to realise the goal of the Africa Contingent Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) programme, designed under former US President Bill Clinton to building Africa's capacity to ensure peace within its own backyards.

Africom signifies the bringing together of the US humanitarian industry and its military establishment as a distinct legacy of the Bush administration. The trailblazer for this aid-military partnership is the cooperation between the Djibouti-based Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa and the USAID in humanitarian affairs, civic action projects, HIV and Aids prevention, and control of vagaries like floods and droughts. These are aimed at winning the hearts and minds of Africans and "draining the swamps of terrorism" in the Horn of Africa.

America's global war on terror provides the backdrop to Africom. It is designed to stem the assumed threat posed by swathes of Africa's "ungoverned" spaces, feared to be potential hide-outs and training fields for terrorists. According to the controversial 2007 "Failed States Index" recently released by the US-based Foreign Policy, Africa tops the list of failed states.

The US has so far put in place embryonic counter-terrorism architecture. Through its Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership, small teams of US special forces have been training soldiers of countries on the fringes of the Sahara on how to handle terrorism.

Since al Qaeda blew up American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, killing 225 people, America has trained its heavy guns on the organisation and its suspected local allies in the region. Some 1,500 US military and civilian personnel attached to the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) have maintained a presence at Camp Lemonier, Djibouti. The Command of the CJTF-HOA, currently under CENTCOM, will be transferred to Africom in 2008.

In December 2006, the US supported Ethiopia to topple the Islamic Courts Unions in Somalia, accusing it of being an al-Qaeda ally. It has since carried out strikes against suspected 'terrorists' while underwriting the mainly Ugandan African Union stabilisation force in the country.

Africom is expected to build upon the US access to foreign air bases and ports in Africa. Gabon, Kenya, Mali, Morocco, Namibia, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zambia all provide access to US servicemen. America used the facilities in Kenya to launch its intervention in Somalia in the 1990s.

Morocco and Botswana have allegedly expressed interest to host the command. Africa's poor countries are attracted by the money and jobs that the superpower's military investment might bring with it. The budget for the Trans-Saharan Counter-terrorism Partnership for 2007 is some \$115 million (Sh770 billion), while non-military assistance has increased by 60 per cent. Admiral Moeller, head of the Africom planning team, hinted that the command will cost to the tune of \$50 million in the 2007 financial year.

Despite the economic lures of Africom, hosting it remains sticking issue. Even America's strategic American partners like South Africa are hesitant to host the new command, concerned with the long-term impact its presence would have on their national sovereignty.

Locating American soldiers permanently on foreign soil will depend on the host country's approval of a Status-of Force Agreement (SOFA) — a legal document that the State Department negotiated to define the legal standing of American soldiers abroad. Washington used a mix of carrot and stick to get a majority of Africa's weak states to sign this bilateral non-surrender pact, commonly known as Article 98 Agreement, to protect American servicemen from prosecution by the international Criminal Court. But some pivotal African states like South Africa and Kenya have not signed.

It is Washington's unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Bush administration's strategy of pre-emptive strikes against its perceived threats which present liabilities which some African states are shy to bear. Countries considered by the US and its allies as pariahs such as Sudan and Zimbabwe shudder the possibility of Africom being used to coordinate strikes against them ala Iraq.

While Africom heralds a new dawn of US-Africa cooperation independent of former colonial ties, America's return to the spirit of global interdependence and multilateralism will greatly facilitate such partnerships.

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