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View Point

AFRICOM at Work: U.S. African Strategy and Scope for Africa

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The U.S.'s strategic interests in Africa extend beyond oil and other resources. Towards that end in 2007, the U.S. established Africa Command (AFRICOM) as the sixth regional command to advance its strategic position on the Continent.

Historically, the African continent had not been identified as strategic priorities for the U.S. military. During the Cold War, Africa was nothing more than a chess board for superpower manoeuvring and the U.S. foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa had little to do with Africa. In post-Cold War, however, Africa has been free from the superpower rivalries, and has opened the gate of new opportunity for African countries. This period marks a remarkable shift in the foreign policies of U.S. towards African states which bring it to the centre stage in international politics. The U.S. experts on Africa, however, have underlined five factors that have shaped increased U.S. interest in Africa i.e. global trade, oil, armed conflicts, terror and HIV/AIDS.

Africa has been plagued by political conflicts and instability over the last five decades, retarding political, economic and social development in the African countries. It led many states to be turned into fragile states such as Somalia, Sierra Leone and Congo. The inability or unwillingness of such fragile states to govern territory within their borders has led to the creation of safe-havens for terrorist organizations. Following terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in Nairobi (1998), Dar-e-Salaam (1998), Algeria (2007), Morocco (2007), on World Trade Centre (2001) and

launch of U.S. proclaimed 'War on Terror', pressurized U.S. to take African issues seriously. Consequently, the U.S. military engagement in the region to respond to the crisis got a higher place on the U.S. strategic agenda for the continent.

According to IMF data, U.S.'s total export has tripled from \$7.6 billion in 2000 to \$21 billion in 2010. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimates the contribution of African oil in total U.S. import may rise up to 25 percent by 2015, which was approximately 18 percent in 2006. It is important to note that African oil is of higher quality, has lower sulphur content, is easily refinable and therefore more profitable in comparison to Gulf's oil. But the instability in Niger delta, Nigeria and other oil producing areas threaten U.S. interests in the region. These factors had led to a conceptual shift in the U.S. strategic view of Africa.

Beside, U.S. foreign policy analysts have focused attention on China's engagement in Africa in recent years, which has led some to question whether an AFRICOM might be part of a new contest for influence on the continent. The growing Chinese engagement in Africa has ushered the region into a competitive battlefield. The view widespread in Africa is that AFRICOM is a tool to erode China's growing influence on the continent. Some U.S. analysts have also described the prevailing ambience in the African region as a proxy economic Cold War, especially in the quest for resources between China and U.S.

Although, the U.S. forces have conventionally focused on fighting and winning wars, the security policy of US in Africa is to develop conflict prevention and management strategy to address threats through increased emphasis on security cooperation and capacity building of African countries. Besides, AFRICOM conducts an annual training exercise 'Africa Endeavor' to encourage interoperability and information exchange among African nations. Recently, 'Africa Endeavor-2010' was concluded from August 9-19, 2010 in Accra, Ghana, which was attended by 36 African nations.

However, there has been considerable apprehension over U.S. motivations for creating AFRICOM, and some Africans worry that the move represents a neo-colonial effort to dominate the region militarily. Reports of U.S. air strikes in Somalia (2007 & 2009), U.S. support for Ethiopia's military intervention in Somalia (2007) and more

recently U.S. supports to protest movement for political change (2011) in North African countries have added to those concerns. However, all Africans do not perceive AFRICOM as a negative development. They argue that increased American attention to the continent's problems would potentially bring increased resources, training and assistance, thus adding to security and stability.

A new phase in relations between Africa and U.S. has arrived in which the U.S. military assistance and training programs have steadily been on the rise. AFRICOM, however, seems as a strategic move in the post-9/11 period, which is sensitive to local needs and regional differences. Undoubtedly, it is about the projection of U.S. interests, but this doesn't mean that Africa is not being benefited at all. In fact, this new scramble for African market and natural resources particularly energy resources, has created a more competitive environment and strengthened the bargaining capacity of African countries.

However, it is important to understand that the lack of security prevents development from taking roots and thus perpetuating conflict and compromising development. To address these challenges an impetus is needed which must be come from within Africa itself and only then any external assistance would prove to be beneficial. Fortunately, it seems that AFRICOM has changed the traditional approaches of security and hopefully, its strategic missions will narrow the gap between security and development. Thus, it could render a platform, where greater African and U.S. engagement can decisively shape the continent's future. AFRICOM could be more effective by developing a commonality of purpose and mutual interest based on constant high-level dialogue, joint analysis efforts, and frequent recalibration of priorities and programs. Certainly, many obstacles are there and these should be removed by collective efforts and by understanding how AFRICOM would add real value to African security and stability. It is crucial for U.S.-Africa relationship to have a durable foundation that could stand the test of time.

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