

NEO-IMPERIALISM AND THE ANTI-SECURITY BLANKET IN AFRICA:

THE NEED FOR NUANCE ON THE DEBATE ABOUT AFRICOM

By Jason Warner

“Security” is the new dirty word in Africa.

Since the 2008 advent of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), not slight amounts of condemnation have rained down on its progenitors in the U.S. Department of Defense from U.S.-based scholars and activists. Two critiques have been most commonly forwarded: that AFRICOM is a neo-imperial enterprise and that it lamentably reformulates U.S. policy to engage with Africa primarily through a *security* lens, rather than through the historically pursued lens of *development*. Apart from their misreading of its “neo-imperial” nature, what these earnest friends of Africa have yet to explain is just *why* the securitization of U.S. policy toward Africa represents a regression rather than progression in U.S. policy formulation.

Critics claim that the creation of AFRICOM is a neocolonial enterprise, akin to the re-colonization of the continent by white imperial armies. But when nearly all of the African states – with the tentative exception of Liberia – publicly declined to host the command in 2008, the United States could not locate it on the continent. Consequently, it is now housed, without irony lost, in Stuttgart, Germany. Is this act not an embodiment of African states’ agency to recognize and resist external foreign influences they deem questionable? Forget location, say critics: the very decision to *create* a U.S. military base in Africa reeks of racist paternalism. Not so. Historically, the Department of Defense has divided the world into six regional commands. Prior to the creation of AFRICOM, oversight of Africa was not a stand-alone operation, but was parceled out amongst the three commands of EUCOM (United States European Command), CENTCOM (United States Central Command) and PACOM (United States Pacific Command).

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By extracting Africa from its former mishmash of regional command centers, the Department of Defense is affording the continent more, not less, respect. No longer is Africa viewed through the lens of, say, Europe – a neo-imperial concept in itself – but is prioritized as an equal world partner like all other regions. Ironically, the detractors who reject U.S. security assistance based solely on antiquated ideological grounds are reinforcing the colonizer-colonized schema they seek to dismantle.

More distressing to opponents than neocolonialism is the claim that the introduction of AFRICOM risks “securitizing” U.S. policy on the continent. States, even powerful ones, are concerned about their security, and the United States engages its closest allies – namely, NATO members – primarily via a framework of security. Preferable for the United States then, are allies that can help it protect its security, rather than ones who are content to absorb handouts in the form of development assistance. By engaging Africa as more than just a basket case, the United States is expressing its faith in the capacities of African states. Others fret that AFRICOM will facilitate interjections from the United States into the affairs of African states, meddling in continental conflicts whenever possible. To the contrary, AFRICOM is not an intervention-minded operation, but rather a training force to build the capacity of admittedly lacking African armies and navies. Rather than playing continental policeman, the United States is attempting to help Africa patrol itself; far from serving as an excuse for the United States to enter African conflicts, AFRICOM is an attempt to obviate such a need. Still others claim that the United States has “constructed” threats on the continent to justify entry. Were the July 2010 bombings in Uganda a farce? Did the Lord’s Resistance Army not actually rape some hundreds of women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? Has the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia finally succeeded in controlling more than four blocks of Mogadishu? Oddly, opponents characterize AFRICOM’s “securitizing [of] U.S. policy towards Africa” in a disparaging way, as if attempts at engendering security on a chronically insecure continent are something to be rued.

But perhaps most confusing is just why opponents view the *securitization* of U.S. engagements with the continent as less constructive than continued engagement by development. To be sure, what the continent needs are roads and schools, not more arms. But the reality is that development cannot happen in the absence of security; a reliable electric grid, for instance, means little when the specter of attack from rebel groups is a real one. More to the point, over the past fifty years, bilateral development efforts by the United States have admittedly done some amount of good on the continent, though few would argue that on the whole, the endeavor could be considered a resounding success. Poverty still reigns. Democracy remains elusive. Humans are still trafficked, drugs still flow, and preventable diseases still take lives needlessly. Near exclusive engagement via the lens of development has not worked, yet some of the continent’s most ardent supporters lobby passionately to stay the very course that has proven to produce little fruit. In the face of brighter (or at least, new) alternatives, they cling tight to the well-worn threads of a shabby, gray anti-security blanket.

AFRICOM cannot and will not solve the breadth of the continent’s problems. It remains to be seen whether it will even do more harm than good, and its critics on and off the continent should most certainly continue to voice their concerns about

it as candidly as possible. But taking jabs at the low-hanging fruits of assumed neo-imperialism and the antithetical critiques of anti-securitization is un-nuanced, overly simplified, and most importantly, counteractive. As AFRICOM is very much a project in formulation, the continent's friends need not continuously rehash the same tired critiques, but rather work to ensure that what does end up on the ground is as effective as possible. Dissenters: criticize away – but next time, leave your easy blanket statements at home. **Y**