South Africa and the U.S. AFRICOM: The Politics of a Tepid and Limited Relationship

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The U.S Africa Command (AFRICOM) was been established in 2007 as a military entity and is intended to assist African state and military actors to address their security needs. Although it is an extension of U.S. strategic interests on the African continent, the U.S. Department of Defence realises the challenge for AFRICOM to be seen as a cooperative and willing partner – a partner that offers needed services and resources, and supporting African security and military priorities with no presumption of having a privileged role in defining the African future. However, one of AFRICOM’s main challenges relates to the point that it has not been able to secure a firm partnership with South Africa as Africa’s economic powerhouse in the south. In this regard, South Africa has continuously taken a lukewarm, even sometimes cold approach, towards AFRICOM since its formation. The main aim of this paper is to examine and discuss South Africa’s political-military relations with AFRICOM and to assess the underlying reasons currently inhibiting AFRICOM from achieving a fully productive relationship with the South African government.

Introduction

AFRICOM was established in 2007 as an organ of the U.S. Department of Defence to work with African militaries with the view of strengthening military capabilities on the African continent through skills training, joint exercises and military operations when the need arises. The major aims are to promote military professionalism, improve operational capabilities and facilitate multinational cooperation to prevent conflict as well as facilitate military responses to emerging crises in Africa. In 2009, American security expert, Dan Henk, somewhat optimistically remarked that the context in which AFRICOM had come to see the light offered a new window of opportunity for Africans, Europeans and Americans to think together about the kinds of security activities and organisations that can best address a better African future, and to move away from American enthusiasm for solving problems in a unilateral manner. Henk even argued that Africans “are now far more interested in partners than patrons” and advised that AFRICOM should serve “as a willing partner, offering needed services and resources and fully able to support African priorities with no presumption of a privileged role in defining that future”.

Yet, not much of Henk’s optimism has materialised since 2007. Moreover, since its establishment AFRICOM has not been able to secure a firm partnership with South Africa – the one country it so wishes to collaborate and partner (being Africa’s economic powerhouse in the south) – as South Africa has continuously taken a lukewarm, even sometimes cold approach, towards AFRICOM since its formation. Despite the expectation that U.S.-South Africa relations would improve under President Barack Obama and that AFRICOM would

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benefit from that, this does not seem to have led to a better appreciation by South Africa of AFRICOM, as strikingly articulated by Greg Mills:

... [South Africa’s] relationship with international actors is another potential force multiplier in Africa. However, this has been hamstrung, to an extent, by the South African government’s schizophrenic relationship with the United States: perceived as a major trade and investment partner on the one hand, and with paranoia about imperial intentions on the other, viz. the hullabaloo over the creation of AFRICOM (the US Africa Command).³

This view is inarguably of much relevance with regard to any discussion on South Africa’s stance on AFRICOM. The significance of this view is underscored by AFRICOM’s former commander, General Carter Ham, who stated at the time of his retirement in 2013 that in his two-year tenure as AFRICOM commander he had visited 42 African states, but that he had never been invited to South Africa.⁴ His statement was pitted against AFRICOM’s view of Botswana as a “highly capable partner”.⁵

A slightly more positive attitude by the South African government towards AFRICOM has emerged when the AFRICOM Commander, General David Rodriguez, visited South Africa from 1 to 2 August 2013 to observe a combined joint exercise designed to increase the ability of both forces to respond to humanitarian disasters and peacekeeping operations in Africa. The exercise took place in the Eastern Cape Province cities of Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown, and East London between 4 July and 7 August 2014.

This raises the question: how could South Africa’s foreign policy stance in relation to AFRICOM be explained? To move towards a better understanding of South Africa’s “schizophrenic relationship” with the U.S. and the fact that South Africa (and its military) has thus far been lukewarm towards AFRICOM, it is instructive to re-examine the contours of South Africa’s foreign policy.

A further question is whether a sound relationship between South Africa and AFRICOM is strongly advisable, specifically given South Africa’s pivotal role in the development of the African Standby Force (ASF) and taking into consideration that the operationalisation of the ASF has proved to be immensely challenging. These matters will be analysed and discussed in the sections below. First, for a sound understanding of South Africa’s perceptions and views on AFRICOM it is imperative to grasp the main priority areas of South Africa’s foreign policy which will be analysed and discussed in the section below.

The priority areas of South African foreign policy

In 2012, the National Planning Commission of South Africa – probably the most important statutory body involved in the country’s planning for the future – released its National Development Plan: Vision for 2030, for public consumption. Chapter 7 of this document, titled ‘Positioning South Africa in the world’, puts matters in perspective. The document states that “the shift of global power towards developing countries provides South Africa with an opportunity to maximize its regional and international influence over the next 20 to 30 years”. It also explicitly pronounces that the South African government’s regional and global policy-making stance should be aimed at improving the country’s position and “functional integration”, firstly in the region, secondly on the African continent, and thirdly among developing countries.⁷
In its *White Paper on South Africa’s Foreign Policy*, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) pronounces those foreign policy principles that should be clearly grasped for an understanding of the country’s foreign policy. These matters are: the primacy of the African continent and the Southern African Development Community (SADC); South Africa’s commitment to South-South cooperation; the centrality of multilateralism in South Africa’s foreign policy outlook; the need for consolidating relations with the North; and the strengthening of South Africa’s bilateral social, political and economic relations with actors in various parts of the world.\(^8\)

These matters have been outlined and clarified in the *Strategic Plan 2012-2017* of DIRCO where it is stated that the focus of South Africa’s international relations programmes revolves around six priority areas, namely: to enhance the African agenda and sustainable development; to strengthen the political and economic integration of SADC; to strengthen South-South relations; to strengthen relations with strategic formations of the North; to participate in the global system of governance; and to strengthen bilateral political and economic relations.\(^9\)

In essence, South Africa’s foreign policy priorities can be summarised as follows:

- Centralising and prioritising its interests South Africa’s immediate African neighbourhood and the wider continent;
- Working with countries of the South to address shared challenges of underdevelopment;
- Promoting global equity and social justice;
- Working with countries of the North to develop a true and effective partnership for a better world; and
- Strengthening the multilateral system.

Against this background, Narnia Bohler-Muller\(^{10}\) rightly describes the overarching principle in South Africa’s foreign policy as Afrocentricity – something that coincides with South Africa’s role on the world stage as being the driver of the ‘African Agenda’. The idea of such an ‘agenda’ is the basis for a strategy through which South Africa depicts its profile and enhances its foreign policy identity as a role-player with interests inseparable from those of the rest of the continent and thus forms an integral part of the African continent. This objective can be traced back to former South African president Thabo Mbeki’s ‘African Renaissance’ as a main driver of South African foreign policy which the South African government is – at least implicitly – still pursuing in terms of its foreign policy outlook.

South Africa has retained its links with its traditional trade partners in the North. However, it is important to note that South Africa is officially committed to utilising bilateral and multilateral engagements to strengthen relations with actors in the developed North with the explicit aim of advancing the African Agenda and the “developmental Agenda of the South”.\(^{11}\)

In sum, all official documents on South Africa’s foreign policy indicate its policy position as being based on three pillars. In simplified terms, the first is to work towards greater African integration, using SADC as a regional instrument. The second is to promote the African voice in world affairs through the AU as a continental instrument. The third is to be active in South-South multilateralism, in particular via its membership of the BRICS formation of countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in the global context. Thus, in promoting its African Agenda, South Africa views itself both a leader and bridge-builder on the continent.
and pursues its goals through the said organisations with BRICS as the most influential in the macro context.12

The above-mentioned exposition raises the question: How does South Africa’s official foreign policy framework impact on the country’s approach towards AFRICOM? After all, Afrocentricity in South Africa’s foreign policy does not – explicitly or implicitly – imply an anti-US foreign policy outlook per se, nor discourages cooperation with AFRICOM in any way. This will be explored in the discussion below with a view to further understanding of South Africa’s views on AFRICOM. Before South Africa’s foreign policy is analysed in more depth, the following section will first focus on the basic framework of AFRICOM as an organ of the U.S. Department of Defence, as well as on some recently recorded political viewpoints on AFRICOM in the South African context that are of relevance to the topic under review.

U.S. interests on the African continent and ideological views on AFRICOM

AFRICOM is evidently an extension of U.S. strategic interests on the African continent, but at the same time, the U.S. realises the challenge for AFRICOM to be viewed as a cooperative and willing partner – a partner that offers needed services and resources and supporting African priorities with no presumption of having a privileged role in defining the African future.13 AFRICOM’s command approach focuses on priority countries, regional organisations, and programmes and initiatives that enhance and build institutional and operational defence capabilities and strengthen strategic partnerships. Cooperative security arrangements are seen as key in addressing transnational threats, and in a practical context, AFRICOM utilises operations, exercises, and related security cooperation engagements to build the capacity of regional and sub-regional organisations and to foster multilateral cooperation. The above-mentioned relates to both peacekeeping and combat operations.14 In the words of General Carter Ham: “Our integrated approach seeks to address the greatest near-term threats to our national security while simultaneously building long-term partnerships and fostering regional cooperation”.15

The priorities of AFRICOM have been broken down into four areas of responsibility. The first is that of ‘countering violent extremist organisations’. According to AFRICOM, three violent extremist organisations are of particular concern to U.S. interests in Africa: al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), active in northern and western Africa; Boko Haram in Nigeria; and al-Shabaab in Somalia. Although each organisation is believed to pose a threat to U.S. interests and regional stability, the growing collaboration of these organisations is posing a heightened danger.

With regard to al-Shabaab, AFRICOM’s partner organisations are the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), as well as the Ethiopian, and Somali forces. While al-Shabaab is less effective, the group is still dangerous and capable of conducting unconventional attacks to disrupt AMISOM operations and the Somali government. In West Africa AFRICOM has been working with the Economic Community of West African States and in Nigeria specifically, where Boko Haram is active, AFRICOM engages with the Nigerian Armed Forces to support their military capabilities. The second area of responsibility is ‘maritime security and counter illicit trafficking’. In short, this relates to piracy and armed robbery at sea in the western Indian Ocean and Gulf of Guinea. From an American point of view, maritime security is not only a critical enabler of trade and economic development, but also vital to countering terrorism and illicit trafficking. In addition, elevated insurance rates and shipping costs result in increased costs to consumers.
Against this background, AFRICOM and its Naval and Marine components work closely with the U.S. Coast Guard in the execution of two primary maritime security programmes, namely the African Partnership Station programme (APS) and the African Maritime Law Enforcement Partnership (AMLEP). These programmes have made contributions to the strengthening of regional maritime capabilities and interoperability in the sense that African maritime forces use the skills gained through participation in AMLEP and APS to conduct maritime operations against pirates. By collaborating with individual nations, AFRICOM supports among others the development of the Liberian Coast Guard and renovated the coast guard’s pier to enable operations. AFRICOM also constructed a new Senegalese maritime operation centre and supported training and assistance to the staff. They also offered advanced training to the Cape Verde Counter Narcotics and Maritime Operations Centre and further assisted Cape Verde and Senegal in developing maritime operations centres with a view to facilitating the interdiction of suspect vessels.16

The third area of responsibility is ‘strengthening defence capabilities’. This means that AFRICOM is actively supporting African states undergoing democratic transitions by assisting in the development and professionalisation of their militaries relating to respect for civilian authority, the rule of law, and their responsibilities to securing their borders and combating mutual threats, including transnational terrorism. One example is the strengthening of partnerships with the armed forces of Libya and South Sudan, which are both countries that went through major political transitions.17

‘Strengthening defence capabilities’ also extends to stable governments where AFRICOM builds enduring relationships with strategic partners, specifically partner nation capacities to address shared security challenges. At least eight partner nations have engaged in such relationships, namely Botswana, Ghana, Liberia, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia.18

The last area of responsibility is that of ‘preparing and responding to crises’. This simply relates to American readiness to respond to crises across the continent, specifically where the safety and security of American citizens are at stake. It also relates to U.S. Embassy operations and the evacuation of U.S. Embassy personnel and American citizens.19

In practical terms, at least 5 000 U.S. troops are operating on the African continent. The main focus of AFRICOM’s is the vast regions surrounding the Sahara desert, the Maghreb to the north and the Sahel to the south. This reason is simply that these areas have become a sanctuary for some of today’s radical Islamic movements and AFRICOM’s support and direct operations are squarely falling into AFRICOM’s ‘countering violent extremist organisations’.20

At this point of the discussion it should be mentioned that the case of South Africa as one of AFRICOM’s strategic partnerships calls for closer scrutiny. After all, General Ham’s statement at the time of his retirement that in his two-year tenure as AFRICOM commander he had visited 42 African states, but that he had never been invited to South Africa is of considerable significance. At the same time, it should be noted that his successor, General David Rodriguez, travelled to South Africa to observe training events between 1 to 2 August 2013, as part of Exercise Shared Accord. This was a combined U.S.–South African military exercise designed to increase the ability of the forces of both counties to respond to humanitarian disasters and peacekeeping operations. During the exercise General Rodriguez remarked that: “… I was able to observe the Shared Accord exercise hosted by the South African National Defence Force and to meet with their leadership to get a better sense for security and defence related issues.
The partnership we have with South Africa is an important one, as our nations share a number of security interests focused on bringing peace and stability to the whole of Africa.”

So, where does that leave U.S.-South Africa relations in general? Nicolas Cook’s assessment of U.S.-South Africa bilateral relations as “generally close” and based on shared goals in the areas of socioeconomic growth and development as well as mutual support for democratic values is accurate and serves as an authoritative barometer of their relations. Yet, he also remarks that among other factors “there are occasional differences over foreign policy issues”. His observation that “South Africa often backs developing country positions that may be at odds with U.S. interests”, is of special interest and relevance, as well as his remark that South Africa has advocated caution with respect to U.S.-backed external interventions in international crises, such as the cases of Iraq and Libya. He also rightly points out that South Africa has taken positions and views on Cuba and the Palestinian cause that are at odds with those of the U.S. 21

However, Cook also correctly argues that South Africa tends to concur with the U.S. relating to most African political or military crises, and on major aspects of issues in the fields of climate change and non-proliferation. The U.S. and South Africa further cooperate in the areas of development and defence, in addition to having close trade and investment ties.22 On the other hand, whatever can be said about U.S.-South Africa relations, General Carter Ham correctly observed that “[t]here remains a high degree of scepticism within South Africa”.23 In 2012, former ANC Deputy Secretary General Thandi Modise was even quoted as having said that there are some leaders within SADC who “want to host people who want to hurt us. They think as long as they can get funding from these western [sic.] people they are fine. But I can tell you that we are not happy at all.” This was a clear reference to the Government of Botswana which for years has been suspected of being willing to host an AFRICOM military base while key Southern African states, including South Africa, were uncomfortable with having United States forces based in Africa for fear that the U.S. might be seeking “to take control of the continent”.24

In a broader South African context, mixed views on AFRICOM have been reported. This ranges from views that military cooperation between the U.S. and Africa is not “developing a win-win-situation”25 to a barrage of radical utterances that the U.S. does not respect the sovereignty of African states and the territorial integrity of the continent, and that the U.S. wants its own interests to prevail over those of Africa. Thus Africa requires or needs no assistance from AFRICOM. In the words of a former member of Parliament from the leftist Pan Africanist Congress:26

Africans have a painful history of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, racism and colonialism by nations that claim to be ‘civilised’ but have behaviour that is contrary to civilisation. They dehumanised Africa’s people and saw nothing wrong with that. They have never shown any remorse for their inhuman deeds to Africans or offered any reparations for the colossal damage they inflicted on Africans. America’s persistence to impose Africom on Africa proves this beyond reasonable doubt... America and NATO have the worst records in their dealings with the African people. Patrice Lumumba was assassinated with the connivance of the US and Belgian governments. Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown with the assistance of America’s CIA. In recent years the American government and its British ally have plotted ‘regime change’ in Zimbabwe.
In response to scholarly views that AFRICOM’s problems could be attributed to weak communication and resultant misunderstandings, Laurie Nathan correctly asserts that the adverse response to the U.S. Department of Defence’s initiative with AFRICOM should be understood in the context of a deep-rooted anti-imperialist posture that is associated with the historical and contemporary realities of politics on the African continent – an argument that is undoubtedly of great relevance to a sound understanding of South Africa’s foreign policy position regarding AFRICOM. This will be analysed and theorised below.

**Analysing and theorising the contours of South Africa’s foreign policy**

Adam Habib points out that South Africa’s contemporary foreign policy cannot be understood outside an explanation of its post-apartheid political transition. Its actors and agents, the ideas that are driving them, the interests they articulate and represent, are all crucially informed by and impacted upon by the democratic transition of the country in 1994. Two foundational characteristics define this democratic transition. Firstly, as one of the last of the ‘anti-colonial’ transitions led by an African nationalist leadership, South Africa and its foreign policy functionaries have been driven (and are still driven) by the goal of pursuing or achieving racial equality in both the local and global context. Secondly, the transition in South Africa took place at a time when a growing desire among developing world actors emerged for a new configuration of power in the global order that would facilitate an enabling environment for South-South and African development.

After 1994, the nationalism of the Mbeki administration especially conditioned South Africa’s foreign policy parameters into a broader South-South solidarity. In the regional context, this imprint on the foreign policy of South Africa manifested in South Africa’s prioritisation of the Africa continent, which has been described as Afro-centricity in the preceding discussion. The nationalism of the Mbeki government further manifested in an “almost messianic zeal” to modernise the continent through a focus on political stability and economic growth. Most important, it coincided with an insistence in South Africa’s foreign policy not to be seen to be dictated to by the West – something that also influenced U.S.-South Africa relations with specific reference to AFRICOM.

From a theoretical point of view, this paper supports both the rationalist and constructivist views of the relations between norms and material interest and/or power, as explained in the work of Yoichiro Sato and Keiko Hirata. In accordance with the rationalist view, states tend to follow international or domestic norms when these norms serve their national interest, and where these norms are supported by powerful states or the dominant political group at domestic level. In accordance with the constructivist view, states may in the absence of material interests and power relations adopt norms as the process of socialisation develops; i.e. where policymakers are socialised into a particular norm or normative orientation.

For conventional constructivists, the central concern in understanding state behaviour (and foreign policy for that matter) is to point out how identity and associated historical or cultural context – such as the democratic transition in the case of South Africa – determine the content of a state’s interest. In an attempt to shed light on Pretoria’s foreign policy by exploring the relationship between ideas and interests, Nathan contends that Pretoria’s foreign policy stance of recent years should be understood in the light of its “anti-imperialist core”, which became evident in the foreign policy approach of the Thabo Mbeki administration. This anti-imperialist paradigm revolved around the following themes:
The “iniquitous” political and economic power imbalance between the North and the South, which is to the detriment of poor nations;

The need to reform the UN, the Bretton Woods institutions and other international organisations in order to address issues of imbalance and resultant inequities;

The domineering and hypocritical approach of Western states that use the above-mentioned organisations to “chide” and “bully” developing countries; and

South-South cooperation and solidarity as a form of collective strength.  

As far as the U.S. is concerned, Henk argues that the anti-imperialist stance has much to do with matters relating to Washington’s unsympathetic attitude to the African liberation movements in recent decades, its exceptionalism in relation to the International Criminal Court, its embrace of dictatorial regimes in Africa and beyond, and its support for Israel despite its illegal occupation of Palestine. The above-mentioned becomes of even greater political-economic significance in view of the fact that South Africa has been formally admitted as a member of BRIC(S) in December 2010.

In a critique of South Africa’s foreign policy, veteran South African political scientist Gerrit Olivier, forthrightly refers to South Africa’s current foreign policy approach as a “blinkered obsession with ideology” and “a contrived anti-western scepticism”, which has led to an “uneasy relationship with the European Union” and “bias against ‘Eurocentrism’” pitted against South Africa’s “idealisation of China and the ‘global South’”.

In this context, Olivier’s reference to a “rejection of the West on ideological premises” by the South African Government can certainly be applied to the country’s lukewarm approach to AFRICOM. Olivier’s observations should also be read in the broader context of seemingly deteriorating relations between the South African and the British governments after the Office of the South African President called off a visit to the UK towards the end of 2014 in view of differences over VIP protection for Pres. Jacob Zuma during the visit. This seems to have brought relations between the two countries to an “all-time low”.

From a theoretical point of view, Amitav Acharya points to the concept of ‘norm subsidiarity’ as a useful tool to explain the role of developing countries in world politics. Norm subsidiarity is the process whereby local or regional actors develop rules or create norms with a view to “preserve their authority from dominance, neglect, violation, or abuse by more powerful actors”. In this regard, there has been a tendency among developing world role-players to question existing international norms as a response to the ‘tyranny’ of higher-level institutions in global governance. Specifically, role-players in the developing world resort to norm subsidiarity when confronted with what they perceive as great power hypocrisy. This is when they witness a violation of cherished global norms by higher-level institutions and powerful actors. An important example would be if the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of states is violated. Acharya points out that Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, since his appearance on the political landscape in the 1950s, led the formulation of subsidiarity norms in the Pan-African context. He did so by especially stressing non-intervention by outside powers in African affairs. Norm subsidiarity in the Pan-African framework also included the non-participation of Africans in superpower-led alliances or defence pacts. After Nkrumah’s departure from the political scene the African normative order continued to reject superpower intervention and to espouse regional autonomy, which currently, is also the normative order in which South Africa’s foreign policy is embedded.

Still, the question remains: is it not sensible and advisable for South Africa and other African states to collaborate with AFRICOM, especially given the pressing logistical challenges facing
African militaries with regard to the operationalisation of the ASF? If so, where does that leave the ideological imperative of African problems requiring African solutions and that the ASF be earmarked as the preferred, primary military organ to address Africa’s security challenges throughout the continent?

South Africa, the African Standby Force and AFRICOM

The above-mentioned critique by Olivier is of the utmost relevance to South Africa’s foreign policy stance on AFRICOM. Whereas AFRICOM’s command approach focuses on priority countries, regional organisations, and programmes that will enhance and build defence institutional and operational capabilities and strengthen strategic partnerships, the ideological leanings of the South African government does not seem to allow the country to commit itself ‘fully’ to working with AFRICOM. Certainly, this has repercussions in the sense that, as much as South Africa is Africa’s economic powerhouse on the continent because of its strong private sector and sound constitutional dispensation, South Africa is hamstrung by many limitations to play the role of military ‘lead nation’ in stabilising the African continent. Issues pertaining to the strategic and financial management of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), its force design and configuration, and the human resources situation in the SANDF, are putting considerable strain on the South African military in its role as a foreign policy instrument and a peacekeeper on the continent. Mills points out that political expectations associated with South Africa’s role as a continental peacekeeper continued to rise over the past decade, but that the budget for the military simply could not keep pace: “What is at issue here is not the costs of peace mission deployments, which are (mostly) covered by additional Treasury funding, but the cost of day-to-day maintenance of main equipment, infrastructure, training, administration and force preparation.”39 Put differently, there is a persistent disconnection between the defence mandate of the SANDF on the one hand and government expectations on the other. In fact, inadequate resource allocation has eroded South Africa’s defence capabilities to the point where the SANDF is “unable to fully deliver its constitutional responsibility”.40

Another matter of concern is South Africa’s pivotal role within the AU’s long-desired ASF. The ASF still represents a serious political intention on the part of African leaders to set up a multi-national military force empowered to intervene in serious conflicts around the troubled continent. When political and social tensions result in violent conflict, there is a need for the rapid deployment of a stabilisation force or peace support mission, as was evident in the recent cases of the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan. However, the target of working towards an AU rapid deployment capacity within the ASF has, proved to be a major challenge. The target of operationalising the ASF was initially set for 2010 but the implementation was postponed to 201541 – and even this target date is unlikely to be met.

Currently, no organization on the African continent is capable of assembling a rapid deployment taskforce within 14 days. In fact, only a handful of countries and organisations internationally are capable of deploying at such speeds.42 Furthermore, more than a strong political will and commitment are needed to provide this kind of response and sustain operations over time since stabilisation or peace support operations are immensely costly affairs played out in messy theatres. Adequate funding for airlift resources, to mention only one key issue, is crucial in rapid deployment and indeed a cause for concern in the African context. Without an airlift capability, virtually no stabilising or peacekeeping operation is possible. At this point in time, very few African states have any strategic airlift capabilities worth mentioning. Even the South African Air Force is currently facing a major challenge to replace its obsolete strategic airlift capability.
Apparently frustrated with the lack of progress towards establishing an ASF, a number of African states decided to initiate an interim measure by creating the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis (ACIRC) in January 2013. ACIRC is in essence a voluntary arrangement, where countries make themselves available on a voluntary basis under the auspices of the AU to address the rapid response deficit. It basically boils down to a coalition-of-the-willing that will deploy to conflict areas under a lead-nation with AU approval.43

According to reports, it seems that some African states – of which South Africa is at the forefront in diplomatic and military circles – have come to view the ACIRC as a more realistic and credible vehicle for future deployments than the ASF. This explains the fact that South Africa has stepped into a leading role at the political-diplomatic level within the AU framework of ongoing discussions and this can have a major impact on the future of the ASF. The challenge though is that the ACIRC does not truly address some of the key pitfalls that the ASF has faced all along. In this regard, the issue of funding the ACIRC is key – especially given the fact that relevant AU member states will be expected to shoulder the troops and financial costs of ACIRC deployments.44 However, the problem is that not even the potential locomotives of Africa’s development and stability – countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria and Egypt – have the commensurate military capacity and the latter all face considerable domestic security challenges that are either a greater priority than security challenges elsewhere, or exceed the security capabilities they can muster.45

Realising the above-mentioned shortcomings, the AU engaged the European Union (EU) in recent years and hence the latter has increasingly become a recognisable security actor on the African continent. In fact, so far the EU has deployed 16 peacekeeping operations while it has also been involved in conflict mediation, and is the single most important donor to the African peace and security architecture. In this context, a strategic partnership between the AU and the EU has emerged, namely the Joint Africa-EU Strategy or JAES, which has institutionalised inter-continental relations between the relevant European and African actors.46

Where does this leave AFRICOM and what is the connection with U.S.-South Africa relations? From a U.S. point of view, it was hoped that AFRICOM could become an important vehicle to sustain U.S. involvement in Africa and to contribute towards a more positive image of the U.S. and its diplomatic and military profile in Africa. Furthermore, although AFRICOM’s focus since its establishment has been mainly on the countering of violent extremist organisations and not so much on conventional peacekeeping matters in Africa, it should be noted that the U.S. has come to recognise the need to enhance peacekeeping capabilities on the African continent.47 AFRICOM is also explicitly committed to “strengthening defence capabilities” on the African continent, which could – theoretically – be a way of cementing the existing partnerships in matters of U.S.-African security co-operation. Moreover, what should be noted is that the manifestation of religious terrorism on the African continent (e.g. Nigeria, Somalia and Mali) has increasingly posed challenges to the AU, and this makes AFRICOM of great relevance to present-day African security challenges. However, it seems that the AU has no strategic arrangement with AFRICOM and that the contribution of the latter is limited to cooperation with specific African militaries – including the South African military to some extent – through the strengthening of capabilities by means of skills training and joint exercises.

This does not imply an insignificant role for AFRICOM on the African continent, but reality dictates that political and ideological sentiments on the part of South Africa (and other nations) are still major factors inhibiting or even denying the organ a significant role in conflict...
management on the African continent. It also implies that there is no explicit or active role for AFRICOM in the AU-ASF framework in the current context, and that South Africa certainly does not wish to serve as a political-diplomatic entrance point for AFRICOM to act as a role-player in stabilising African conflicts. Nor does South Africa facilitate AFRICOM to assume any direct or pertinent role in the continent’s peacekeeping requirements.

**Evaluation and conclusion**

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos\(^{48}\) states that during Thabo Mbeki’s second term (2004–2008), there was a shift in South Africa’s foreign policy identity and profile. This shift boiled down to a shift from South Africa’s immediate post-1994 identity and profile as a bridge-builder between the North and the South to its more recent profile and identity as an African and a developing state committed to eliminating ‘global apartheid’ in both the economic and political terrains.

The White Paper on South Africa’s Foreign Policy confirms the above-mentioned observation by explicitly stating in the foreword of the document that South Africa’s evolving international engagement is based on two central tenets, namely: Pan-Africanism and South-South solidarity. It is clearly stated that “South Africa recognises itself as an integral part of the African continent and therefore understands its national interest as being intrinsically linked to Africa’s stability, unity, and prosperity”.\(^{49}\) Few pronouncements of South Africa’s foreign policy direction are clearer than the following: “Since the birth of democratic South Africa in 1994, the country has prioritised an Afro-centric foreign policy rooted in national liberation, the quest for African renewal, and efforts to negate the legacy of colonialism as well as neo-colonialism”.\(^{50}\)

This does not mean that South Africa has turned its back on its Western partners. The White Paper makes it clear that South Africa and Europe will continue to enjoy strategic and multifaceted political, economic and social cooperation, and that close, substantial and fruitful relations are still valued. However – and this is of importance – cooperation is now firmly attached to the advancement of economic development in Africa, as well as support for the continent’s peace and security architecture. In brief, economic relations between South Africa and Europe will continue, but should be “in support of the Africa Agenda”. South Africa must also ensure that the trade relationship between Europe and Africa should be supportive of the “regional integration agenda as well as its development objectives”.\(^{51}\) As far as North America is concerned, it is similarly pronounced that South Africa intends to continue “[engaging] the USA and Canada to meet development commitments to Africa”. The U.S. and Canada are considered important role-players in peacekeeping as well as post-conflict reconstruction and development efforts in Africa, through the multilateral UN agencies and on a bilateral basis. Against this background, South Africa intends to continue to urge these powers to put their support behind the AU peace and security objectives.\(^{52}\)

In view of the above, the case of South Africa and AFRICOM (once again) underscores ambiguity running through South African foreign policy. On the one hand, South Africa maintains links with AFRICOM, but does so in a manner that reminds of a SADC discussion on AFRICOM in 2007 where SADC members concluded that it is better if the U.S. were involved with Africa from a distance.\(^{53}\) This can be explained by the role of norm subsidiarity in South African foreign policy. It shows that on the one hand, South Africa officially supports an international norm system where actors on the African continent, including South Africa, “champion collaboration, cooperation and building partnerships over conflict”. On the other hand, South Africa, operating in and inspired by the regional AU framework, has come to view

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\(^{48}\) Sidiropoulos, Elizabeth. “South Africa’s Foreign Policy.”

\(^{49}\) Idem.

\(^{50}\) Idem.

\(^{51}\) Idem.

\(^{52}\) Idem.

\(^{53}\) Idem.
any form of Western intervention on the African continent with increasing scepticism and as abuse by more powerful actors in the form of acts of dominance and violation. The official South African response and norm dynamics in the South African foreign relations context strongly coincide with what is referred to in the scholarly literature on norm subsidiarity as the challenging or resisting effect of norm subsidiarity.\textsuperscript{54} Through subsidiary norms, local actors offer normative resistance to higher-level institutions or great powers. At the same time, local actors – such as the South African government – claim the right to formulate rules and deal with local or regional issues without intervention by any higher-level authority. Obviously, this is of relevance to the case of AFRICOM and its (potential) role on the African continent, most specifically in relation to South Africa’s views on AFRICOM and what is described by Mills as “imperial intentions” associated with AFRICOM.\textsuperscript{55}

Still, there can be no doubt that African militaries indeed stand to benefit from what AFRICOM offers in terms of military-diplomatic opportunities and tangible means. Specifically, this pertains to the countering of violent rebel or extremist organisations, strengthening maritime security and other defence capabilities, maintaining strategic posture, and preparing for and responding to crises.

This being said, much about the future of AFRICOM will depend on whether the U.S. can better convince actors on the African continent that a genuine interest exist to terminate or reduce conflict, insecurity and underdevelopment in Africa through the provision of sustained assistance to African countries. This implies that a belief should take root among the critical mass of African role-players – including South Africa – that AFRICOM is more than an agency through which only the U.S. stands to gain and that AFRICOM is not narrowly aimed at pursuing U.S. strategic interests on the African continent. It also implies a conviction that the U.S. does not want to impose its political will on Africa or that it wants to dominate the continent. At the same time, African role-players should understand that the U.S., like any other nation, uses its resources to promote national interests and that its actions are not necessarily motivated by altruism. This means that a balance needs to be struck in which African states – including South Africa – recognise that the U.S. will only play an active role when doing so is serving its national interest.

Thus far, ideological leanings in South Africa’s foreign policy have not facilitated any strong working relationship with AFRICOM, while AFRICOM has probably also been seen as camouflageing militarism in the guise of humanitarianism. Thus American efforts in Africa through AFRICOM have suffered the required legitimacy and AFRICOM is falling short from playing a truly substantial role, or in the words of Henk, having “a fully productive relationship”\textsuperscript{56} with African partners in dealing with or addressing the security challenges of the African continent. In the meantime, AFRICOM can only rely on bilateral links with specific African states and capitalise on the situation that communication and coordination on security matters between African actors (including the position of AFRICOM) are often weak and uncoordinated.\textsuperscript{57}

In the final analysis, another set of dynamics could have a most important impact on the future of South Africa’s links with AFRICOM. This relates to South Africa’s membership of BRICS. Observers have already started to ask what role BRICS could play in linking the BRICS development agenda to that of African peace and security. The BRICS Bank has been launched and it is argued that South Africa might have access to new sources of finances for peace building on the African continent. The most important matter here is that traditional northern donors are at present, providing a substantial portion of aid, but that “South Africa and the rest
of the continent are working towards diminishing reliance on these donors”. Needless to say, this might have an important impact on future security management matters on the African continent and specifically influences AFRICOM’s desire to establish a stronger relationship with the South African government, which remains a most important and influential political, diplomatic and military actor on the continent.

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