Chapter 10

The African Union and the United States: The Pursuit of a Strategic Partnership

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Introduction

The African Union (AU) has been one of the key organisations and most important actors in the interstices of collective diplomacy, multilateralism, and inter-regionalism for the past 20 years. From a regionalist perspective, Africa's future largely depends on the effectiveness of the African Union Commission (AUC), because it negotiates and implements international agreements on various issues, especially on security and development. These two are very important, given the view that security and/or political stability are a prerequisite for African development and prosperity. It is imperative to highlight that the AU is a relatively nascent organisation, representing the world's most fledgling nation states, in terms of statemaking and nationbuilding[1]. Hence, Africa faces two challenges. The first is how to catch up with the rest of the world, in terms of security and development. The second is how to reconcile any projects on institutions or nationbuilding

1 This is to differentiate the process of state formation and nationbuilding in Africa from the breaking up of states in Eastern Europe (some of which were part of the Soviet Union), and those in Asia and the Pacific, which gained independence from others even though nationbuilding and statemaking had a longer history. This does not imply that postcolonial experiences in Europe and Asia were less significant than those in Africa.

with the rest of the world. Hence, the AU is inadvertently thrust into a theatre of international partnerships to achieve its goals.

It is imperative to clarify that international partnerships were not imposed on Africans. Africans pursued partnerships since the early days of African multilateralism. During the early days of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), African technocrats settled on developing Africa using a "tripartite approach…involving Arab money, African resources, and Western technology" (Gassama 2013). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the merits and demerits of this approach, but this 'dependent' path represents a critical juncture from which African multilateralism has hardly deviated since the first experimentation with the Africa-Arab League Partnership of 1975/6. Efforts to foster African agency were evident, starting with the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 and culminating in the somewhat hesitant adoption of the Conference on Security, Stability, Development, and Co-operation in Africa (CSSDCA) in the late 1990s (Akuffo 2011).

However, the verve for international partnerships retroceded and resurged under the auspices of the AU. Both the Constitutive Act of the AU – under Article 3(*e, i, n*) – and the Protocol on the Peace and Security Council (PSC Protocol) – under Article 7(*k*) – highlighted the significance of international partnerships (AU 2000). However, the implicit claim of African agency should not mute the *international partners*' direct interest in the "partnerships". Foreign states and organisations have a direct interest in "helping" a struggling and underdeveloped continent, such as Africa. Erstwhile colonisers, among others, have taken advantage of this milieu and reinvented bilateral programmes and passed them off as pillars and entities of these partnerships (Bagoyoko & Gibert 2009). Currently, the most powerful states such as the United States (US), Russia, and China are viciously agitating for influence and hegemony in Africa. These three have strategic partnerships with Africa through bilateral agreements with African countries, regional economic commissions (RECs), and the continental body, the AU. The partnership between the US and the AU is one of the most intriguing case studies, given its intricacy, controversy, and occasional melodramatic fits.

This chapter examines the US-Africa strategic partnership. The primary argument in this chapter is that the US-Africa partnership has grown, but largely outside the framework of the AU partnership. The partnership has gyrated in and out of the framework due to contestable preferences around issues on African agencies. It attempts to assess the nature of US-Africa relations within the AU framework. However, as the next two sections demonstrate, the partnership with the US has been the most difficult to sustain within the AU's framework in the last 20 years. The chapter notes that the US, unlike other international actors, has resisted the major institutionalisation of the partnership. It thereby examines three major aspects of the partnerships that exist both within and beyond the AU framework: politics and security, trade and development, and social relationships. It is imperative to highlight that, although the AU forms the basis and scope of discussion in this book, the AU is primarily a conduit for reducing transactional costs of bilateral, trans-regional, and inter-regional co-operation.

This chapter unfolds in three parts. The first part contextualises international partnerships as an aspect of international diplomacy and African agency. Thereafter, it appreciates the existence of these partnerships in the light of the unfolding coloniality and imperialism. In the second part, the chapter examines the role of agents or processes driving the AU's international partnerships. It pays special attention to the role of members of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government (AHSG) and the office of the Chairperson of the AU. It also highlights and describes the processes through which the various actors seek to exert agency. The third part examines the performance of the AU's international partnerships in the last two decades, and concludes, offering some important recommendations.

The African Union and African Agency in International Affairs

When discussing or commemorating the two decades of the existence of the AU, especially *vis-à-vis* its relationship with the

US, it is fitting to apply the notion of agency to the discourse. The most used definition of agency, which was derived from Colin Wight, posits that agency is the ability to do something (Brown 2012). When extrapolated to the notion of African agency, this is rooted in intentionality, accountability, and subjectivity (Blaauw 2015). However, I have argued elsewhere that African agency is "agency slack" (Gwatiwa 2022). This is not a polemic or exegetical overstretch, but a simple acknowledgement that African actors, including the AU, have limited power in international politics. Indeed, regarding the relationship with the US, the AU is dealing with a powerful country that has little respect for the agency.

The AU's partnership with the US exhibits agency slack, which refers to an independent action by one party that is undesirable to other contracting parties. Agency slack takes two forms: "shirking", which is when an agent minimises the effort it exerts; or "slippage", wherein an agent shifts policy away from a preferred outcome to its preferences (Hawkins *et al* 2006). This chapter holds that the US-AU partnership exhibits substantial slippage. To understand these dynamics, it is important to understudy how the US approaches regionalism, particularly because it is not used by regional organisations. Historically, it has been reluctant to promote regionalism within its region. It has largely remained ambivalent on regionalism, as evident by its membership of the Organisation of American States (OAS). The goals of the organisation are at odds with the enduring Monroe Doctrine.[2] The chapter subsequently highlights how difficult it was for the US to adjust to a relatively new organisation, which sought to minimise or limit American influence, in a region where Chinese and Russian influences were increasing.

2 The Monroe Doctrine, first articulated by US President James Monroe in 1823, emphasises that the European powers – specifically the United Kingdom – were obligated to respect the Western hemisphere as the United States's sphere of interest and influence.

Origins and Motivations for the US-Africa Partnership: History on Repeat

US-Africa relations predate the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the US State Department and the AUC. The origin of this partnership has a binary explanation. The first relates to the evolution of the United States' "Africa policy". The second perspective relates to the US's role in a post-hegemonic world. The two can provide an understanding of the nature of this partnership. The evolution of the US "Africa policy" was problematic. This is attributable to the fact that the US State Department and the US Department of Defence (DOD) had a lackadaisical policy approach towards Africa. When the State Department established its Bureau of African Affairs in 1958, "the top echelons of the Africa Bureau…were dominated by European specialists who continued to approach the continent from a Eurocentric point of view (Schraeder 1994).

Similarly, the word 'Africa' was not introduced into the DOD policy and structures until 1952. These two inadvertently shaped (or warped) perceptions of Africa among US policymakers meant that the problems of racialism, prejudice, and policy errors were ingrained into the US policy towards Africa. Recent events, including the public statements by the former AU ambassador to the US, Arikana Chihombori-Quao, show that much has not changed (*Al Jazeera* 2022). The recent bullying of African states to take sides in the US's geopolitical meanderings in Ukraine (Fabricius 2022), as well as the abrasive engagements with South Africa (Imray & Biesecker 2023) and other states, show that American viewpoints of Africa have not changed much.

Subsidiarity is a key feature of US-Africa relations that has a long trajectory. It took more than five decades for the US government to finally warm up to the idea of a whole-of-government approach. The fragmented policy formulation and implementation can be explained by two major factors. First, US engagement with Africa was defined and driven by narrow interests. For instance, anti-communism was a key feature of US involvement in Africa. Currently, the US is also primarily driven by the desire to counter Chinese, Russian, and Iranian

influence on the continent. Second, US involvement in security and developmental issues was subsidised to specific government agencies and departments.

After World War II, US activities in Africa were primarily left to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which has a penchant for clandestine operations. The CIA, which was not accountable to the US Congress, is characterised by a legacy of political destabilisation, entrenched autocracies, and various abuses of human rights. The CIA also supported the apartheid regime in South Africa, including its domestic terrorism against the Black populations, as well as its destabilisation of Southern Africa (Schraeder 1994). This pattern exhibits itself in the way the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), which was established in 2007, with the headquarters located at Kelley Barracks, Stuttgart, Germany, in the last fifteen years, has virtually become the largest US foreign policy machine in Africa (Wiley 2012). It is therefore not surprising that the US government is failing in its current attempts to implement its ambitious development programme.

Furthermore, a related and undying feature of US foreign policy towards Africa is its militaristic obsession. US military activities in Africa have always been about seeing the enemies and annihilating them. As communism became a less fashionable policy tool, terrorism became a new speaking point. In 1986, the US bombed Libya for its alleged sponsoring of terrorism (John 2002). In 1992, the US led the (UN) Unified Task Force to create a safe passage for humanitarian work during the Somali civil war. Shortly thereafter, the US withdrew from Somalia, following the killing of 19 US Special Forces in Mogadishu. In 1994, the US deployed combat-ready troops in Burundi as the Rwandan genocide took place, but it did not intervene. It also deployed combat-equipped contingents to Sierra Leone and Liberia between 1996 and 2003, as well as sending forces to Cote d'Ivoire in 2002 – all of which were solely to protect American personnel or military installations (Ploch 2011). It was not until 2012 that the US deployed Special Forces to track Joseph Kony – a warlord who has terrorised the Ugandan frontier territories since his fallout in the late 1980s (Roberts 2014). This culture of parochialism

continues, while the US-Africa policy is still defined by narrow interests that largely revolve around a military economy.

Mapping US-Africa Relations in the Age of Partnerships

It is appropriate to posit that US-Africa relations grew noticeably during the first seven years of the establishment of the AU. It is also imperative to contextualise the events. On the one hand, the transition from the OAU to the AU in 2002 was characterised by political will and verve towards a better form of institutionalism. The AU, or African continent, accentuated its agency. When Africa renegotiated the Lomé Agreement with Europe in the late 1990s, the OAU Commission explicitly tasked negotiators as follows: "[it] is important that there is no Eurocentric perspective of these essential elements. The ACP must give their perspective of these elements which takes on board the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic specificities of our states" (OAU 1999:9). The AU has collaborated with different countries and organisations, while the Africa-EU partnership as well as the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) continue to grow exponentially.

On the other hand, the US had its strategic concerns. First, the idea of an African combatant command was mooted during President Bill Clinton's administration to quell the rise of transnational terrorist networks in failed or weak states in Africa (Le Van 2010). Second, as the command took shape during President George Bush's dispensation, the war on terror was no more an important consideration than oil diplomacy, as three African states were among the top ten oil producers in the world. By 2001, Nigeria, Angola, and Algeria ranked between 5th and 7th largest oil suppliers to the US (Berchinsky 2007). More importantly (to the Americans), the US government sought to counter Chinese influence in Africa. China surpassed the US as Africa's largest trading partner in 2005. These self-serving interests defined the environment in which the AU and the US government sought to negotiate their strategic partnerships.

Locating US AFRICOM in US Foreign Policy towards Africa: Optics and Realities

During the dawn of AU partnerships, in the early 2000s, the US sought to engage the AU based on the formation of a partnership. After all, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – a largely US-led military alliance – already had an operational partnership with the AU. The AU also emphasised the efficacy of these partnerships in reducing transaction costs in international co-operation. Moreover, the European Union (EU) – a key strategic ally of the US (regardless of the presence of difference) – also had a flourishing strategic partnership with the AU. The US continued its policy of mimicking European strategic behaviour in Africa. Apart from policy imitation, they repeated their old system of a military frontloaded approach. However, that did not entirely go well during early attempts to negotiate a partnership between the US government and the AUC. Before discussing this negotiation, it is imperative to introduce the notion of a US Africa Command.

For almost 20 years of US-Africa relations, the US military was the primary policy instrument in Africa. The creation of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) should not generate confusion in scholarship. AFRICOM was designed from existing bilateral relations with various African states. As Wyatt demonstrates, a 'new' Combatant Command (CCDM) was long overdue. The US already had different combatant commands assigned to different areas of responsibility (AORs) (Wyatt 2021). However, there are claims that it was designed in a uniquely organisational format to appeal to the AU and sub-regional organisations. The workforce of AFRICOM consists of officials from the US Department of Defence, the US State Department Bureau of African Affairs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and other government departments and agencies (Berchinsky 2007). According to various sources, this amalgamation was in pursuit of a whole-of-government approach. However, not long after 2007, there were accusations that the US military personnel had dominated the space in which US foreign policy towards Africa was initiated and implemented.

At the initial stage, AFRICOM was designed and positioned for political objectives. AFRICOM is headed by a four-star army general (the most senior rank), with immense political significance. A four-star general is directly accountable to the US cabinet (especially the Secretary of Defence), the US Senate, and the US Congress – all key components of US foreign policy. The first leader of AFRICOM, General William Kip Ward, was an African American. As symbolic as it was, this did not amount to much because most African American policy officials remain 'American' to the core. It is no surprise that, as the Joseph Biden administration sought to revamp US-Africa relations, the government appointed another African American, General Elliott Langley, to head the US AFRICOM.

Langley habitually parrots the old mantra of a "holistic approach in Africa relations" – one of the Bush administration's greatest hits (Vergun 2023). However, beyond this racial symbolism, Langley does not represent a departure in US foreign policy towards Africa. Just like the irony of a [then] Black US president born of an African father, the US remains an ambiguous and destabilising force in Africa. For example, while touting a '3D approach' representing diplomacy, development, and defence, and repeating the old tired tune that African countries "prefer to solve African Problems with African Solutions" (Garamone 2023). Langley met with a controversial General, Khalifa Haftar – a US-backed Libyan warlord, whose butchering record earned him the moniker 'Khalifa Hifter', which rhymes with Hitler (Turse 2023). Arming and back-patting a ruthless high-ranking soldier, among other recent AFRICOM controversies, is an ironic case of supporting "African Solutions to African Problems".

This seemingly contradictory implementation of US policy towards Africa is not surprising, given the fact that US Special Operations Command (US SOCOM), located in MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, usually undertakes controversial activities. I have argued elsewhere that AFRICOM expanded based on a combination of Special Forces and intelligence apparatus across Africa (Gwatiwa 2021). Among other things, the US SOCOM conducts what it calls 127e operations, which "allows US special operations forces to use certain host-nation military units as surrogates

in counterterrorism missions" (Turse & Naylor 2019). As far as AFRICOM and accompanying special forces are concerned, they hold a fluid position where they can display their oratory prowess to political audiences while militarising the continent and arming several destructive forces that further destabilise Africa. Indeed, the AUC and its member states have not concertedly criticised the US security policy and its complicit interventions in African peace and security architecture. The AU has kept mute on many US controversies since the AU-US negotiations have produced mixed outcomes, during the heyday of their international partnerships.

Diplomacy and Engagement, 2007-2013

In 2007, the US engaged the continent in the formation of AFRICOM. Part of the reason was to create a buy-in for the command and possibly foster a partnership with the AU. The founding senior staff of AFRICOM often distance themselves from previous consultations on locating AFRICOM on the continent but attribute those efforts to US State Department staff. However, the hostility towards the establishment of AFRICOM and its possible hosting in Africa was evident across the continent (Nathan 2009). The polemics of what was attempted in secret around relocating AFRICOM from Germany to Africa is a complex subject. However, the US government and the AU engaged in diplomatic negotiations around the pursuit of a strategic partnership.

The most prominent diplomatic engagement revolved around security co-operation. The initial (direct) negotiations between AFRICOM and the AU Peace and Security Department were not fruitful.[3] The unwillingness of the US to balance its interests with AU preferences hampered negotiations. However, the US, with its existing military networks, remains an indispensable actor in international security. Instead of an outright dismissal of the US, the AU settled for an informal agreement for collaboration in peace support operations from around 2009. The informal agreement simply built on pre-

3 This was prior to the formation of the Partnerships Management and Co-ordination Division (PMCD), and any aspiring partner had to negotiate directly with the concerned department.

existing bilateral security co-operation between the US and African states: primarily the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) 1996-2004, and the subsequent Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) 2004-2017 – which focused on peacekeeping and humanitarian training (Karis 2009; US State Department, n.d.). This was no complex task because the formation of AFRICOM largely involved the formalisation of existing bilateral security co-operation arrangements (Le Van 2010). US-Africa security relations continued in that manner until the second round of negotiations from around 2011.

The irony of the negotiation of this strategic partnership was how the issue of subsidiarity complicated the final negotiations between 2011 and 2013. While negotiations covered various issue areas, ranging from energy to business and trade, the security component had a special place. Some sources indicate that AFRICOM wanted a separate agreement, similar to the AU-NATO partnership agreement (Choge: Personal Communication 2015). However, that desire did not materialise. This was largely due to the AUC's increased distrust of the US. AU officials have attested to a widespread distrust of the motives behind the US quest for seeking partnerships with Africa. One of the most contentious aspects of the negotiations was the US's unwillingness to compromise on its preferences around security co-operation.

In 2013, the AUC and the US government held final negotiations on a US-Africa strategic partnership, at which point they decided to expand their scope. This new round of negotiations also included the RECs, such as the Southern African Development Commission (SADC), the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). Negotiations reached a deadlock around the issue of African agency, especially regarding resource disbursement from the US government to the AU Commission. Specifically, the AU sought far-reaching reforms of ACOTA to meet AU training directives, but the US rejected these suggestions (Order, personal communication, August 2015).

Moreover, the RECs were not receptive to the prospect of an increased US military presence in Africa (Le Van 2010). The issue of African preferences and US interests became contentious such that when the parties signed the US-Africa strategic partnership in 2013,[4] it was overshadowed by other components. The agreement focused on issues like trade, development, energy, and aid while making a skeletal reference to security co-operation (Office of the Press Secretary 2012).

Contentious Preferences in US-Africa Relations

Preference definition and bargaining have been problematic in US-Africa relations. This is largely due to US unilateralism. Indeed, the US government is more accountable to its domestic audiences than the international community. However, foreign relations either in bilateral or multilateral forms require periodic bargaining and adjustment of preferences, regardless of the stature of those involved. The US has a different approach to international affairs. As the AUC seeks to promote African agencies in international affairs, it is bound to clash with incongruent US approaches. For instance, as some scholars note, the US can either support or undermine regional projects, depending on their assessment of how those initiatives or developments affect US interests (Hettne & Ponjaert 2013). As a latecomer to the AU partnership milieu, the US has had an incentive to approach the AU with cynicism. As a result, the US focused on expanding its 'beloved' AFRICOM project through clandestine means (Turse 2013). This expansion is meant to enable the US to act according to its interests.[5] This reflects self-interest and anarchy in the international system.

4 The US-Africa Strategic Partnership of 2013, which was signed by the chairperson of the AU Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and the then-US State Department Secretary Hilary Rodham Clinton.

5 US expansion in Africa contravenes an AU/AHSG declaration on the hosting of AFRICOM on African soil. Even the countries that host such bases have little awareness of or control over US activities within these military bases (or "lily pads" as they are known). There have been complaints and friction about US activities in some lily pads such as Djibouti, Ethiopia, and – less so – the Seychelles. The only base to be closed was the US drone base in

There is poor preference co-ordination in US-Africa relations. The recent fanfare over a revised and/or revived oomph and verve in US-Africa relations should not be misleading. In 2022, the US hosted the second US-Africa Summit, which was attended by 49 African leaders. Before and during that summit, the Joe Biden administration changed its rhetoric to support African agencies. In a radical departure from the tradition, US President Biden addressed African states as partners and used the word "partnership" more than ten times. He also reiterated US support for the AU to become a permanent member of the Group of Twenty (G20) and secure a permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC) (The White House 2022). While the former promise (on G20 permanent membership) was fulfilled in September 2023 (Acharya & Singh 2023), the issue of UNSC permanent seats is yet to materialise. It is unlikely that the issue will be resolved, given the current tense relations between the P3 (the US, France, and the UK) and the P2 (Russia and China). Thus, these new developments should be taken with a caveat because the US has a long history of jettisoning African interests.

Between 2022 and 2023, a former AU Ambassador to the US, Arikana Chihombori-Quao, lamented the strategic insignificance of Africa to the US. There is an enduring view among top decisionmakers that Africa is not a strategic priority to the US. Former US president George W Bush, under whom AFRICOM assumed operational status, once remarked that "while Africa may be important, it doesn't fit into [American] national strategic interests, as far as I can see them" (Berschinsky 2007). Similarly, former US president Barack Obama failed to redeem the pledges of the first US-Africa Summit that was held in 2014, but dispatched a US peacekeeping mission to Somalia, killing thousands of

Ethiopia. While the official reasons were undisclosed, this incident followed an episode of disagreements between Ethiopia and the US on how to approach security issues in the Horn of Africa (see Maru (b), personal interview, 2015). Disagreements between Djibouti and the US have not led to the closure of any bases because US, French, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese military bases are strongly tied to the Djiboutian political economy. However, the friction has strengthened Djibouti's negotiating position vis-à-vis the US in the renewal of the lease of military bases.

both local militias and innocent Somalis in search of 'terrorists' (Bump 2016).

Some observers posit that the US national security strategy towards Africa is closely tied to its interests in violent extremism, maritime security, oil, and global trade. However, the promotion of the US interests deepens Africa's marginalisation in the world economy, due to unfair trade agreements and high levels of raw materials exportation by African countries. In the case of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), it is important to highlight that, while the trade policy remains open to all African states, there are qualifying factors that limit access to US markets. For example, as of 2023, ten states are still ineligible for AGOA, and President Biden terminated preference benefits for four countries (i.e. Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea-Conakry, and Burkina Faso). The main beneficiaries in AGOA are few: South Africa, Kenya, Lesotho, and Ghana. Yet, AGOA trade statistics show that South Africa-US trade volume outpaces all African states combined by far (Wong 2023). Without broad-based, inclusive, and consultative partnerships, it will be impossible to build a healthy US-Africa relationship. Among other things, the parties need to have candid conversations over some of the major issues and occurrences that have destabilised Africa.

The intervention of the West in Libya in 2011, which drew condemnation from several national and regional actors as well as the AU, was a clear illustration of the failure of preference definition and co-ordination between the US and the AUC. Surprisingly, this jingoistic intervention occurred five years after the inception of AFRICOM. Moreover, AFRICOM had launched Operation Odyssey Dawn – a US military operation that preceded NATO's Operation Unified Protector – before the US government could conclude its negotiations with the AUC on the strategic partnership. There is yet to be any candid conversation between Africa and the US government around this controversy. This means that US AFRICOM can launch another major destabilising operation in Africa. The so-called 127e programmes are clear indications that the US may not cease its unilateral operations, damning its destabilising effect on African security (Turse & Naylor 2019).

In the run-up to the legitimation and execution of the NATO-led intervention in Libya, the US overlooked African states and the AU to pursue the interests of the West in Libya.[6] The US sponsored and drafted the UN resolution that legitimatised the intervention in Libya. Instead of engaging the AU or the Africa Group in New York, the US and its allies created a NATO no-fly zone over Libya. Alder-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) give a detailed explanation of how the P3 used the diplomatic manoeuvre to systematically ostracise Nigeria and South Africa and privileged the role of the Arab League to support regime change in Libya. This happened at a time when the Arab League member states already had difficult relations with Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi. Ironically, two of Africa's so-called hegemons were diplomatically outmanoeuvred, but they were already divided on Gaddafi.

When African heads of state and government secretly met in Gabon to discuss the impasse, they still could not agree on a solution. Former South African president Thabo Mbeki has described how NATO aborted its trip to convince Gaddafi of a diplomatic solution (Mbeki 2016). Western obstinance and African divisions enabled the prevalence of US or Western interests. As a result, AFRICOM commenced Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya days ahead of the NATO intervention. This circumvention of African interests was emblematic of the general failure of preference definition and co-ordination in the partnership.

Slippage between Addis and Washington: A Set of Ruminations

Indeed, the US-Africa partnership is emblematic of slippage by the way the AU often shifts from a strong engagement with the US to alternative partners. The AU, which is usually the weaker party, carefully calculates its fortunes. Given the US-Africa Leaders Summit in 2022, some of the issues articulated hereunder may change significantly in the future.

6 AU interests are represented by the "Africa Group" at the UN Headquarters in New York.

The slippage is partially attributable to the type of agreement guiding the management of this partnership. The agreement governing the AU-AFRICOM collaborative partnership is thin and vague. Consisting of only a three-page document, it is the thinnest document in the AU partnership milieu. Precisely, the agreement is inimitably vague on peace and security. It is also heavily themed towards economic issues rather than peace and security. It also leaves the peace and security component very open. In the absence of a clear articulation of the peace and security component of the partnership, there is no action plan as found elsewhere (in partnerships with the EU and UN). With the benefit of such precedence and with no soft, binding, or at least guiding addendum to the agreements, neither partner sees any serious obligations to implement the agreements. This creates room for any party, especially the stronger one, to act as it pleases, including 'breaking down' (atomising) the partnership. Empirically, this usually incites a response in the form of agency slack.

The aforementioned issues invite the subject of African agency in this partnership. Did the lack of an elaborate agreement undermine African agency? When the US AFRICOM commenced in the early years of the Bush administration, there was a "perceived need for Africans to 'do more for themselves' in the realm of conflict resolution" (US Senate 2001). Did this mean that the US would accommodate African "agenda and priority setting", which the AU and its lead states vehemently sought? Indeed, the foregoing rhetoric by the then US secretary of state Collin Powell seemed to have resonated with the mantra of 'African Solutions to African Problems', which has gained ample buy-in in Europe.

However, a closer look at Powell's[7] statement reveals that this was hortatory rhetoric in what was an already changing political landscape. Evidence suggests that even when AFRICOM took shape, the Combatant Command (CCMD) had problems with either enabling or letting Africans 'do more for themselves'. It habitually overrode African preferences at the technical or operational level, especially considering the type of operations the

7 Collin Powell was the United States Secretary of State from 2001 to 2005.

US conducts in the periphery of African peace support operations in Somalia, North Africa, and the Sahel region. In Somalia, the US has an estimated 450 military personnel supporting Somali forces and the AU mission in Somalia (Faruk & Anna 2023).

Indeed, the US operates 11 so-called 'co-operative security locations' (CSLs) – which host unspecified numbers of special forces and intelligence collection apparatus – in different African states such as Niger, Djibouti, Kenya, and others (Vine 2015). In total, there are 29 confirmed US military bases in Africa consisting of CSL, forward operating locations (FOL), and other types (Turse 2013). These US troops operate independently and provide little room for African preferences in mission areas such as Somalia and the Sahel region. It is doubtful that AFRICOM's General Langley, given his contradicting rhetoric and action, will do anything differently.

Africa's slippage was caused by a lack of professional networks between the US and Africa. The echelons of the CCMD, as well as the security elites in government, had either no or limited networks in Africa. Indeed, there were scores of people with experience in African affairs who could have better articulated how the US could contribute to the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) but were replaced by several personalities with either corrosive or no experience in Africa. For instance, US president George Bush's assistant secretary of state for African ffairs, Jendayi Frazer, had a hardline approach that favoured US militarism in Africa (US Senate 2008). She had no extensive policy networks with senior African policymakers who were the main drivers of APSA projects. This also applies to the inaugural commander of AFRICOM, General William Ward, who had no strong background in African security. This is evinced by how he failed to create lasting networks during his tenure, which also remains a mystery. If these two influential figures had established meaningful networks, they could have advocated for improved collaboration between Africa and the US, particularly between AFRICOM and APSA. A similar issue appears to be noticeable in the current leader of AFRICOM, General Langley.

AU agency slack is also attributable to the problem of historical longevity. The historicity of sporadic and very perfunctory engagement between the US and multilateral actors undermined the process of institutionalisation, as well as engendering trust between the US and AU. As the parties stuck to their preferences, they eventually adopted somewhat opposed approaches to security. The US also failed to transform from a realist approach to its touted 'whole-of-government approach'. Ironically, the latter resonates with the AU's human security approach and could have somewhat eased co-operation between the two. As a corollary, the US often implemented its preferred programmes, often strengthening bilateral security co-operation. This implies that the AU's slippage tactics were not sufficient to inhibit US activities in the continent.

Agency slack, in this case, is also a response to cognitive regionalism. Indeed, there was an appetite for a paradigm shift towards comprehensive security to align with AU security doctrines. However, old perceptions and habits prevailed. Schraeder observes that the nucleus of the Bush administration consisted of a "realist-oriented foreign policy" triumvirate that "emphasised a more 'hard-headed' analysis of concrete US interests" and criticised the preceding Clinton administration for a "feel good" policy towards Africa (Schraeder 1994). This implies a contradiction between the previously mentioned rhetoric and practice. This hampered an actual shift, thereby making the command appreciate the efficacy of APSA. This explains the chronic problem of gyrating between positive and negative developments in US-Africa relations.

The slippage in this partnership is also attributable to its form of institutionalisation. Unlike other partnerships (with the EU and China), the institutional structures for facilitating the US partnership with the AU are very weak. Apart from the US Ambassador to the AU (which is a 'second rate' ambassador), the US does not have a significant presence and clout that reflects the importance of the strategic partnership. Moreover, this ambassadorial position and the tag "strategic advisor" to the AU, do not reflect any aspiration to enhance US-Africa relations. It is surprising that even as the Biden administration seeks to improve

relations with its new-found 'partner', the security domain remains largely unchanged under the auspices of the AU.

Finally, there is fear of the militarisation of the continent. AFRICOM is still headquartered in Stuttgart (Germany) with nearly 600 military officers who were transferred from the US European Command (EUCOM) to form the then-nascent AFRICOM, and an additional 600 civilians were incorporated into the amalgamated organisation (Murithi 2010). There are also more than 30 security co-operation officers attached to US embassies all over Africa. This overwhelmingly military formation creates unease. To the AU, formalising a partnership with such an actor carries greater risks.

Conclusion: Towards Better African Agency in US-Africa Relations

In the broader context, US-Africa partnership requires a comprehensive review and fundamental paradigm shift concerning how African agency is perceived and approached. There is no doubt that the security interests of the two parties have meeting points. However, its potential efficacy requires further dialogue regarding the role of African agencies. African agency does not imply a radical transformation of US security interests, but the need for the US – especially as a relatively new player in the continent – to adjust its manner of engagement and alignment of its security interests. The biggest failure in this partnership has been the US's inability to treat the AU as an equal partner and abandon its unilateralism.

The stakes are also not necessarily in favour of either party. To start with, the US already has its agency, which is built around force, political bullying, and the dwarfing of other actors' efforts. The contemporary African security architecture should involve multiple players, traditional and emerging powers, from which the AU and its member states can draw resources that the US is unwilling to provide. China, Russia, Turkey, Brazil, and others are willing and making concerted efforts to occupy the position of the US in Africa, by pandering to African agencies. Conversely, the AU cannot completely avoid relating with the US either.

Most AU member states are tied to US security architecture through diverse bilateral terms. As the world's most advanced security establishment, the US is unavoidably a necessary foe. Thus, the AU can only exercise slippage to a certain extent and for a certain period. The AU should explore its existing ties with the US to engage its member states to diplomatically persuade the US – which has strong relations with individual states – to formally accept African agency. This should not only be found in the rhetoric of senior political leaders (as it was in the case of the Bush administration) but codified into official documents, including future US-Africa strategic partnership agreements. Moreover, there are already ample avenues for further institutionalisation of the relations through AU diplomatic offices in Washington, New York City, and Brussels (which is not far from Stuttgart).

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