



# Transforming National Security: AFRICOM- An Emerging Command Synopsis and Key Insights



## Key Insights and Recommendations

- AFRICOM has created both high expectations and some confusion about its role in Africa, and now it must work to clarify its mission and dispel regional concerns.
- AFRICOM should calibrate its approach to account for existing African capacity.
- AFRICOM will employ a "holistic approach" to address the roots of regional instability.
- AFRICOM's overall success will depend on how effectively it builds partnerships with Africans, in addition to relationships with interagency, multinational, and intergovernmental organizations.
- AFRICOM will support other agencies in support of USG foreign policy, but will be the lead agency for security sector issues.
- AFRICOM represents a long-term, sustained commitment to the region.
- AFRICOM remains a "work in progress."

## Introduction

Until recently, American military engagement with Africa was divided between three separate Combatant Commands; USCENTCOM (U.S. Central Command), USEUCOM (U.S. European Command), and USPACOM (U.S. Pacific Command). Each command had its own geographical AOR (Area of Responsibility), with the largest share allotted to USEUCOM.

On February 6, 2007, the Bush administration announced an initiative to transfer these AORs to a single combatant command devoted exclusively to the continent of Africa.<sup>1</sup> The deadline for this transition was set for October 1, 2008.

A headquarters for the new organization, AFRICOM, was initially planned for the African continent; however, popular backlash against the notion of a new American base

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<sup>1</sup> Egypt, the only exception, was allowed to remain as before, under the USCENTCOM umbrella.

has delayed a final decision. The command will remain in its transition headquarters, at Kelley barracks in Stuttgart Germany, for the foreseeable future.

## **Assisting Fragile States**

The African landmass stretches 11.6 million square miles in size- large enough to comfortably hold all of Western Europe, the United States, China, and Argentina at once. Over 2,000 languages are spoken on the continent, and its 900 million citizens are divided into 53 separate states.

AFRICOM's mission is correspondingly complex, and according to one distinguished speaker, it "has been worked and reworked." Broadly speaking, the command intends to assume responsibility for existing military programs while cultivating partnerships which strengthen Africa's security capacity, including peacekeeping forces.

### **What are the reasons for AFRICOM's unusual focus on strengthening institutions in fragile states?**

AFRICOM's unique civil-military framework was a response to the following factors:

1. *Terrorism:* In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration declared "weak states...can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states..."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Africa became an area of particular concern. Many believe its ungoverned spaces and porous borders risk becoming a terrorist nursery and a transit point for destructive operations against American interests.
2. *Focus on Prevention:* The lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan have excited interest in "non-kinetic," or "Phase 0" operations which attempt to pre-empt conflict by addressing the root causes of instability. AFRICOM supports the "importance of early measures to prevent problems from becoming crisis and crisis from becoming conflicts."<sup>1</sup> Since 1991, U.S. forces have conducted 30 contingency operations in sub-Saharan Africa. In the future, the new command hopes to mitigate situations which require American intervention.
3. *Africa's Growing Geo-Strategic Importance:* Many believe stability and good democratic governance on the African continent will ultimately help protect America's growing investments and ensure positive political relations with a resource rich region.
4. *Humanitarian:* Any coherent American policy towards Africa must also seek to help alleviate human misery. AFRICOM hopes to promote civil and military reforms which help build African capacity to deal with humanitarian problems.

## Resources and Partnerships

AFRICOM will be a relatively small organization, with no permanent American forces deployed abroad, no plans to establish new military bases, and a relatively small budget (\$392 million for FY 2009). Its staff headquarters will incorporate a wide range of interagency participation, and the command is receptive to the idea that NGOs and other international organizations like the U.N., the E.U., and the African Union will also have an important consultative role to play.

While AFRICOM's organizational structure and stated mission may be innovative, they are not entirely unique. SOUTHCOM is a successful command which has also partnered with NGOs, international organizations, interagency actors, and private businesses to foster reform and stability across South America. According to SOUTHCOM's commander Admiral Jim Stavridis, "In this hemisphere, we are in the business of ideas, not missiles. Our main battery, so to speak, is communication."

Because of its small size and limited resources, AFRICOM's success will depend primarily on its ability to seek effective partnerships while deferring to State Department country teams. Policy-makers have described a cooperative principle (JIIM- "Joint, Interagency, and Multinational") which they believe will lead to more coherent American diplomatic, development, and defense policies on the continent. "AFRICOM is a tangible recognition," observed one speaker, "that Africa deserves more than a humanitarian response to its security needs." Others offered more critical perspectives.

Some attendees suggested that AFRICOM risked becoming simply another competitor in the interagency race for scarce resources, and

part of an improper trend in the militarization of U.S. foreign aid. "In 2002," one panelist observed, "the DoD spent 6% of ODA (Official Development Assistance). Now it spends 22%. Who has lost? USAID has lost, for the most part... We have to ask ourselves if soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines are the best people to do (development work). Should they hold a sword in one hand and a ploughshare in the other?"

Several speakers acknowledged that despite high-level State Department enthusiasm for AFRICOM's mission, a culture of suspicion towards DoD objectives still plagued U.S. development agencies. "Many of the older generation," commented one State Department representative, "especially those in USAID who began their career in the 1960s, have a hard time coming to terms with a permanent DoD/USAID relationship. We need to just get over it."

Most participants however, struck a supportive, though cautionary tone towards AFRICOM's prospects for success. One former State Department official warned the command should carefully manage its expectations when partnering with African state and regional institutions. "There are major political challenges in each African nation. They don't have the history or capacity one would expect." Another panelist concurred, saying, "There is always the risk, when dealing with the AU and ECOWAS, that our ambitions will outstrip theirs..."

Despite these reservations, a consensus emerged among attendees that the establishment of AFRICOM represented, on the whole, a positive development for U.S. Africa policy. The presence of a four star commander was viewed as an especially powerful symbol of American commitment to the region. AFRICOM representatives noted the general would make a powerful advocate for a wide range of interlocking interagency programs, drawing additional resources and attention to the region.

## Strategic Communication

AFRICOM was initially greeted with some skepticism and even suspicion by members of the international community. Africans asked if the new command signaled the militarization of U.S. foreign policy; how it related to the continent's colonial past, and whether its mission threatened their states' sovereign authority. Similarly, U.S. agencies like the State Department worried AFRICOM's objectives encroached on their traditional areas of responsibility. NGOs were also slow to embrace a military command which they believed could tie development assistance to political ends, compromising their long-established reputation for neutrality.

**The command's outreach effort has been challenged to communicate a number of important messages:**

1. *Not an Intervention Force:* AFRICOM's primary mission is to build African capacity, not deploy American forces. The command is not structured to compete with foreign powers (like China) for influence over African resources.
2. *Ongoing Activities Continue:* The DoD's current operations will be transferred to AFRICOM from EUCOM, PACOM, and CENTCOM without interruption.
3. *Supporting Role-* Chief of Mission authority and State Department country teams are the final decision-making authorities for USG activity on the continent. AFRICOM will play a supporting role.
4. *A "Strategic Listener":* The command intends to partner with a variety of actors helping to build the capacity of African stakeholders, not replace them with DoD surrogate programs. AFRICOM's primary tool for success will be its strategic communications, or maintaining an effective dialogue by incorporating the counsel of a range of professionals.

One speaker noted AFRICOM's early emphasis on non-military and development goals represented a strategic communication error, however well intentioned, which provoked suspicion among Africans that the new military command harbored a hidden security agenda.

Most attendees, however, expressed the belief that much of AFRICOM's negative reception has been exaggerated and will naturally fade as the command proves itself. In the meantime, participants counseled AFRICOM to lower its profile and temper the high expectations which its rhetoric may have prematurely excited.

## Security Concerns

While conference participants did not dwell on American strategic interests on the African continent, several speakers noted the danger weak and failing states pose to U.S. economic relations, humanitarian goals, prospects for military intervention, and success in the war on terror. Nevertheless, several participants voiced skepticism that African and American security interests were so closely aligned.

One panelist suggested 9/11 had distorted US perspectives on Africa's importance. "We need to be a little more clearheaded about what our security interests in Africa really are," noted the speaker. "One of the premises of Africa is that weak states provide a breeding ground for extremist groups...(but) poverty and hopelessness have not bred extremists...the over-riding security interest in Africa is not terrorist, it's of the weak governments not able to control their own territory...Is the US willing to engage Africa's interests, or is it merely dabbling?"

A former State Department official summarized the consensus response to such concerns by suggesting AFRICOM's focus on "helping Africans help themselves" was properly far-sighted. According to this view, the command's highest priority should be the "strengthening of partnerships with African organizations and helping to build partnership capacity...The success of AFRICOM's other missions (including counter-terror) will ultimately depend on how well it accomplishes this central task."

This perspective was echoed by several African representatives who voiced their enthusiasm for AFRICOM's promise of development assistance. "African states are weak, with fluid ethnic identities and fluid ethnic loyalties. Democracy has brought economic exclusion where ordinary people do not see their needs being met. AFRICOM is right on-time because Africa's democratic honeymoon has come to an end. It is a good initiative, especially when it promotes common goals of development, health, democracy and economic growth."

One participant warned the command to avoid "packaging AFRICOM as a counter-terrorist organization," while applying for congressional funding. "While there is a CT (counter-terrorism) piece, we should be leery of over-playing it as a way to get more money. Rather, our argument should hinge on the importance of building partnerships in

### U.S. Security Priorities

- Terrorism
- WMD
- Democratic Expansion
- Iraq/Afghanistan

### African Security Priorities

- Health
- Food Security
- Corruption
- Territorial Sovereignty
- Economic Inequities

the region and on African security. If this happens, then the hope is that there will be less demand on the US military.” This comment won widespread approval from the audience.

## **Conclusion:**

AFRICOM is an innovation designed with the conviction that American security is as threatened by weak and failing states as by strong ones. The command aims to address the roots of instability by promoting civil and defense sector reforms, military professionalism, and capacity-building programs which allow Africans to help themselves. As one high-level official put it, “Military security (alone) doesn’t give stability; it only allows a pause from the cycle of instability. You also need the pillars of a good economy, effective governance, and the rule of law.”