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U.S. Africa Command: A New Way of Thinking

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Introduction

Recent national security reviews have highlighted an emerging trend affecting U.S. vital interests: the importance of the African continent to America's security. In response to this growing strategic challenge, the President and the Secretary of Defense have announced their intention to create a new unified combatant command for Africa. This new regional command will differ greatly from other regional combatant commands in its interagency approach and the unique, complex challenges facing the U.S. Army in the region.

On 6 February 2007, the White House announced a presidential directive to create a new unified combatant command in Africa. The project was detailed in greater length on 9 February 2007 by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) commenced official operations on 1 October 2007 and will remain a sub-unified command under U.S. European Command (EUCOM) until October 2008.

The establishment of AFRICOM marks a realignment of the Pentagon's regional command structure on the African continent and is, in large part, a response to Africa's growing strategic importance to U.S. national security interests. The post-9/11 environment and prioritization of counterterrorism for U.S. national security, in addition to the traditional security issues on the continent—humanitarian crises, ethnic conflict and health epidemics—have raised Africa's geopolitical profile.

The establishment of AFRICOM provides the United States an opportunity to rearrange its current military orientation on the continent, address traditional and developing issues for U.S. security in Africa, and provide security and development assistance for 53 African countries.¹ During the transitional phase, AFRICOM will gradually receive oversight of U.S. military programs and activities conducted with African nations.

Background

The Unified Command Plan (UCP) document establishes the combatant commands for the U.S. military, assigning missions and geographic responsibilities. The UCP is approved by the President and published by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.² The last revision to the UCP was published in 1 October 2002; updates to that official plan have since taken place.

AFRICOM Mission and Purpose. The primary mission for AFRICOM, the tenth unified combatant command, is to promote U.S. national security objectives by working with African states and regional organizations to strengthen

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stability and security on the African continent. The primary purpose of AFRICOM is to serve as a supporting structure to already existing U.S. and international programs in Africa. According to Ryan Henry, Principal Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, “The goal is for AFRICOM not to be a U.S. leadership role on the continent. . . . We would be looking to complement rather than compete with any leadership efforts currently going on.”³

During testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), General William E. Ward, AFRICOM’s first commander, stated that AFRICOM intends to work closely with the African Union, with regional African institutions and with individual nations to advance security, development and diplomatic goals. The aim of AFRICOM will be to “build the capacity of our African partners to: reduce conflict; improve security; defeat terrorists; [and] support crisis response.” In support of these goals, AFRICOM will:

- work with African states, regional organizations and other partners to build partnership capacity;
- support U.S. government agencies in implementing security policies;
- conduct theater security cooperation activities;
- increase partner counterterrorism skills;
- enhance humanitarian assistance, disaster mitigation and response activities;
- foster respect for human rights;
- support African regional organizations; and
- as directed, conduct military operations.

In pursuit of these objectives, AFRICOM hopes to provide support to Africans to build democratic institutions and establish good governance, while focusing on tasks such as peacekeeping, security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁴

Conceptual and Logistical Development. While AFRICOM was announced in early 2007, the idea for a U.S. military command in Africa has been in development for several years. In 2003, one of the first public announcements regarding AFRICOM was made by Gregory R. Copley, who referred to the establishment of a new military command in Africa (so-called “U.S. Forces Africa”) in a *Defense and Foreign Affairs* article.⁵ The substance of the report was refuted at that time by the Department of State; nevertheless, four years later, the official announcement heralding the creation of AFRICOM was made.

The process leading up to the official “stand up” of AFRICOM has been aided by the establishment of two teams: Implementation Planning and Transition. Established in November 2006, the AFRICOM Implementation Planning Team—the initial planning structure for the Department of Defense (DoD)—comprised full-time senior representatives from the Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other U.S. government agencies. The Implementation Planning Team completed its tasks in early 2007 and was replaced by the Transition Team, which began its work in Stuttgart, Germany. Since February 2007, a team of military and civilian specialists has been designing the organizational structure and developing mission focus areas for AFRICOM.⁶

Previous Command Arrangements. While the Pentagon has five geographic unified combatant commands around the world, a regional command has never before been devoted exclusively to American security interests on the African continent. Beginning in 1983, U.S. military responsibility for the African continent was divided and subordinated among three commands (see the figure on page 4): EUCOM, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). Under CENTCOM were Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan; under PACOM, the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles; and under EUCOM, the rest of the continent.⁷

Going forward, oversight of U.S. military missions in all African countries (with the exception of Egypt, which will remain under CENTCOM) will be assigned to AFRICOM. Officials believe AFRICOM represents an important effort to coordinate U.S. defense policy and to oversee U.S. military organization for the African continent. One senior government official has stated that AFRICOM represents an opportunity to eliminate bureaucratic divisions and operational seams fostered by the previous command divisions.⁸

Africa and U.S. National Security Policy

The Era of Benign Neglect. Africa's previous command arrangements reflect the relatively low level of importance assigned to the African continent within the U.S. military structure. Before the creation of AFRICOM, Africa generally received less attention than other regions under the three aforementioned military commands. CENTCOM was focused on U.S. security priorities in Iraq and Afghanistan. EUCOM was preoccupied with NATO, relations with European allies and Russia. PACOM was primarily focused on regional powers such as China, India and North Korea. There is a consensus that the previous command arrangements for Africa represented a "suboptimal organizational structure."⁹ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed that previous command arrangements for the African continent were "an outdated arrangement left over from the Cold War."¹⁰

U.S. foreign policy in the region, like its military involvement, was primarily concerned with Cold War geopolitics rather than African policy and development. Scholars have referred to this policy attitude as "benign neglect," designating Africa as the "stepchild" of U.S. foreign policy.¹¹ This attitude continued after the end of the Cold War, when the opportunity to articulate coherent policy was overlooked. While the transformation of the geopolitical landscape was significantly altered by the fall of the Soviet Union, America's attention was focused on the newly freed Eurasian states. In 1995, in its U.S. Security Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa, DoD noted that "ultimately we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa."¹²

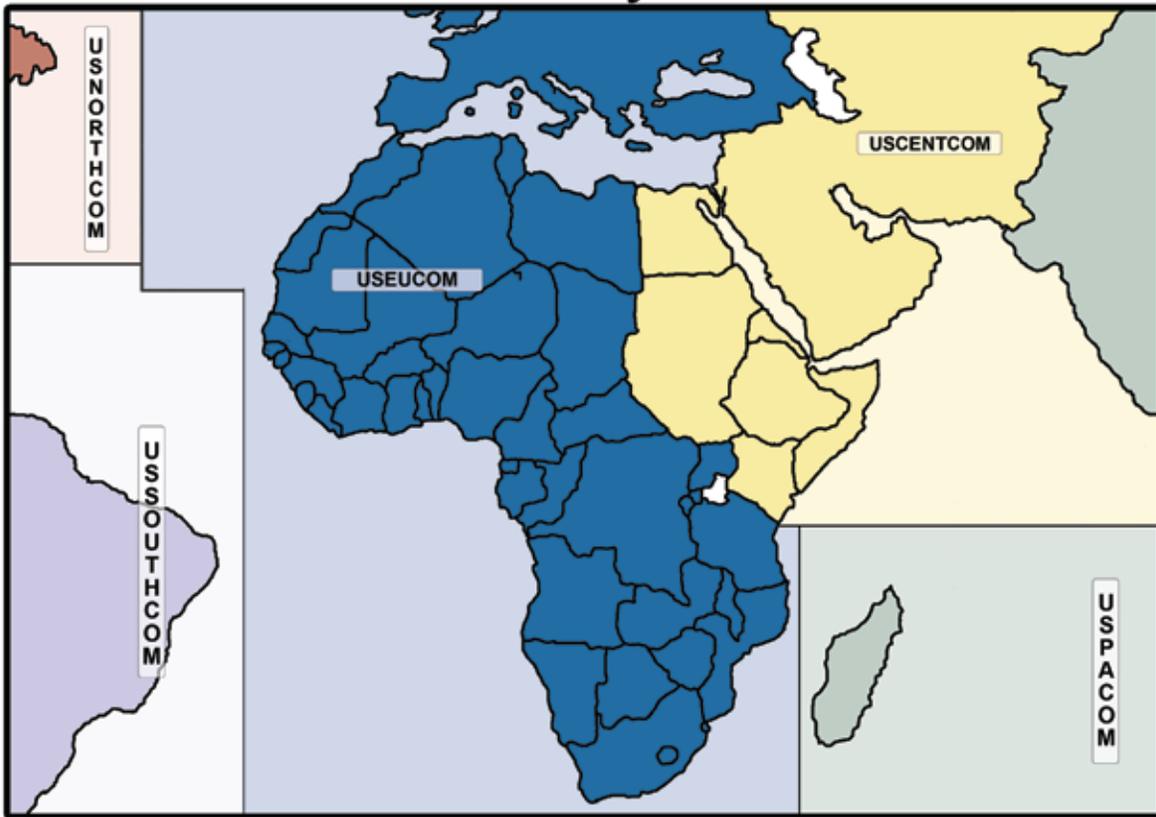
Emergence of Africa as Strategically Relevant. Events in the late 1990s began to change U.S. perception of security interests in Africa. In 1998, for example, two U.S. embassies in Africa were bombed. While many scholars believe these twin bombings marked a turning point in U.S. strategic policy toward the region,¹³ the domestic terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 forced a reassessment of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Africa and its role in the global war on terrorism.

The growing strategic importance of Africa for the United States was subsequently articulated in government documents. In the 2002 National Security Strategy, the concept of weak states and their role in global instability was an important theme. The 2006 National Security Strategy solidified the newly important role of Africa, observing, "Africa holds growing geo-strategic importance and is a high priority of this administration."¹⁴ The National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD 50) signed by the President in September 2006 provided the first update to overall U.S. strategy toward Africa since 1992.¹⁵

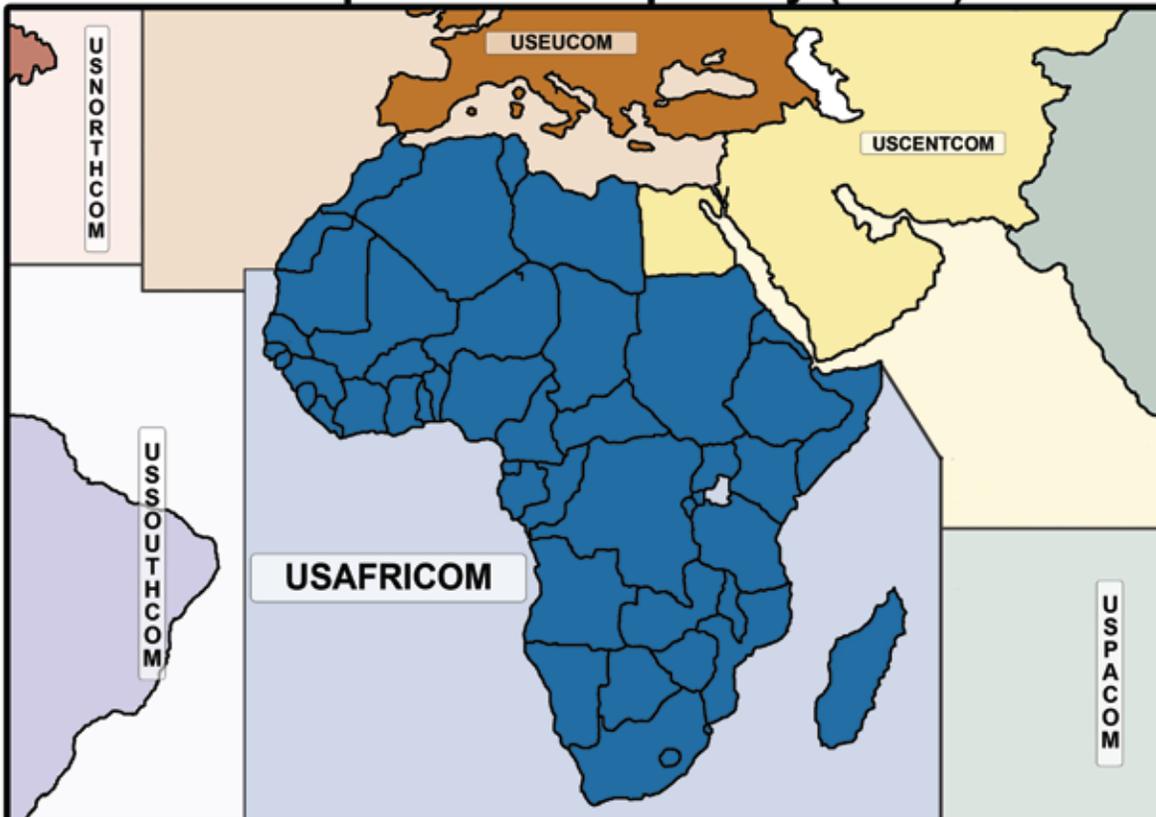
The growing relevance of Africa to U.S. national security interests is the result of several important factors. Noted African scholar J. Peter Pham has observed that three trends have coalesced to make Africa strategically relevant: 1) the post-9/11 environment; 2) the growing political will expressed by African nations to address the various problems of "disease, poverty, ethnic tension, religious extremism, bad governance [and] lack of security" and 3) recognition by both the United States and African countries of commonality between strategic interests (enhanced security, stability and development).¹⁶

A 2004 report by an advisory panel of Africa experts advising Congress on new policy initiatives identified five factors increasing U.S. interest in Africa: HIV/AIDS;¹⁷ oil and energy resources; global trade; armed conflicts; and terrorism.¹⁸ Of the five factors listed, two are presently of particular importance to the United States: oil and energy resources and terrorism.

Today



Full Operational Capability (Draft)



Oil and Terrorism. The abundance of natural energy resources renders Africa an attractive region for the United States. For example, Nigeria alone provides almost as much oil to the United States each year as Saudi Arabia. By 2015, according to the National Intelligence Council, it is expected that at least 25 percent of domestic U.S. oil imports will come from Africa.

As discussed earlier, the war on terrorism and the rise of extremist terrorism have increased Africa's profile. Three areas are of particular concern to U.S. officials: the number of soft targets (e.g., embassies and consulates); the recruiting potential for young, angry, marginalized youth from Somalia to Morocco; and the potential of sanctuary for international terrorists (particularly in large ungoverned spaces).¹⁹ Africa is no stranger to terrorist activity: there were attacks on the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, in 1998; on targets in Mombasa, Kenya, in 2002; and most recently in Algiers in 2007.

In particular, the Horn of Africa is of concern to terrorist experts and military personnel. In SASC testimony in March 2006, CENTCOM commander General John P. Abizaid stated that he views the region to be particularly vulnerable to penetration by extremist and terrorist groups and to ethnic violence, highlighting evidence of al Qaeda's activity in the region and its role in major terrorist attacks.²⁰

"Combatant Command Plus": Beyond Conventional Military Doctrine

The unique challenges and responsibilities of the African continent have compelled AFRICOM organizers to envision a new type of arrangement for the command. AFRICOM marks the first time a military command has had interagency representation culled from various government departments. From its headquarters designation and different focus to its leadership selection, AFRICOM displays qualities substantively different from those of other unified combatant commands.

The Interagency Model. The AFRICOM headquarters structure will integrate staff members from other parts of the U.S. government; the two main organizations to be represented will be the Department of State and USAID, which is in charge of U.S. policy and development efforts in Africa. The command will also rely on other federal bodies for expertise as needed. One senior official expects "these interagency officers will contribute their knowledge and expertise to the command so that AFRICOM will be more effective as it works to build peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, and disaster response capacity in Africa."²¹

In addition to the interagency approach, it is expected AFRICOM will depart from the Pentagon's traditional "J-code" organization structure, a method of organizing a command for warfighting developed in the Napoleonic age. Unlike other commands, AFRICOM will be organized for theater security cooperation activities, focusing on preventing problems before they begin.

AFRICOM's commander has appointed two deputies, one civilian and one military. The civilian deputy is Ambassador Mary Carlin Yates, who will serve as commander for civil-military operations. The military deputy is Navy Vice Admiral Robert T. Moeller, who will serve as deputy for military operations.²² It is believed the appointment of Ambassador Yates marks the first time a senior government civilian from outside the Defense Department has been named to be part of a U.S. regional military headquarters command structure.²³

Therefore, **three innovative aspects of AFRICOM—its interagency model, focus on war prevention and deputy appointments—distinguish it from traditional military combatant commands.** While AFRICOM stands apart from other combatant commands, it remains to be seen whether the command's unique approach will serve as a prototype for U.S. military commands in the future.

Headquarters and Area of Responsibility (AOR). Many of the issues related to AFRICOM's headquarters basing, staff and military component arrangements are still in flux as the command prepares for its October 2008 separation from EUCOM. There is still much debate over the location and structure of the permanent AFRICOM headquarters. One factor complicating this task is the strong resistance from various African

countries to the stationing of AFRICOM headquarters on the continent. While some countries have expressed enthusiasm for the new command, others have articulated serious reservations about the spread of U.S. military influence on the continent. Recently, Nigeria endeavored to block AFRICOM from establishing its headquarters in the Gulf of Guinea region. The Southern African Development Community (SADC)—an organization with 14 member countries—has declared that none of its members would be willing to host U.S. forces.²⁴

Recently, U.S. military officials announced that due to the controversy over headquarters arrangements, AFRICOM would remain in Germany until further notice. While under EUCOM's authority, AFRICOM will use that command's facilities at Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart.

With respect to U.S. troops, Pentagon officials insist AFRICOM will not immediately increase the U.S. military's presence on the continent. On a trip to Africa in February 2008, President Bush supported this claim when he maintained there were no plans to build U.S. military bases in Africa.

If a headquarters on the continent is established in the future, it is likely AFRICOM will take a “distributed approach” to its basing.²⁵ Under this approach, AFRICOM would be organized with one permanent headquarters and five regional teams—currently referred to as “regional integration teams”—based around the continent. Defense officials emphasize that these teams will provide a more “tailored” approach, taking into account the individual challenges of the 53 African countries in AFRICOM's AOR.

Combatant Command Similarities. While AFRICOM is substantively different from other military commands, it does share certain paradigm similarities to two regional commands. AFRICOM operations, for instance, will likely mirror those of PACOM, where the U.S. military is not present in high numbers. (In the Philippines, PACOM is involved in the war against Islamic insurgents.)²⁶ AFRICOM also shares a similarity with U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), in that its primary mission, unlike that of other unified commands, is not warfighting. (For SOUTHCOM, the military's primary mission is the Colombian drug war.) Moreover, some defense officials have stated AFRICOM could function like SOCOM's interagency task force, insofar as that task force has authority to make decisions without consultation with Washington.²⁷

AFRICOM and the U.S. Army

The establishment of AFRICOM has led to the reexamination of the role of the U.S. military, and in particular the U.S. Army, on the African continent. It has also caused controversy and mixed reactions over the potential effects of heightened U.S. military presence in the African countries under AFRICOM.

U.S. Military in Africa. U.S. military operations in Africa over the past 50 years have ranged from counterterrorism to political warfare. As discussed earlier, U.S. policy in Africa has been sporadic and patchy in the past 50 years. U.S. military involvement has mirrored this tendency. Until the attacks of 9/11, U.S. military involvement in Africa had been limited in scope. In the 1990s, there was general resistance to the idea of U.S. military operations on the continent after the unfortunate events of the Battle of Mogadishu following Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, in which 18 U.S. Soldiers were killed. This reticent attitude was altered by the events of 9/11, which emphasized the importance of Africa as a new front in the war on terrorism.²⁸

Since 9/11, the U.S. military has led several important counterterrorism operations on the African continent. In October 2002, the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) was launched to combat terrorism in the region. Headquartered at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, the operation is staffed by 2,000 individuals—U.S. military personnel (including special operation forces), U.S. civilians and coalition members.²⁹ The Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCI) began with Exercise Flintlock 2005 and builds on the work completed by the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI).³⁰ TSCI has focused on training programs in western and northern Africa. In early 2005, the Gulf of Guinea Guard Initiative was launched to operate in conjunction with regional governments to improve the maritime security of the West African coast.³¹

U.S. Army Operations in Africa. The U.S. Army has a rich and varied history in Africa. The first U.S. Army battle of World War II took place in Tunisia under Major General Orlando Ward, commander of the 1st Armored Division. In this battle, American forces were routed in a series of German attacks and forced to retreat through Kassarine Pass.³² The U.S. Army has since been involved in a variety of contemporary missions on the African continent, particularly through U.S. Special Forces Command (SOCOM). For example, in 2000 the 3d Special Forces Group was in charge of training two Nigerian battalions in peacekeeping duties for United Nations operations in West Africa.³³

Through the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, the Army has worked with civil authorities and populations to support military operations and establish liaisons with civilian aid agencies and civilian commercial and private organizations. In 2002, Army personnel from the 30th Medical Brigade, along with other U.S. Soldiers, assisted in the disposal of thousands of rounds of unexploded ordnance in Nigeria.³⁴

The Army and other services are developing proposals to establish service component headquarters to support the new command. In November 2007, there were reports that Special Operations Command-Africa is in the works. Furthermore, it is expected the Air Force will reactivate 17th Air Force as its AFRICOM component.³⁵ Prior to its deactivation in 1996, 17th Air Force was located at Sembach Air Base, Germany.

There is currently a dearth of information regarding future Army service component command (ASCC) arrangements for AFRICOM. There are several factors that help illuminate the Army's likely future role within AFRICOM. The Office of the Secretary of Defense designated the Army as the service most appropriate to shoulder AFRICOM's Fiscal Year 2009 budget of approximately \$250 million. In addition, as a temporary sub-unified command under EUCOM, AFRICOM is operating in Stuttgart, Germany, at a facility funded by the Army.³⁶ It is likely the Army component for AFRICOM will be related to U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army, currently under EUCOM.

Of the three commands sharing responsibility for the African continent, EUCOM was responsible for the most tasks and missions. Therefore, it is feasible that EUCOM's ASCC will provide materiel and manpower for AFRICOM's Army component. The proximity of EUCOM's headquarters to the African continent (as compared to those of CENTCOM and PACOM, located in Florida and Hawaii, respectively), the breadth of EUCOM's Africa missions with relation to the other two commands, and the establishment of AFRICOM under EUCOM until later this year point to the likelihood that U.S. Army Europe will have an important role in AFRICOM's future ASCC.

Implications for U.S. Army

While the introduction of a new U.S. military command on the African continent has signaled a changing perspective on U.S.-Africa security relations, it has also engendered controversy and concerns over what the future of AFRICOM will portend for the continent. It is likely that these issues will form the principal challenges the U.S. Army will encounter in its operations on the African continent.

China vs. United States: Future Strategic Competition. According to a recent article, "A new set of worries has been raised by the new U.S. Africa Command, which many in both the U.S. and African media have taken to be mainly a reaction to China's increased presence in Africa, particularly in oil-producing areas."³⁷ This reflects an oft-voiced belief that the real purpose of AFRICOM is to position U.S. forces closer to coveted oil sources and to mitigate the growing influence of the Chinese government on the continent.

In the future, Africa may well be the major supplier of petroleum to the United States. China, ever more energy-hungry, imports nearly a third of its crude oil from African sources. Furthermore, China's presence in the past few years has supplied new infrastructure and investment. In resource-rich states such as Angola, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, China has committed to building more infrastructure than all other donors combined.³⁸ More important, since 2001, China has cancelled more than \$10 billion of debt for 31

African states.³⁹ Some fear the ramifications of two superpowers vying for important energy resources on the African continent, mirroring Cold War proxy battles between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Targets of Terrorist Attacks. Another serious concern is that the increased presence of the U.S. government will make African countries the target of terrorist attacks. In particular, there is a fear that African countries will be dragged, unwillingly, into the war on terrorism. According to a recent news article, the magazine *Jeune Afrique* believes AFRICOM will attract terrorists to Africa “like a magnet attracts metal.”⁴⁰ Said one Somali worker, “The U.S. military will only bring more harm to Africa.”⁴¹

Blurring the Civilian-Military Divide. A matter of general concern is how the new structure of AFRICOM will affect traditional aid structures in both the United States and Africa. Domestically, while the State Department and USAID welcome additional resources and aid from DoD for complex operations, there is a concern that the U.S. military may “overestimate its capabilities . . . [and] its diplomatic role in Africa.” Concern over the possibility of U.S. military efforts overshadowing diplomatic initiatives was expressed in a 2006 Congressional Research Service report, which observed that the blurring of civilian-military lines could “risk weakening the Secretary of State’s primacy in setting the agenda for U.S. relations with foreign countries and the Secretary of Defense’s focus on warfighting.”⁴²

The increasingly vague line between aid and military development has the potential to adversely affect efforts on the African continent. Officials at USAID, for example, are concerned that development programs could be “stigmatized” by links to the military, and that the authority of diplomats could be “confused” or “usurped.”⁴³ In recent congressional testimony, Michael E. Hess, a senior official at USAID, noted that the growing DoD presence in Africa has the potential of “blurring the lines between diplomacy, defense and development.”⁴⁴ A director at the Africa advocacy center TransAfrica Forum observed that African democracies are uncomfortable with the concept of DoD coordinating humanitarian aid.⁴⁵

Addressing the Critics. The U.S. government has attempted to assuage fears and concerns by responding to some of the more pressing issues. In testimony before the SASC, the AFRICOM commander stated that the military command presence in Africa would neither disrupt current peace processes nor lead to the militarization of the region.

The Pentagon believes the negative reaction has been simply a matter of faulty public relations. On the official AFRICOM website, the command has addressed some of the controversial points raised by several African countries. In response to claims that the United States is trying to gain access to natural resources and act in the face of growing Chinese activities, the command has stated that AFRICOM was established due to growing African military strategic and economic importance and that the U.S. military is seeking to “bolster security on the continent, to prevent and respond to humanitarian crises, to improve cooperative efforts with African nations to stem transnational terrorism, and to sustain enduring efforts that contribute to African Unity.”⁴⁶

The current controversy over AFRICOM is similar to that over CENTCOM, which evolved out of a Cold War-era rapid deployment joint task force (RDJTF) established in 1980 by the Carter administration. CENTCOM, too, was viewed with suspicion and was regarded by nations in its AOR as “little more than a major intervention force designed to operate solely for U.S. purposes without their consultation or participation.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, over time, it has become accepted as a legitimate and essential military command.

Since AFRICOM represents the first interagency command, achieving a harmonious, synergistic balance between military and diplomacy elements will be a challenge. Organization, different institutional structures, funding questions and personnel selections are issues that will have to be addressed during the development of the command.

Conclusion

Africa is growing in strategic importance to U.S. security interests and is becoming a vector of concern due to resource competitions, political instability, humanitarian crises, and terrorist issues. AFRICOM represents a historic opportunity for the U.S. government to address Africa's growing strategic importance for U.S. global strategic interests, to reassess and reposition its assets on the African continent to better achieve its security goals, and to better assist African countries in the AOR. AFRICOM posits its role as a supporting one for African governments and regional organizations, and the innovative interagency structure and war-prevention focus signal a new direction for U.S. military commands.

The next few months will be a crucial development period for AFRICOM as a command under construction. In anticipation of its October 2008 stand-up, AFRICOM officials still need to find sites for headquarters and facilities, fill more than 1,000 jobs, and consolidate the disparate missions previously divided amongst the three commands. While the role of the U.S. Army within AFRICOM has not yet been announced, it is certain that AFRICOM will provide the Army with a plethora of challenges and opportunities in the future.

Endnotes

- ¹ The AFRICOM area of responsibility will cover U.S. military relations with 53 African nations—every country on the continent except Egypt, plus the Islands of Cape Verde, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe, as well as the Indian Ocean islands of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. While CENTCOM retains responsibility for Egypt, AFRICOM will coordinate with Egypt on issues relevant to African security.
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- ⁶ "U.S. Command Reaches Initial Operating Capability," U.S. Africa Command Press Release, 1 October 2007, available online at <http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp?art=1480>.
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- ⁹ Department of Defense "Bloggers Roundtable" with Theresa Whelan, Defense Public Affairs, 24 October 2007.
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- 15 Bloggers Roundtable, 24 October 2007.
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- 26 Pham, "Next Frontier?"
- 27 Stephanie Hanson, "The Pentagon's New Africa Command," Backgrounder, Council on Foreign Relations, 3 May 2007, available online at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/13255/>; for additional information on U.S. Army South, ASCC for U.S. Southern Command, see Charles Hornbostel, "U.S. Army South and the Transition to 6th Army: Rising to Face New Challenges in Central and South America and the Caribbean," AUSA National Security Watch 06-5, 1 December 2006, available online at http://www.ausa.org/pdfdocs/NSW06_5.pdf.
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- 38 *Ibid.*
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