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Clarifying the Future of AFRICOM

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On February 6, 2007, President George W. Bush announced that the United States will create a new, unified combatant command for Africa (AFRICOM) to oversee security, enhance strategic cooperation, build partnerships, support nonmilitary missions, and conduct military operations as necessary. The announcement capped years of discussion over the merits and need for an independent combatant command for Africa. Seven months after the announcement, however, key decisions on the structure, location, mission, budget, staff, and institutional status of the new command have yet to be formally announced. This has created uncertainty in the U.S. and among African nations that opponents of the new command have used to question AFRICOM. The confirmation hearing scheduled for September 27 before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the nomination of General William E. Ward as commander offers an opportunity to clarify these uncertainties.

AFRICOM. The President's decision to establish AFRICOM was long overdue.¹ Africa is no longer a distant region that can be ignored by the U.S. As articulated in the National Security Strategy, the need to expand and ensure America's access to energy resources, prevent the spread of terrorism in weak or broken states, and address transnational health and environmental concerns has transformed Africa from a strategic backwater into a priority region for U.S. economic, political, and military interests.² America has become increasingly involved in the region since the end of the Cold War,

with over 20 U.S. military operations in Africa between 1990 and 2000 and another 10 since 2000.³ These concerns and operations, combined with a rising expectation by many in America and other countries that the U.S. should intervene in internal and regional African conflicts more frequently and actively, assure that the U.S. will become more involved in the region in coming years.

Under the current combatant command arrangement, security concerns and challenges in Africa receive insufficient attention from the three separate combatant commands responsible for parts of the region, whose primary focus is not the African continent.⁴ Central Command (CENTCOM) has responsibility for Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan. Pacific Command (PACOM) has responsibility for the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Seychelles. And European Command (EUCOM) has responsibility for the rest of the continent.

While each of the commands includes dedicated experts on Africa and is engaged with the African nations under its responsibility, Africa generally receives less attention than other regions. CENTCOM rightly focuses most of its attention and

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resources on U.S. security priorities in Iraq and Afghanistan. EUCOM is preoccupied with NATO, relations with European allies, and Russia. Similarly, PACOM focuses on the burgeoning regional powers of China and India and the unpredictable belligerence of North Korea. As a result, U.S. strategic policy toward Africa has been inconsistent, driven by emergencies and crises rather than by a considered strategy. The President's plan to establish AFRICOM will help U.S. policymakers focus more closely on Africa's problems, support regional efforts to address mutual concerns, and bolster the capacity of African nations to tackle regional problems.

A New Type of Command. Africa is subject to political and economic volatility that contributes to border disputes, corruption, famine, internal conflicts, poverty, weak internal security capabilities, porous borders, poor infrastructure, natural disasters, and vulnerability to terrorism.⁵ These problems make addressing U.S. security and economic concerns in the region a complex combination of

bolstering stability, encouraging political pluralism, enhancing the military capabilities of African peacekeepers, promoting development and economic growth, building institutions, promoting good governance, and addressing short-term natural disasters and other crises.

The unique challenges of this continent led the Administration to set up a new type of interagency command for Africa. The President made clear that he sees the new command as having more than simply military responsibilities: "Africa command will enhance our efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote our common goals of development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa."⁶ The new command will draw heavily upon the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other federal bodies for expertise. Moreover, AFRICOM will have a civilian Deputy Commander position held by a State Department official.⁷ It is important to note, however, that the Department of

1. The Heritage Foundation has long advocated an independent command for Africa. See James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., "U.S. Military Assistance for Africa: A Better Solution," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1697, October 15, 2003, at www.heritage.org/Research/Africa/bg1697.cfm.
2. Africa remains strategically important as a source of natural and mineral resources. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 18.6 percent of U.S. oil imports in 2005, compared to 17.4 percent from the Middle East. Within the next decade, Africa's production is expected to double, and U.S. imports of oil from West Africa alone are forecast to increase to 25 percent of total U.S. oil imports. See Brett D. Schaefer, "America's Growing Reliance on African Energy Resources," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1944, June 20, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/Africa/bg1944.cfm.
3. CDR Otto Sieber, "Africa Command: Forecast for the Future," *Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 1, January 2007, at www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2007/Jan/sieberJan07.asp.
4. Africa has long been ignored in America's regional combatant command structure. Sub-Saharan Africa was not included in any geographic combatant command until 1983 and, once included, was an often-overlooked component of the existing commands. *Ibid.*
5. No other region of the world is in more dire need of development than sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa's 719 million people face tremendous challenges, including the world's highest incidence of HIV/AIDS, deep poverty, unemployment, political instability, and a host of related problems. Unfortunately, about half the countries in sub-Saharan Africa experienced negative growth in real per capita income despite hundreds of billions of dollars in aid over the past two decades. Instead of desperately needed economic growth, sub-Saharan Africa as a region saw a decline in per capita GDP from \$575 in 1980 to \$536 in 2004 (in 2000 dollars). See Brett D. Schaefer, "How Economic Freedom Is Central to Development in Sub-Saharan Africa," Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 922, February 3, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/TradeandForeignAid/hl922.cfm.
6. Pauline Jelinek, "Pentagon to set up new command in Africa," Associated Press, February 6, 2007, at www.chron.com/displ/story.mpl/ap/politics/4530336.html.
7. Jackie Northam, "Taking on the U.S. Military's Africa Command," NPR, February 7, 2006, at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7234997, and Vince Crawley, "Africa: US Creating New Africa Command to Coordinate Military Efforts," AllAfrica.com, February 7, 2007, at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200702070072.html>.

Defense sees this expanded role for civilians in the command as an expansion of the command's knowledge, not a shift in authority, and the command is not designed nor expected to assume a prominent role in setting U.S. policy in the region beyond that traditionally reserved for the military.⁸

AFRICOM will begin as a sub-command of EUCOM in October 2007 headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, at the European Command headquarters. It is expected to stand up as a separate command by October 2008, with a headquarters on the African continent. While not all of the commands have regionally based headquarters—for instance, CENTCOM is based in Tampa—AFRICOM should be based in the region because of the unique challenges that it is being asked to meet. This arrangement will improve accessibility to the region and promote cultural and working relationships with regional partners. Moreover, the command will be better positioned to communicate concerns to the political leadership in Washington and provide better advice to policymakers.⁹

Uncertainties and Misunderstandings. The non-traditional aspects of AFRICOM, combined with inadequate efforts to explain why the U.S. sees the need for a new command and how it fits into existing foreign policy relationships, has created confusion and contributed to misunderstandings in the U.S. and in Africa. As Representative Donald M. Payne, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health, stated:

Africans themselves seem somewhat skeptical, and perhaps downright cynical about the intentions of the United States. There are some who think this effort is a reaction to the presence of the Chinese. There are others who be-

lieve that we are trying to extend the global war on terror. Still others are convinced that the United States is intent on protecting oil resources on the continent. I suspect that there is an element of truth to each of those rumors....

During the course of this hearing, I hope that administration officials will address those three issues, as well as questions regarding the principle mission of the new command, the structure of the command, where it might be located, and the level of resources such a command might need.¹⁰

Chairman Payne makes a fair point that the Administration has provided few details on the structure and mission of AFRICOM and how it will interact with existing U.S. government actors in the region. Aside from describing a command that will focus less on war-fighting than conflict prevention and emphasize civil-military cooperation, the Administration has put forward only vague assurances that the U.S. military will not dictate policy to African governments. Some of these details are no doubt still being finalized, but the Administration's reticence has unnecessarily raised concerns. For instance, South Africa announced that the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region does not want to host AFRICOM. A South African Foreign Affairs Department official asserted that this opposition stems from fears that "even though AFRICOM would not necessarily entail a large number of personnel, it would be 'an injection' of U.S. military presence on the continent, creating a facility for enhanced intelligence-gathering within Africa."¹¹

Other nations that would usually be expected to welcome more U.S. engagement in Africa, such as Botswana, have hesitated because they are uncertain of the details of the command and hear only oppo-

8. Comments by Department of Defense Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Theresa M. Whalen at "AFRICOM: Implications for African Security and U.S.-African Relations," American Enterprise Institute, September 20, 2007, at www.aei.org/events/eventID.1571.filter.all/event_detail.asp.

9. The Administration shares this analysis. Pauline Jelinek, "Pentagon to set up new command in Africa."

10. Opening Statement by Chairman Donald M. Payne, "Africa Command: Opportunity for Engagement or the Militarization of the U.S. Africa Relationship?" Subcommittee on Africa & Global Health of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives, August 2, 2007, at <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/payne080207.htm>.

11. Shaun Benton, "US to shed light on Africom," BuaNews, September 21, 2007, at www.safrika.info/africa/africom-210907.htm.

sition from countries like South Africa. Speaking to the University of Botswana, President Festus Mogae of Botswana stated, “We have not taken a position [on AFRICOM] because we don’t know how the animal will look like.”¹² Opposition parties in Botswana have seized upon conspiracy theories about AFRICOM to advance their position claiming, “It is the duty of every Botswana citizen who cherishes peace, tranquility and democracy to vigorously prevent President George Bush from using Botswana as a spring board for his military and oil based economic maneuvers.”¹³ The Administration’s weak communications strategy created a vacuum, now filled by critics.

Worse, the failure of the Administration to convey details of AFRICOM has also created opportunities for individuals like President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe to promulgate conspiracy theories about U.S. military or neo-colonialist ambitions in Africa. Because of Mugabe’s reputation as a liberation icon, his accusations have currency in Africa despite his lack of evidence and his obvious interest in diverting attention from economic disaster and political repression in Zimbabwe.

The Facts So Far. The U.S. position could not be more distant from the fevered claims of Mugabe or the fears of South Africa. The idea is not to dictate U.S. demands to African governments or to inject large numbers of U.S. military personnel into the region, but rather to work with leaders to improve their capabilities and coordination to address mutual concerns, such as instability and governance. As noted by Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Ryan Henry, an important measure of AFRICOM’s success will be “if it keeps American troops out of Africa for the next 50 years.”¹⁴ Indeed,

the entire purpose of AFRICOM is to diffuse and prevent crises on the continent by increasing regional capabilities, thereby reducing the need for U.S. or multilateral military intervention. A meeting between U.S. officials and African countries in Washington on September 22–23 may address some of the concerns voiced by African governments but may be too late to mitigate the suspicions cultivated by Mugabe and others.¹⁵

The details of the headquarters composition are overblown and far less important than U.S. aims and goals for AFRICOM. Indeed, the Pentagon is still in the planning stages for AFRICOM and is adjusting its details for the headquarters and regional footprint in response to government and public reaction in Africa. The location of the command headquarters has not yet been announced, although officials have met with numerous governments about the possibility of hosting. The Department of Defense has said the headquarters will be relatively small, with as much as 80 percent of command staff not based in the region.¹⁶ Similarly, the Pentagon insists that there are no plans to establish new military bases in Africa; instead, AFRICOM will be represented by the headquarters and “regional integration teams” in offices spread around the continent to align with the African Union’s five regional economic communities and the African standby force brigades, with the intent of establishing a “regional presence on the African continent which would facilitate appropriate interaction with existing Africa political-military organizations.”¹⁷

Recommendations. When he speaks to the Senate Armed Services Committee, General William E. Ward should further explain the role and vision of AFRICOM to clearly address African and congress-

12. Kitsepile Nyathi, “Southern Africa: Plans to Base U.S. Africa Command in Botswana Causes Tension,” *The Nation* (Nairobi), September 13, 2007, at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200709121003.html>.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Lauren Ploch, “Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the U.S. Military in Africa,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, July 6, 2007, p. 6.

15. Shaun Benton, “US to shed light on Africom.”

16. Charlie Coon, “New AFRICOM staff to be mainly situated outside Africa,” *Stars and Stripes* (European edition), September 25, 2007, at www.estripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=49013.

17. John T. Bennett, “DoD planning 5 regional teams under AfriCom,” *Navy Times*, September 24, 2007, at www.navytimes.com/news/2007/09/defense_africom_070919/.

sional concerns. He should also show flexibility over secondary issues like establishing headquarters. Despite the expectation that AFRICOM will stand up as an independent command headquartered in Africa in 2008, there is no pressing need to establish a regional headquarters by that date. The priority is to have necessary personnel on the ground working with African and U.S. government counterparts to set, oversee, and advance AFRICOM priorities and activities. This need could be met by the regional integration teams. A physical headquarters can be delayed if it helps allay African concerns. It is far better to take a crawl, walk, run approach to establishing a headquarters if it will assist the process in building up trust and confidence in African countries on the roll of AFRICOM.

The Department of Defense's self-imposed rush is counterproductive if it only creates turmoil among the countries the command is charged to cooperate with. General Ward's highest priority should be to develop a long-term theater engagement strategy that is interagency in character. This strategy should address the competition for energy resources, combating terrorism, thwarting infectious diseases, responsible governance, reducing corruption while increasing transparency, strengthening civil-military relations, and developing free

markets. This strategic guidance is more important than any details about brick-and-mortar building locations within the continent.

Conclusion. Africa is distinct from other regions in the nature and variety of its challenges. Creating an independent command will allow the proper focus and attention that Africa deserves as an increasingly important area for U.S. national and economic security. President Bush has demonstrated foresight in calling for an Africa command, but the Administration must bolster its public relations efforts to better explain how AFRICOM fits into the existing U.S. relationship with African nations. General Ward's confirmation hearing offers an opportunity to clarify how the new command will partner with African nations and supplement existing U.S. government activities and policies in the region. Most importantly, he can alleviate concerns voiced by African nations and Congress about what role AFRICOM will play on the continent.

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