Africa Command: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

Mark Bellamy

Apart from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, few American military initiatives in recent months have attracted as much attention or provoked as many questions as the announcement by President Bush in February 2007 that the U.S. would establish a new geographic combatant command for Africa. There is little disagreement in Washington that Africa Command – AFRICOM – is an idea whose time has come. There is less agreement, however, about how the new command will be structured and staffed, how it will be resourced and where it will be located.

Answers to these questions are needed before AFRICOM’s target date to launch as a fully-fledged “unified command” in late 2008. Also required is a clearer understanding of the range of AFRICOM’s missions. War fighting and “kinetic” operations will not feature high on the list of AFRICOM’s likely duties. Instead, President Bush has promised a soft power agenda for AFRICOM, a focus on “common goals of development, health, education, democracy and economic growth for Africa.” Creating what one senior DOD official called “a command like no other in US history [...] a command that is as unique and diverse as Africa itself” has presented military and civilian planners with daunting challenges.

Increasing U.S. Attention to Africa

Why has the United States chosen this moment for an ambitious experiment in Africa? Part of the answer is practical. For twenty-five years, the Pentagon’s limited involvement in Africa has been divided geographically among three commands. European Command (EUCOM) has been responsible for all of North Africa and most of sub-Saharan Africa, Central Command (CENTCOM) was in charge of the Horn of Africa, and Pacific Command (PACOM) exercised oversight for Madagascar and Indian Ocean island states. “An outdated arrangement left over from the Cold War” was how Defense Secretary Gates described this parceling out of Africa among military headquarters for which the continent was not a main concern. Bringing the whole of Africa under a single command with an exclusive focus on its problems and opportunities was a reform that was long overdue. Still, it took a strong push from former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld during his final weeks in office to generate the impetus for bureaucratic change within the US government.

Viewed from global policy perspective, the creation of AFRICOM is simply the most recent of several major initiatives of the Bush Administration that acknowledge the growing importance of Africa to the United States. Midway through his first term, President Bush launched the largest international public health initiative ever undertaken by the United States – an emergency plan to combat HIV/AIDS. Africa was inevitably the primary focus of the 5 year, $15 billion PEPFAR initiative. This massive push into the African public health sector was the primary reason that official development assistance from the U.S. to Africa as a whole more than trebled from 2000 to 2004.

At the same time, the Bush Administration proposed and budgeted major increases in US funding for African development through the newly-created Millennium Challenge Corporation. The mission of the MCC is to identify African governments making progress in respecting the rule of law, investing in the uplift of their own populations and promoting economic freedom. Generous assistance is then channeled to these governments to support these continued reforms. PEPFAR and the MCC are two of the most important humanitarian and developmental initiatives ever undertaken in Africa by the United States. They enjoy bipartisan support in Congress, in part because generous spending increases are linked to strict measurements of how effectively the money is actually being spent in the field.
Africa as a Security Challenge

Alongside this new level of engagement in Africa is a growing appreciation in Washington of the global dimension of security challenges in Africa. Al Qaida’s bombings of US Embassies in East Africa in 1998 are now understood to have been part of a global campaign that led to the 9/11 attacks on US soil. (Osama bin Laden lived in and operated from the Sudan prior to the East Africa attacks.) The prospect of international terrorists finding refuge and marshaling resources in poorly policed or ungoverned spaces in Africa is considered a real potential threat to the US and its allies. Lawlessness and extremist violence in Somalia, attacks on international shipping off Somalia’s coast, violence in the oil-producing Niger Delta and growing insecurity across the waters of the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa are of direct concern to the U.S. and other non-African states. Africa already supplies China with 30 percent of its imported oil. The U.S. will rely on Africa for 25 percent of its imported oil by 2010. Much of this oil comes from areas marked by chronic instability and uncertain governance.

Then there are Africa’s internecine wars. Since the Rwandan genocide in 1994, it has not been as easy for the United States, or the rest of the world, to turn a blind eye to African conflicts that were once considered purely internal. The collective conscience of the world’s democracies reacts when millions are killed in long running civil wars in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), or when states fail in West Africa amidst well publicized human suffering. Apart from the humanitarian tragedies these conflicts generate, a danger exists that instability on this scale offers opportunities to terrorists or, more likely, international criminal organizations to flourish as traffickers of arms, drugs, natural resources, and illegal services. Blood diamonds are only part of this story. Booming illegal traffic in tropical hardwood and precious metals, for example, was a driving force in the long running civil war in the DRC. That criminal elements may some day actually succeed in “capturing” sovereign space in Africa, possibly in partnership with corrupt political elites, is a potential concern with wide international ramifications.

Thus the official view in Washington of Africa’s security challenges today differs markedly from that of only a decade ago. In a cornerstone policy document, the National Security Strategy of the United States of America, published in 2002, the Bush administration declared that “weak states….can pose as a great danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.” The NSS further noted that in Africa “promise and opportunity sit side by side with disease, war, and desperate poverty. This threatens both a core value of the United States – preserving human dignity – and our strategic priority – combating terror. American interests and American principles, therefore, lead in the same direction: we will work with others for an African continent that lives in liberty, peace and growing prosperity.”

African leaders too are coming to grips with the increasing strategic sensitivity of Africa and have evinced a new resolve to take charge of security challenges facing the continent. This determination is reflected in the transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU). An important facet of this transformation, both as embodied in the new AU charter and as expressed by African leaders, is acceptance of a degree of collective responsibility for advancing democracy, instituting good governance, safeguarding human rights and managing crisis and conflict across the continent. The AU’s agenda is ambitious and, perhaps understandably, progress thus far has been mostly hortatory and symbolic. Still, the discourse in Africa has changed. A new readiness exists to confront collectively political and security issues that would in earlier times been considered sovereign matters for individual states to resolve.
AFRICOM's Mission

AFRICOM's intent is to complement and reinforce the AU's new resolve. It proposes to do so through training, exercising and cooperation with African military counterparts, thereby enabling African militaries to better execute the missions they are given by their civilian authorities. Building partnership capacity, as it is called, is a key objective of DOD's global strategy (as outlined in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review). The need for such capacity building is especially acute in Africa, which is why the US has for many years operated bilateral programs there to upgrade and professionalize African armed forces. Depending on how the numbers are tallied, about $250 million is now spent annually on activities such as training African militaries to secure borders and maritime zones, conduct peacekeeping operations, provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and conduct civic action programs. AFRICOM will unify these diverse efforts in a single chain of command and presumably bring additional resources and fresh impetus to them.

Plans by the African Union to establish a force of sub-regional "standby brigades" trained and equipped to move into peacekeeping situations on relatively short notice offer a possible avenue for collaboration with AFRICOM. While implementation of this project has been slower than originally anticipated, it remains a key element in the AU's drive to develop local capabilities to manage security challenges. AFRICOM would be very likely to respond positively and generously to any AU request for help in forming the standby brigades.

AFRICOM will also break new ground by concentrating on what the QDR refers to as "anticipatory measures." Broadly speaking, these are policies and activities that address the root causes of social instability and conflict in Africa. A key assumption in the design of AFRICOM is that, if the new command is properly configured, it can help African governments to "prevent problems from becoming crises and crises from becoming catastrophes." This ambition moves AFRICOM into terrain that is far more familiar to diplomats and development experts than to the military.

Acknowledging this, AFRICOM planners have developed a unique command structure, one in which senior civilians are fully "embedded" and empowered to help set and implement policies. A senior Foreign Service officer of Ambassadorial rank is slated to serve as one of the principal deputies to the four-star AFRICOM commander. This diplomat will direct a major command element – the Directorate for Civil/Military Activities – that will oversee virtually all of AFRICOM's capacity building assistance to African militaries, as well as all of AFRICOM's humanitarian assistance, civil action projects and developmental initiatives. The directorate will be manned by combination of military personnel and experts drawn from civilian agencies – the State Department, USAID, Treasury, Justice, Energy, Homeland Security and others. By marrying DOD's considerable resources with civilian expertise, AFRICOM is expected to develop a wider range of partnerships and operate closer to the grassroots level of African societies than could any conventional military command.

Because of its emphasis on crisis prevention and "anticipatory measures," AFRICOM will not be configured as primarily a war fighting machine. Preparations for "kinetic" action will not be a priority. While AFRICOM will be able to call upon and deploy fighting forces in Africa should the need arise, the likelihood of such a requirement is considered low. Because conventional military operations in Africa are envisioned only in exceptional circumstances, there is no current plan to base additional combat forces on African soil beyond the small number already in place (since 2003) in Djibouti. A sizeable headquarters element, however, is slated for location in Africa. The exact size and location of this headquarters is yet to be determined.

Although AFRICOM does not foresee the basing of additional combat forces in Africa, it will have as a fundamental part of its mission a requirement to combat terrorism and terrorist-related extremism. It is highly likely that AFRICOM commanders will look first to African
partners – operating on their own or in concert with the U.S. – to act against identified threats. But integral to AFRICOM’s creation is the assumption that it will act alone if necessary to neutralize threats to the United States or its allies.

**Doubts and Difficulties**

As could be expected, the process of designing and building a new and unconventional geographic combatant command has encountered a degree of questioning and resistance from different quarters.

Even within DOD misgivings have emerged. With Defense Secretary Rumsfeld – the driving force behind AFRICOM’s creation – out of the picture, and with the recent departure of former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace, skeptics within the Pentagon have come forward to question some of the basic assumptions behind AFRICOM. Some services, for example, have balked at the prospect of having to transfer resources and authorities to the new command. More broadly, initial cost estimates for establishing the command have raised concerns within the Joint Staff that AFRICOM’s agenda may be too ambitious after all. There are reports that the new Chairman of the Joint Staff, Navy admiral Michael Mullen, could seek to scale back or slow down AFRICOM’s development.

Another source of concern has been the mixed reaction AFRICOM has received within the Washington inter-agency community. While few question the soundness of the basic idea – the need for a unified command with an exclusive focus on Africa -- the precise role(s) and the structure of the command are still the subject of some sharp debate. DOD and the State Department have thus far been unable to agree on the likely location and composition of the AFRICOM headquarters in Africa. A DOD proposal to create four “Regional Integration Teams” of blended DOD, State, USAID and other civilian personnel and locate these in four different African capitals has reportedly raised concerns about competing USG bureaucracies in Africa. The State Department will likely insist on strict Chief of Mission (Ambassadorial) oversight of all AFRICOM activities short of actual combat operations. How AFRICOM correlates with Ambassadors and US Embassies in Africa remains an important unresolved issue.

Another major disconnect also looms between DOD and civilian agencies. Whereas AFRICOM requires a sizeable civilian component, including at senior command levels, in order to accomplish its unique mission, it is not at all clear where civilian agencies will find the personnel to meet this requirement. The State Department, in an urgent drive to fill newly created positions in Iraq and Afghanistan, currently has more than 300 officer positions unfilled worldwide. Less dramatic staffing gaps exist at other civilian agencies. The US Congress has been generally slow to approve staffing increases outside DOD, so it is by no means certain that State – by far the largest and most important non-DOD partner in AFRICOM – will be able to contribute more than a small handful of officers to the exercise.

In Africa itself, AFRICOM has also gotten a cool reception thus far. Senior DOD officials, accompanied by State Department and other USG personnel, have made two multi-nation swings through Africa in recent months. They have briefed in European capitals and hosted conferences in the U.S. as well in order to gather non-US, and especially African, feedback and suggestions. Cautious African reactions thus far reveal concerns about a possible “militarization” of US activities, especially development assistance, in Africa. Some African officials have questioned whether the real US motive in setting up AFRICOM isn’t to ensure access to African oil or other natural resources, or to counter growing Chinese influence in Africa. Others allege that the US intends to use AFRICOM to step up the “global war on terrorism” in Africa, to the detriment of civilian populations and Muslim communities.
There is a degree of frustration in Washington over what many feel are misplaced and exaggerated concerns about AFRICOM's mission. US officials note that African opinion is by no means universally hostile and that more than one African government has enthusiastically offered to host the new AFRICOM headquarters. What seems indisputable, however, is that the US needs to expand and intensify its consultations with African governments and improve its communication with African publics. This is particularly relevant given generalized African uneasiness over US security policies globally. Suspicions will persist until Washington can find ways to demonstrate convincingly to African audiences that AFRICOM's intentions are benign and that it can deliver tangible benefits to African communities.

The Way Ahead

A fully operational AFRICOM, with a headquarters located somewhere on the African continent and support elements positioned probably in Germany, is due before the end of 2008. Much works remain to be done if that deadline is to be met. Differences within DOD regarding the composition and authorities of the command must be resolved. AFRICOM's ambition to be a truly unique, whole-of-government operation must somehow be squared with the authorities exercised overseas by the Department of State. Personnel shortfalls in civilian agencies must be addressed by Congress. African audiences must be convinced of the worth of AFRICOM and persuaded to support it.

Perhaps most necessary of all is a clearer articulation and a deeper common understanding of AFRICOM's mission. That DOD should internally reorganize to bring more focus and coherence to its activities in Africa is beyond doubt. That AFRICOM should be innovative in its approach to African security problems while always making sure it supports – not substitutes for – African initiative is also a given. But the larger paradigm shift – creating a new combatant command whose main job is to forestall conflict rather than fight – is likely to require more debate, more refinement and more careful marketing before it becomes a reality.

W.M. (Mark) Bellamy is Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.