

AFRICOM: MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE UNITED STATES' NEWEST COMBATANT COMMAND AND WHAT TO EXPECT

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Introduction

As the world's largest consumer of oil, the United States (U.S.) is continually hunting for this resource to meet its massive demand. The search has led the U.S. to attach a new importance to Africa, one of the few continents where oil output is growing. The optimism that Africa's massive oil reserves generate is tempered by the reality that the continent is plagued by chronic instability. Reflecting on the experiences of extracting oil from unstable regions across the globe, such as the Middle East, the U.S. has introduced a new strategic paradigm for Africa that seeks to prevent violence and facilitate development. The new U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) is leading

this effort. While a military-led approach carries risks, most notably for the African people and especially in the face of competition from China, AFRICOM has the potential to engage positively in Africa by bolstering much needed security while achieving American strategic objectives.

Global Energy and the Context for the New U.S. Military Focus on Africa

The United States military has traditionally treated Africa as an afterthought. The combatant commands created during the Cold War divided the continent among three separate areas of responsibility, a clear representation that Africa lacked strategic importance.¹

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With world demand for energy resources increasing and global supply falling into question, the United States has recently begun to redefine its relationship with the resource-rich continent. More specifically, the U.S. has taken note that world supply of oil may fall short of global demand as early as 2025.² By the same year, Africa's oil production is expected to rise by 91 percent.³ As the United States seeks to keep spigots flowing, it has begun to factor Africa into its strategic calculus.

The African oil reserves that have caught the attention of U.S. policy makers have simultaneously elevated the importance of accompanying risk factors. Most importantly, many of the continent's resource-rich regions have traditionally suffered from chronic instability.⁴ America's experience in the Middle East has demonstrated both the costs of responding to crises and the lengths that the United States will go to secure its strategic interests. If the U.S. hopes to facilitate the smooth transfer of oil from Africa to the United States, then addressing the problems of instability is an important prerequisite.⁵

The case of Nigeria illustrates America's need to confront volatility in oil-rich countries if it hopes to maximize

extraction efforts. Nigeria is currently the fourth largest supplier of oil to the United States.⁶ Despite massive oil profits, Nigeria has failed to adequately secure oil facilities and pipelines or to address the grievances of regional populations demanding a share in the income. The joint frustration of local populations, overwhelmingly situated near the oil-rich Niger Delta, and the vulnerability of oil infrastructure has led to widely successful attacks against Nigeria's oil production. The Movement for the Emancipation for the Niger Delta (MEND), the group spearheading attack efforts, has succeeded in slashing Nigeria's output by a third since 2005.⁷ Specifically, Nigeria lost US\$23.7 billion to oil theft and sabotage in just the first nine months of 2008 alone.⁸ That translates into a staggering 700,000 barrels or US\$3 million in losses per day.⁹

The frustration felt by the people in the Niger Delta as well as factors behind Nigeria's poorly protected oil infrastructure stem from problems shared by many resource-rich, African countries. Corruption, inadequate investment laws, internal disorder and conflict, and a systematic lack of government transparency contribute to inefficiency across the continent.¹⁰ The United States

has created a new combatant command focused on Africa to help overcome these impediments and ensure uninterrupted access to African oil.

AFRICOM: Old Interests, New Paradigm

AFRICOM has aroused concerns both from within Africa and from external observers about the intentions of the U.S. military. Given the growing competition for Africa's resources, many fear that America's approach will militarize the continent to the detriment of the African people.¹¹ Others, however, applaud U.S. efforts and hail AFRICOM as a radical shift in U.S. policy towards a new strategic paradigm. They believe this embraces both security and development by helping Africa disengage from the cycle of violence through the prevention of conflict.¹² The effects AFRICOM will have on the continent will be determined with time. Still, lessons from America's implementation of other combatant commands, former U.S. military engagement with Africa, and the new strategic paradigm that characterizes AFRICOM provide insight into the new combatant command's role.

A look at previous U.S. policy concerning resource-rich regions provides worrisome

examples. In the Persian Gulf, military assistance accompanied the burgeoning U.S. interest in oil security. The establishment of military bases and the formation of Central Command (CENTCOM) followed, and eventually combat ensued.¹³ War in the Gulf was consistent with U.S. policy as enunciated by the Carter Doctrine in 1980 wherein President Carter categorized Persian Gulf oil as a "national strategic interest" and officially committed the U.S. to the use of "any means necessary, including military force" to guarantee the free flow of oil from the Middle East.¹⁴ The same trajectory was repeated in the Caspian Sea, and some fear the Carter Doctrine is now being extended to Africa.¹⁵ To support their case, proponents of this view point to former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Walter Kansteiner's comment in 2002 that "African oil is of strategic national interest to us and it will increase and become more important to us as we go forward."¹⁶

The declaration of African oil as a strategic interest accompanied the establishment and increase of military programs and provisions. Not surprisingly, the biggest slices of assistance have been allocated to Africa's two leading oil suppliers to the U.S.: Nigeria and Angola.¹⁷

More broadly, United States arms sales to Africa through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program climbed from US\$25.6 million in 2004 to US\$61.5 million in 2005.¹⁸ Moreover, the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) underwent a telling expansion. Created in 2002 to provide counter-terrorism training and equipment to Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, PSI transformed in 2004 into the Trans-Saharan Initiative (TSI) and expanded to include the important oil producing countries of Algeria and Nigeria, as well as Senegal and Tunisia. TSI funding also increased from US\$16 million in 2005 to US\$100 million in 2007.¹⁹

Resource needs clearly drive the U.S. military focus on Africa. However, AFRICOM introduces a new strategic paradigm that emphasizes opportunity for mutual benefit. So while the Pentagon's new and expanded programs center on the self-interested endeavors of fighting terrorism and improving America's ability to gain resources, AFRICOM is more than an inflated version of business as usual. Rather, the new combatant command represents a radical shift in U.S. policy.

Traditionally, U.S. doctrine divides conventional military campaigns into phases typically marked by roman numerals: I) deter / engage, II) seize initiative,

III) dominate, IV) transition.²⁰ Recently, military strategists have introduced "Phase Zero" which addresses opportunities to prevent conflict from occurring in the first place. AFRICOM is emblematic of the Department of Defense's (DOD) Phase Zero initiative. The new Command has articulated a holistic security approach that embraces both security and development.²¹

The creation of AFRICOM demonstrates that the previous system did not adequately serve American interests.²² Further, there is no doubt that the United States is shaping AFRICOM to achieve its strategic interests by addressing Africa's three broad areas of significance to the United States: terrorism, resources, and humanitarian concerns.²³ What makes AFRICOM unique from other combatant commands, however, is its holistic, inter-agency approach to security. It is in an innovative manner that AFRICOM attempts to reconcile American national interests with African interests and develop African capabilities in areas of mutual interest.

AFRICOM operates on the theory that it is possible to mitigate the conditions that produce conflict by engaging with allies and partners to shape the international environment and thus promote stability and security.²⁴ Moreover,

AFRICOM brings several U.S. agencies, including the Department of State and the Agency for International Development (USAID), into its core functions.²⁵ The result is a multifaceted approach emphasizing a blend of diplomacy, development, and defense.²⁶ The expectation is that a world occupied by democratic states, effectively governing their territories, will best provide a secure and congenial environment to the United States' interests.²⁷

AFRICOM will focus on three areas, which are strategically important to the United States. First, Africa's resource wealth, as previously discussed, is the driving force behind U.S. policy for the continent. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) reported that Africa supplied more petroleum to the United States (19.8 percent) than the Persian Gulf region (16.1 percent).²⁸ Moreover, most of the petroleum from the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea is light or "sweet" crude, which is preferred by U.S. refiners for its low sulfur content.²⁹

Whereas other combatant commands have intervened militarily in major oil producing regions, particularly in the Middle East, it is unlikely that U.S. forces will engage in combat in Africa to secure resources. Instead,

AFRICOM seems to be focused on building partner capacity so that African countries can provide for their own security. In other words, the United States hopes to secure oil resources by limiting internal African conflicts while boosting Africa's ability to effectively respond to crises. According to U.S. General William Ward, commander of AFRICOM, the new Command "is a headquarters staff whose mission entails coordinating the kind of support that will enable African governments and existing regional organizations, such as the African Standby Force, to have greater capacity to provide security and respond in times of need."³⁰ In addition, AFRICOM's position that development acts as a preventer of conflict is a leading factor that the Command calculates into its efforts towards avoiding violence and instability.³¹

Second, the challenge of global jihad has crept onto the continent. While the problem of terrorism in Africa is primarily isolated in the Maghreb region, al Qaeda's 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania demonstrate that the threat has the potential to extend its reach.³² The vast areas of ungoverned space in many countries permit malicious groups to operate in the absence of an effective state security apparatus

and provide attractive havens for terrorist plotting.³³ U.S. forces, however, are unlikely to actively participate in counter-terrorism operations in Africa or attempt to control ungoverned spaces in the Sahel. Instead, AFRICOM will seek to help African countries build their military capability to extend governance to the territorial boundaries of their countries thereby eliminating ungoverned spaces.³⁴

Third, humanitarian concerns compel U.S. attention for a growing number of reasons. To begin, the epidemics that plague vast portions of the continent have a direct effect on the preservation of regional military forces. For example, South Africa suffers from a one-third HIV/AIDS infection rate. The disease equally afflicts the country's military which means that for every three men or women South Africa trains for military service, they can expect to lose one to HIV/AIDS. The drain on the state's resources in terms of time and treasure, not to mention the tragic loss of human life, is significant. Since AFRICOM intends to participate in training African security forces, it is in the broader interest of the U.S. to address issues of disease to ensure American and African resources are well spent.³⁵

Traditionally, Africa has drawn the United States' attention primarily during humanitarian crises. While moral impulses are no longer the central factor dictating Africa's importance to the U.S., they still persist, such that the African Command will seek a structure that allows U.S. forces to assist the continent in times of crisis. AFRICOM prefers a scenario where African countries can provide emergency response to their citizens entirely on their own. For most African states, that capability has yet to be realized which means AFRICOM, in concert with international actors, can expect to be called on to help alleviate crisis suffering. The focus of AFRICOM will remain, however, increasing African capabilities through training and development.

Competition for Africa's Oil: The Chinese Threat

While the United States does not officially list China as a threat to African oil, there is certainly a real and perceived challenge from the rising power. China's energy needs are rapidly rising, and America is concerned that China will pre-empt U.S. firms in developing promising oil fields and compete with the U.S. for the loyalty of local governments, in Africa.

China's remarkable growth rate has been accompanied by a growing need for oil. DOE estimates that China's net oil consumption will rise by 214 percent between 2002 and 2025, from 5.2 to 14.2 million barrels per day.³⁶ Chinese firms have already established a significant presence in Sudan where the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation now owns 40 percent of Sudan's largest oil-producing company. China also now owns 45 percent of a major Nigerian offshore oil field and is seeking large oil investments in Angola as well.³⁷

Beyond just oil, China is playing an increasingly influential political and economic role in Africa and many in the United States fear that China's practices will compete with the U.S. approach. At the same time, China's official policy not to "interfere in the internal affairs of other countries" sparks worry that China intends to entrench the status quo.³⁸ The concern is that China will aid and abet African dictators, gain privileged access to precious resources, and undo American efforts to support Africa's trajectory towards democracy.³⁹ While this view is somewhat alarmist given China's capabilities, it is nonetheless held by many in America and will therefore likely affect U.S. policy, AFRICOM

included. Military ties to African governments and the supply of arms and military assistance can in part, therefore, be viewed as a low level form of military competition with China for the loyalty of local elites.⁴⁰

Potential Consequences of the U.S. Military Focus on Africa

The consequences of the new United States military focus on Africa remain somewhat speculative, but addressing areas of concern are important considering the high stakes involved, particularly for the continent's population. On the one hand, AFRICOM was created with a genuine commitment to transforming America's approach to Africa. The unique security-development model offers a positive engagement opportunity for the U.S. and Africa. At the same time, national strategic interest in Africa's oil provided a major catalyst for the new U.S. effort. If history is an indicator the United States will defend those interests with force, if necessary, to the potential detriment of the Africa.

A number of possible negative consequences of increased military engagement with Africa are worth discussing. First, African regimes could come to rely on oil-based development instead of

making genuine efforts to develop local manufacturing and agriculture. Second, U.S. military involvement could aggravate internal political conflict over resource allocation. Third, developing close relationships with unstable and unpopular regimes poses the threat of fuelling anti-American sentiment and promoting the growth of terrorism. Fourth, there is the likelihood that escalating military confrontation between the United States and China could lead to proxy wars at the extreme detriment of the African populations.⁴¹ To avoid these potential negative consequences, AFRICOM must continually keep the welfare of the population in mind. If genuine concern for the development and security of Africa acts as a driving principle in AFRICOM's decision-making, then potential negative consequences will be limited. It will require, however, an active effort on the part of the U.S. military and policy makers.

A further issue worth exploring is the role of private military companies (PMCs). Given that American military forces are severely overstretched with commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas around the globe, the United States has been forced to hire PMCs to carry out its military training.⁴² In Africa, PMCs have

exhibited a number of disturbing characteristics in recent years. In the case of Liberia, two PMCs are accused of spending \$172 million for army training without input from the Liberian government.⁴³ These companies often lack transparency and accountability to the host countries. Since PMCs are contracted by the U.S. government, they are answerable only to agency representatives and not to the recipient country of military training, leaving African countries to only deal with PMCs through U.S. diplomatic missions. If AFRICOM hopes to realize its stated objectives of security and development in Africa, the Command will have to restructure how PMCs engage with African countries.

Conclusion

The new U.S. military focus on Africa represents an opportunity for the continent to shift towards greater security and development. At the same time, poor implementation or unforeseen crisis could upend America's genuine intention to engage positively with Africa. As the United States pursues its national strategic interests in Africa, it must bear in mind the consequences of its actions on the African people. AFRICOM represents a

tremendous opportunity to bring much needed security to the continent and open a new chapter in U.S.-Africa relations, but only if the U.S. gets it right.

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³ Klare and Volman, “African ‘Oil Rush’,” 611.

⁴ Klare and Volman, “African ‘Oil Rush’,” 610.

⁵ Klare and Volman, “African ‘Oil Rush’,” 612.

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¹¹ Jeremy Keenan, “Demystifying Africa’s Security.” *Review of African Political Economy*, 35, Issue 118 (2008): 635

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¹³ Catherine Besteman, “‘Beware of Those Bearing Gifts’: An Anthropologist’s View of AFRICOM,” *Anthropology Today* 24, no. 5 (2008): 21.

¹⁴ Daniel Volman, “The Scramble for African Oil,” *New African* 453 (2006): 18.

¹⁵ Besteman, “Beware,” 21., Volman, “Scramble,” 18., Keenan, “Demystifying Africa’s Security,” 635.

¹⁶ Volman, “Scramble,” 18.

¹⁷ Volman, “Scramble,” 18.

¹⁸ Volman, “Scramble,” 18.

¹⁹ Volman, “Scramble,” 19,

²⁰ Pham, “Scramble,” 257.

²¹ Pham, “Scramble,” 257.

²² Geopolitical. “AFRICOM and U.S. Military Priorities in Africa.” *Ocnus.net*. May 23, 2007.

²³ Pham, “America’s New Africa Command,” 258-9

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²⁵ Carmel Davis, "AFRICOM's Relationship to Oil, Terrorism and China." *Orbis*. 53, Issue 1 (2009): 123.

²⁶ Penn, "US AFRICOM," 74.

²⁷ Davis, "AFRICOM's Relationship," 131.

²⁸ Pham, "America's New Africa Command," 259.

²⁹ Pham, "America's New Africa Command," 259.

³⁰ William E. Ward, Thomas P. Galvin, "U.S. Africa Command and the Principle of Active Security. *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 51 (2008): 4.

³¹ Pham, "America's New Africa Command," 262.

³² Davis, "AFRICOM's Relationship," 125.

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³⁷ Klare and Volman, "African 'Oil Rush'," 622.

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⁴³ Aning, Jaye and Atuobi, "Role of Private Military Companies," 624.