

Africom Stands Up

Robert Killebrew

On the first day of October, the new United States Africa Command (Africom) became fully operational. The last major action proposed by former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the new command is chartered to support U.S. military and diplomatic initiatives across a huge continent and among an enormously diverse population. It's no secret that the decision to establish the command was controversial in Africa, and that reception initially ranged from cool to frosty, though that is said to be warming slightly.

Certainly the new command is making every effort to appear helpful and collaborative. The four-star command has two deputy commanders, one three-star for military operations and one ambassador for civil-military relations; its mission statement and other supporting guidance focus on "soft" activities like conflict prevention, consultation and aid. Signally, the title "combatant command," another holdover from the Rumsfeld era, does not appear, replaced instead by "regional military command" and the more historic "unified command." Considering the state of affairs on the African continent, this is all to the good.

Despite understandable uneasiness (or confusion) in some African capitols, this is a propitious time for Africom to stand up. First, change is coming to Africa, though unevenly. In the Moslem north, would-be moderate Arab states are clashing with radical Islamist movements. In the south, states like Botswana are emerging as stable countries after decades of post-colonial and post-Cold War violence; South Africa, the regional powerhouse, continues its emergence from apartheid to a true modern, multiparty democracy. American objectives and policies, distracted by ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and chastened by reality, are more likely to be more consultative and expectations are likely to be more modest than when the Neocons made sweeping gestures over large-scale maps. As a result, Africom's operations are likely to be more truly sensitive to the concerns and needs of host countries than previously, and the U.S. will be less likely to blunder into ill-considered adventures on the continent. Africom's new command structure, and the military-civil makeup of its staff, holds out the hope that U.S. civil-military operations will at long last be better coordinated.

There are certainly reasons why the U.S. should be involved in Africa's continued development. The command's area of operations covers 53 African countries, ranging from stable democracies to utterly failed states like Somalia. Aside from internal strife from tribalism or other political friction, disintegrative narco-criminal gangs and burgeoning Islamic radicalism challenge many of Africa's 53 states. State terrorism, such

as in Sudan, continues to be a source of instability and terror. Finally, the potential reemergence of great-power competition for Africa's natural resources, and in particular its energy supplies, supports a greater American focus on the continent's diverse challenges and opportunities. There has never been a real issue about whether we should take an interest in Africa; the question was always how. Here are a few suggestions for the new commander and his staff.

First, it's essential that every member of the command understand the essentially modest contribution that a headquarters of 1300 people can actually make in Africa, an enormous continent of 800 million people, where nearly half of the population is under the age of 15, where disease and malnutrition are rampant in vast areas and where, despite chaotic conditions, the economy is expected to grow 6.2 per cent next year. A strong dose of humility, and a focus on supporting the aspirations of emerging states, will go a long way.

Second, do not underestimate the great value of American diversity. While the conditions of the African diasporas to the United States was tragic, the consequences are that Africa is the ancestral home to a huge number of Americans, forging common ties of blood and kin not found with any other major power. In a sense, Africans see their African-American descendants "returning" to Africa, much like Irish-Americans going "home" to Erie. This can give the U.S. a huge advantage in overcoming bitter memories of colonialism if our policies and objectives recognize it.

Third, given the scope and diversity of the continent, Africom's activities will necessarily bring the command much closer to U.S. diplomatic missions and the chiefs of missions, the resident U.S. Ambassador. Given Africom's mission and operational dynamics, the U.S. missions will essentially be the command's "maneuver units," and it is vital for the command, and the U.S. ambassadors in the region work out effective relationships. Even given the necessity for military-to-military contacts, it is the U.S. ambassador, not the commander of Africom, who should be the "face" of U.S. policy toward, say, South Africa or Gambia. Rather, Africom's dedication to effective civil-military cooperation should extend beyond its staff, and include recognition of, and support to, U.S. ambassadors and their resident military assistance teams, if present. U.S. foreign policy has a long history of confusion and occasionally conflict between diplomats and soldiers; Africom should dedicate time and effort to insuring that "conflict prevention" -- part of the Africom concept of operations -- begins at home.

Fourth, the Africom staff, teamed with appropriate Department of Defense officials, should propose and support legislation designed to untangle the present laws and regulations governing military assistance. The present laws governing U.S. assistance generally, and military assistance in particular, date back to the passionate 1970s, when legislators set out to clip the wings of military adventurism. The past decade has awakened many in Washington for the need for a fundamental rewrite, but until the present there has been no service or agency willing to take on the bone-wearying, long-term task of seeing military assistance untangled, and the advent of a new administration -- of whatever party -- makes it probable that there won't be movement on this

unglamorous but vital subject for at least a couple of years. As a new command with an obvious stake in the outcome, the new military-civilian hybrid headquarters could well take this on.

Fifth, and along the lines of military assistance, the number of African military officers attending U.S. military schools should be ramped up. "African" covers a lot of ground, and in this case includes both the cosmopolitan, Europeanized officer corps of the Mediterranean littoral with those of the deepest interior. Not only would all take back to their home countries ties with America and American officers -- some of whose careers would intersect with their African classmates over the years -- but the command's, and America's interests would be considerably advanced. At present, attendance at U.S. service schools is too expensive, handled by the State Department instead of more expeditiously by Defense, and too restricted by Service classroom space; all should be reversed. Costs should be cut or shared, the Defense Department should have the lead on defense-related schools, and more classroom space should be made available. The lure of a school in the United States is a potent sweetener for military-to-military relations, and Africom should make this an urgent priority above other legislation outlined above. Finally, Africom should vigorously resist the well-meaning suggestion, made in some quarters, that special schools or courses should be organized for African officers. The ghettoization of African officers to second-rate schools -- for that is exactly how it would be perceived on the continent -- would be deeply resented, and would frustrate the strategic intent of schooling foreign officers in American classes, alongside American counterparts.

At a recent conference retired ambassador Bob Houdek, a senior official with wide experience in Africa and the national intelligence community, spoke urgently against the placement of Africom headquarters in Africa itself. Ambassador Houdek pointed out that the establishment of a thousand-person headquarters, with families and homes maintained to U.S. standard, with the attendant and necessary security measures -- walls, barbed-wire fences, armored cars -- would create the appearance of a colonial oasis in the midst of a country most liable to be in poverty, and at the mercy of unanticipated coups and changes of government. Better, he said convincingly, to put the headquarters in the United States, as in the case of Central Command, and commute to advanced command posts in Africa when necessary. The United States, he pointed out, is in the process of closing a number of posts in the U.S. that could easily accommodate a unified command headquarters at a minimum of the cost of establishing a U.S. base in Africa.

Whatever the final form it takes, the establishment of Africom is a good idea whose time has come -- finally. The command's emphasis on civil-military integration and a low-key operational profile is appropriate and well suited to its mission. We should wish it well.

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