



# COMMENTARY

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## **AFRICOM**

By J. Stephen Morrison, Director, Africa Program and Kathleen Hicks, Senior Fellow, International Security Program

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On October 1, the United States launches the U.S. Africa Command, an historic step in meeting steeply rising U.S. stakes in Africa. We recently traveled to Stuttgart, Germany to meet with General “Kip” Ward, nominated to be the first AFRICOM Combatant Commander, and his staff. The trip reinforced the high risks this command faces in its first year. In Africa, inept outreach has both hardened opposition to the command and raised unrealistic expectations among supporters. At home, State-Defense cooperation has been largely absent, and Congress is concerned that the command’s high start-up costs will produce little return. Within Defense, Africa expertise is thin, and the command will be vulnerable early on to unforeseen, quick breaking crises. Despite these cautions, our trip underscored the fundamental soundness of the command’s strategic rationale. We remain convinced that AFRICOM will improve America’s strategic approach to Africa and advance the necessary evolution of its national security apparatus.

AFRICOM is mandated to strengthen American forces’ operations and activities in Africa, enlarge the capacities of African partners, and create a new model of integrated U.S. civilian and military approaches. AFRICOM’s leadership is under intense pressure to prove both that a ‘non-traditional’ mix of civilian and military programs is workable and that AFRICOM will respect civilian leadership of U.S. foreign policy. AFRICOM’s harried preparations -- President Bush only announced the new command in February – and shifting rationales have raised tensions between the Departments of Defense and State, and stirred controversy on Capitol Hill and within Africa.

The decision to create AFRICOM grew out of recognition that Africa increasingly matters to core U.S. national interests. Africa today provides 22 percent of U.S. imported oil. The threat of terrorism is real in the Horn and West Africa. HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases are shared transnational threats. China’s expansion in Africa has dramatically intensified competition. The American people have consistently supported efforts to alleviate poverty and respond to urgent human needs in Africa. U.S. policymakers share in the international consensus that African states require an improved capacity to manage their peacekeeping requirements, curb piracy and criminality, and strengthen policies and institutions to sustain economic growth and good governance, as Africa approaches a population of 1.2 billion by 2025.

Against this backdrop, the establishment of a unified headquarters to coordinate US military activities in Africa seems unassailable. Much of the blame for the consternation currently embroiling AFRICOM can be laid at the feet of the Defense Department, whose belated and clumsy outreach generated suspicion about the military’s true motives and raised questions about the Command’s ability to deliver value to Africans and U.S. taxpayers.

The Department has offered changing and sometimes conflicting rationales for AFRICOM’s establishment.

In minimalist explanations, AFRICOM combines oversight of existing U.S. military activities on the continent, which are currently divided among three other commands. This explanation raises concerns on Capitol Hill, where legislators wonder whether the \$5 billion cost of a new AFRICOM regional headquarters is justifiable, considering the current, relatively paltry \$250 million annual military assistance program for the continent.

Grander statements about AFRICOM's mandate have emphasized the transformational character of the Command's mission -- promoting regional approaches to U.S. security interests in Africa that cut across U.S. civilian and security agencies and expanding the Defense Department's "peacetime" assistance programs. This latter explanation worries State Department and development officials, who foresee the military straying outside its areas of expertise and undermining the foreign policy primacy of U.S. ambassadors and the Secretary of State. The steady hollowing out of U.S. diplomatic and intelligence capacities in Africa over the last 15 years only exacerbates these fears and makes more conspicuous the gap between civilian and military resources.

Defense officials also bungled initial outreach to Africa. They allowed the headquarters basing decision to dominate, offered few specifics on concrete programs that would build African security, and failed to provide reassurances about civilian oversight. They underestimated Africa's opinion climate: the power of independent media, non-governmental groups, and opposition; the hangover effects of U.S. military action in Iraq; and the disquiet caused by U.S. counter-terror operations in Somalia, in league with Ethiopia.

These early mistakes are not terminal. AFRICOM is a sound concept that can succeed. First, General Ward is a consummate communicator who understands that listening is his essential first tool. Equally important, he grasps that incremental, concrete contributions to African security, achieved early, will ease fears about the Command's intentions. Demonstrating progress of this kind is the surest way for AFRICOM to establish trust in Washington and among Africa's leaders and publics.

Second, although AFRICOM's establishment entails costs, it can improve the return on U.S. security investments in Africa. If successfully implemented, AFRICOM's heightened focus on assistance delivery, and its structural innovations to better integrate its programs with U.S. civilian agencies, will make more efficient use of existing dollars. Further, it will provide a stronger argument for creating deployable African peacekeeping battalions, building partnerships to control borders and combat external threats, and creating effective maritime security along Africa's coastlines to reduce violent criminality and reclaim control of the continent's plundered fisheries. Because the Command's start-up costs stem largely from the creation of new military headquarters facilities on the continent, a slower path to African basing would ease cost pressures and simultaneously give the Command time to prove its worth.

AFRICOM matters too much to U.S. interests to be allowed to stumble or fail. Special care is needed in this next year to reaffirm the primacy of civilian leadership of U.S. foreign policy in Africa, win State Department integration into AFRICOM's structure, focus AFRICOM's efforts upon its core strengths and persuade Congress to provide resources to expand its essential programs. As we emphasized to General Ward, he and his deputies will need to lower rhetorical levels, listen and engage intensively with African leadership, and put off until a later point a basing decision for AFRICOM headquarters. Focus now should be on building the fundamentals -- relationships, skills, programs -- and creating new facts on the ground in Africa that will prove AFRICOM's value-added.

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