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AFRICOM and US-Africa Relations^{*}

RUSI Conference 18 February 2008

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Summary

The RUSI conference on AFRICOM and US-Africa relations covered a broad range of topics, including: US defence policy on Africa; the African response to AFRICOM; Aid, security and development in Africa; and International security relationships.

The first two sessions gave the American perspective on AFRICOM from key figures General William Ward, commander of AFRICOM, and Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs.

- AFRICOM is a command under construction, and is still evolving
- It will assist the creation of indigenous capability through partnership
- Training is a key component of partnership to build sustainable security
- The focus is on long-term, sustained engagement

The third session switched to the African reaction to the command's inception. Panellists considered the perspective of civil society, a West African regional perspective and the need for foreign actors to understand and appreciate the political nuances of involvement.

- There are fears that AFRICOM will operate shrouded in secrecy; the US must do more to reassure through openness and broad consultation
- Within ECOWAS, there are competing views of AFRICOM's role; some, however, do see it as an opportunity for meaningful capacity-building
- It is vitally important to understand context when considering involvement in African affairs; problems are regional, and demand informed solutions

Session four discussed the conceptual dimensions of Western approaches to African security. The paradigm of human security was outlined and evaluated, while another presentation deconstructed Western involvement on the continent.

- Human security is the security of individuals and the communities in which they live, and blurs traditional distinctions between 'hard' and 'soft' security
- The concept is vital in establishing a shared narrative to generate institutional coherence within the donor community
- We must be wary of imposing inappropriate Western solutions out of context

The final session placed African-US relations in a wider international context. Global systemic factors and state failure were considered.

- There are drivers of change in the international system that may reduce AFRICOM's impact
- Approaches to state failure lack coherence and an appreciation of the scale of the challenge; demand for intervention is high, but resources are limited

Session One: Keynote Address

General William Ward opened the conference with a presentation stressing three main qualities of Africa Command (AFRICOM). First, it is a command under construction and still evolving. Second, its primary role lies in *assisting* Africa in creating an improved security environment. Third, the approach would be based on partnership.

The mission of AFRICOM is sustained security engagement. General Ward stressed the long-term nature of the project: the value of the endeavour would be seen in ten to twenty years. 'Active security' comprises activities that are done on this sustained basis that lead to stability in a country or region. This involves several activities:

- Assistance in security capacity building as requested by African states
- Continual dialogue to ensure US understanding of needs and wants
- Going beyond crisis response to actively promote the conditions that prevent conflict

The General listed a number of local, regional and international partner actors with whom AFRICOM would engage. The command would work as part of wider US government policy and so would complement, for example, State Department and US Agency for International Development efforts. There would also be co-ordination with African partners on a bilateral basis. AFRICOM would also provide support to multilateral African organisations such as the African Union and regional economic communities. Further, the command would also work with international partners, including foreign donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Co-operation would not be limited to state-based actors. The General highlighted the potential for partnership with civil society, especially in knowledge development. Skills and expertise reside in academia, think tanks, private industry – all outside of formal state channels.

While the command would not have a direct role in economic development, it recognised the linkages between development and security. AFRICOM must build partnerships that facilitate development by fostering continental stability.

Discussion

In the question and answers session, several themes were discussed. A major question remains the permanent location of AFRICOM. Its current location in Stuttgart facilitated mission transfer from Europe Command, and no African country had yet

been formally approached to host the command. Currently, however, the programmes were the focus of attention: the degree that a presence assists the mission will determine the level of headquarters staff being present on the continent.

Another strand of discussion concerned the specifics of partnership. The General dismissed the idea that AFRICOM would become a tool for dictatorships, saying that there would be no large garrisons: the military did not make policy, and acted in accordance with the US government. Nevertheless, it was a Department of *Defense* endeavour, and therefore necessarily had a military character.

Further, the US had solicited African opinion over the last two years, and had noted requests for assistance in capacity building. When considering with whom to work, appropriate actors (such as NGOs) would be chosen based on appropriate experience and an effective track record.

Session Two: AFRICOM and US Defence Policy on Africa

Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, offered the next presentation. She outlined the specific aims of AFRICOM, and the tools with which they would be achieved.

- AFRICOM is not about oil: access to African resources is through markets
- The threat of state failure underpins US strategy
- Partnership and training are key to building appropriate African capacity
- Military security is but one (albeit crucial) element of stability

The 'hidden agenda' question was tackled immediately: was AFRICOM about oil? It is an issue - but in terms of *access to markets*. AFRICOM was not designed to give the US a monopoly on access to Africa's oil. The ability of all states to purchase African commodities in open markets was a means by which to develop the potential of continent.

American security policy has evolved to recognise state failure as a major threat in the post-9/11 environment. This strategic underpinning of the new approach to African security did not exist a decade ago. The US needs to focus on a more comprehensive approach to security; the monopoly of power of states is eroding, thus more factors enter into strategic analysis, such as state *weakness*.

What, then, were the specific areas AFRICOM would be focused on? The speaker outlined a selection:

- National and regional capacity to participate in peacekeeping missions
- Improved counter-terrorism co-operation
- Defence reform
- Professional democratic militaries
- HIV/AIDS awareness
- Increased co-operation with European partners

These goals may be boiled down to *reform*, *professionalism* and *capacity-building*. Capacity building is reliant on the other two aspects: military reform is a key element of 'good governance' in promoting stability, and there is a genuine desire for such reform in Africa. The US will continue to focus efforts into these three areas.

The tools to be used included training and exchange programmes to build an African core of knowledge, professionalism and capacity:

- Civil control of militaries and defence reform: military exchanges were a crucial tool in providing tutelage and support

- Military professionalism would be developed through joint combined exercise training
- Capacity building would come from operational training and peacekeeping training
- The capacity to train must be conferred upon African militaries themselves

These are all part of a focus on long-term, sustainable security. Ms Whelan provided an analogy: security is a foundation which underpins the pillars of a 'roof' we call stability. Long-term stability does not result purely from military security: economic opportunity and good governance are essential.

Discussion

The discussion session considered a broad range of topics. The first strand concerned the level and efficiency of US military and development spending. Currently, much US spending on the continent is inefficient because it is reactive. More is spent on crisis response than on crisis prevention. But capacity building can markedly reduce the cost in lives and money of natural disaster, as Zambezi River flooding in Mozambique then and now shows. A steady, if modest, flow of resources dedicated to capacity building and training is critical.

However, one question asked how this focus on partnership and development as security would be reconciled with the more short-term approach counter-terrorism seems to countenance? Referring to the American intervention in Somalia in 2006, Ms Whelan argued that this was due to a lack of local capacity. An expected benefit of AFRICOM's programme is to reduce the need for such unilateral interventions.

Concerning how AFRICOM would determine which regimes were suitable for assistance, there exists legislation that determines the nature and scope of involvement. For example, training programmes must vet participants based on human rights records. Involvement may be limited in some cases to efforts that are marginal in terms of governance, such as education on rule of law and defence management.

Session Three: The Response from Africa

This session outlined the African response to the creation of AFRICOM. The command must tread a careful path if it is not to alienate civil society and regional organisations. There are divergent views on the continent concerning the value of AFRICOM; some see it as a valuable tool in developing regional capability and 'African solutions for African problems', whereas others are sceptical. This report will first offer summary of each presentation, and then draw thematic summaries:

- Transparency and engagement
- Geo-politics
- Regional perspectives

Introductions

Dr Ebenezer Asiedu of the Conflict, Security and Development Group, King's College, London, provided the perspective of African civil society. How does it view AFRICOM and the contribution to African security? There seems to be genuine apprehension within Africa that the command intends to operate shrouded in secrecy.

- There should be more liaison between the AU and AFRICOM
- Concern exists that AFRICOM is really a geo-political endeavour
- Some fear an American presence could invite terrorism

Dr David Francis, Director of the Africa Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Bradford, outlined the interactions between AFRICOM and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). There are competing views of AFRICOM in West Africa. But there have been few attempts to actually conceptualise what 'security' is.

- Some see AFRICOM as a patrimonial crutch for unpopular regimes
- Others hope AFRICOM will provide much-needed capacity building
- There are fears that the command is part of a new 'scramble for Africa'

Mr O B Sisay, Deputy Head of the Africa Division, Exclusive Analysis, highlighted the vital importance of context when considering involvement and intervention on the continent. Problems are usually regional, and therefore demand informed, regional solutions. He offered a selection of case studies to illustrate the complexity of such crises:

- Militant attacks in the Niger delta are negatively correlated with political activity; armed groups are often used by local politicians at election time
- In Somalia, the Transitional Federal Government is a contradiction; Ethiopia's support undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of Somalis. Piracy is a result of Somali lawlessness

- Problems in West Africa cannot be solved without solutions in Sierra Leone and Liberia, but Guinea, also a troubled state, has been neglected by the international community
- Foreign organisations, whether business or government, must understand local complexities
- Foreign actors are *inextricably* drawn into African conflict and political systems

Transparency and Engagement

Though AFRICOM is meant to promote developmental goals, one major criticism is that African views and consultation has not been sufficiently sought. If the command intends a strategic partnership between the USA and Africa, then there must be more meetings between the AU and AFRICOM. A good example would be the recent EU-AU summit, where the exchange of views was frank.

There has been insufficient engagement with civil society in transparent, open meetings. Instead, there are press releases after closed meetings; pan-African civil society (although far from homogeneous) believes that the more open debates there are, the better the appreciation of AFRICOM's objectives would be.

There is also a danger of overlap between AFRICOM and the African Standby Force when both are operational on the continent. Whose knowledge will supersede the other?

But not all observers are so sceptical. Those involved in development, humanitarian and conflict interventions in West Africa are positive about AFRICOM. It provides joined-up governance between African actors and the US, which should lead to coherent responses. West African militaries seem genuinely enthused, argued David Francis, about the capacity-building element of AFRICOM. Improved peacekeeping capability is an important attraction for regional organisations in Africa.

In the discussion, the question of open multilateralism versus closed bilateralism was raised. The instincts of many states favour bilateralism; it provides an opportunity for opaque interaction in the international arena. Equally, however, there is recognition that AFRICOM does represent a new desire for centralised interaction with the US. The principle is certainly desirable, but there are still concerns that the process might be hijacked.

Ultimately, the secrecy of the process remains a problem. The continent has not seen the openness and transparency promised. Why, for example, have decisions concerning AFRICOM not been left to national parliaments? On the other hand, the institutional constraints faced by African governments must be taken into account.

The discussion also critically assessed the potential for engagement. Civil society is not a unified bloc, and it is embedded into the political culture of a state - which often means that civil society itself is not above patrimonial culture. Secondly, organisations often draw success from being independent of government; any association with AFRICOM might undermine this.

Geo-politics

The geo-political motivations of the US and AFRICOM were extensively discussed. Much of civil society, said Dr Asiedu, believed that the true objectives were somewhat more cynical than presented by AFRICOM. He argued that the US has three strategic interests:

- Securing access to sub-Saharan Africa's hydrocarbon reserves
- Countering and contesting Chinese influence in Africa
- Combating terrorist networks

Is AFRICOM, in a way, an attempt to contain China's influence? There are fears that capitalist competition between the US and China may hurt Africa. Some worry of a return to the Cold War 'scramble for Africa's resources'. The controversial issue is that from some African perspectives, AFRICOM represents a US effort to secure energy from an alternative to the unstable Persian Gulf states.

The selectivity of previous American involvement on the continent worries many Africans. The sudden change in approach, to one stressing partnership and joint interests, generates a degree of concern. Furthermore, far from combating terrorism, there are fears that the presence of US military assets on the continent will in fact *invite* terrorism. Those holding this view point to the East African embassy bombings, and the local casualties sustained.

Another concern was highlighted by Dr Francis. There are accusations that AFRICOM is just a new front in the War on Terror - amidst extreme poverty, which is the overriding concern of locals. However, he contested the idea that a US presence necessarily attracts terrorism: US assets in the Gulf of Guinea and Djibouti have not been attacked.

The question of human rights was raised in the discussion session. Would China be held to the same critical standard as AFRICOM? The answer was yes: in fact, the perception in Africa is that both US and Chinese involvement represents 'predatory capitalism', and that AFRICOM brings little new in this regard. Policy-makers must openly discuss this with African partners. Perceptions would only change if human rights and democratic freedoms were held above purely strategic interests.

Regional Perspectives

Outlining a regional response to AFRICOM in the West African context is difficult. The region and ECOWAS, made up of fifteen members, is diverse. There are different levels of state formation, economic development, different political systems and historical/communal experiences.

But some challenges the region faces are easier to outline:

- Poverty is endemic; 75 per cent of the population live on less than \$2 a day
- Corrupt ruling elites engage in predation
- A regional conflict complex sees cross-border flows of arms, fighters and money

There have been a variety of regional responses to conflict and civil war:

- ECOMOG² military intervention in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau to contain conflict
- UN peacekeeping and peace-support operations
- External intervention: the UK in Sierra Leone, France in Côte d'Ivoire
- Nigerian military intervention
- Privatised peacekeeping: Executive Outcomes, Sandline, mercenaries

This provides the context to West African responses to AFRICOM. ECOWAS has yet to come to a final verdict about the command. There appear to be two groups of opinion in support forming.

The first see AFRICOM in terms of regime protection and access to US resources. One Sierra Leonean parliamentarian is said to have remarked, 'As long as there is access to US money, we will support it.' The support for the command is therefore derived from access to resources, not its stated objectives.

The second see AFRICOM as a genuine opportunity to build local capacity for local militaries and regional communities. In this regard, the command can be seen as an attempt to help develop 'African solutions for African problems'. ECOMOG officers seem to be enthused about this aspect of AFRICOM, and hope that the engagement of the State Department will increase.

The debate between these supporters and opponents of AFRICOM will continue. But we can list some criteria by which success will be measured:

² ECOWAS Military Observer Group

- How does AFRICOM affect the lives of ordinary people in health, poverty and development?
- To what extent does AFRICOM not shy away from taking issue with 'friendly' regimes and promoting democracy and human rights?
- Does AFRICOM avoid impinging on sovereignty?

Session Four: Aid, Security and Development in Africa

The fourth session offered a critical analysis of traditional conceptions of security and Western involvement in Africa. First, two presentations outlined the relatively recent paradigm of human security, and its implications for foreign intervention. Second, a third presentation offered a critical perspective on Western approaches to African security. This section considers each theme in turn.

Human Security

Professor Mary Kaldor, Director of the Centre for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics provided a European perspective on the concept. Human security is suitable for the EU, but it has not adopted it yet. But how do we define human security?

- It is the security of individuals and the communities in which they live
- It embodies material, environmental, economic and communal security
- It blurs the traditional distinction between domestic and foreign security

There are objections to the concept. Critics deride it as being about development and environment, rather than 'hard' security such as war and terrorism. Further, critics argue that we will always need to possess hard capabilities. Others contend that the concept of human security actually adds very little; we already try to foster development and communal security.

There are a number of responses to these criticisms. First, when considering 'hard' and 'soft' security, it is important to remember that they are not clearly delineated. The Canadian approach posits human security as a 'hard' issue: it is often about protecting people from violence and uses force in dangerous situations. This does pose difficulties for practitioners, as kinetic force must be tempered in situations where the military's mission is to protect civilians, not defeat enemies.

Regarding the second criticism that soft security adds little conceptually, Kaldor responded that peacekeeping operations currently focus on stabilisation. But stabilisation does not mean tackling root causes, organised crime, gender violence, unemployment, and so on. For many people, peace does not mean freedom from predatory violence or exploitation. Sustainable peace demands the tackling of the seeds of violence and conflict.

Furthermore, Western responses lack coherence. We have a plethora of actors, sometimes competing against each other. A shared strategic narrative is essential if

there is to be institutional coherence. But whether or not it is a utopian concept, human security requires a massive cognitive shift.

Major Shannon Beebe, US Army, provided the results of a military project on the developing human security paradigm: although the (US) National Security Strategy addresses kinetic-based threats, it fails to fully capture other threats along strategic seams of institutions and bureaucracies. We must therefore look to twenty-first century solutions to twenty-first century problems.

To a degree, this confounds military traditionalists; they anticipated state-on-state engagement. Beyond security sector reform, responses to insecurity in Africa have been outside the US paradigm of security.

Major Beebe briefly recapitulated the changes in the international system, since the end of the Cold War, that have brought about the necessity for this new paradigm:

- Political: the end of the bipolar system
- Economic: rapidity of development and unequal globalisation
- Communications: instantaneous information exchange and resulting perceptions

These changes have allowed security institutions to become untethered. Security engagement has been reactive, not proactive. Further, security has specific meanings in the African context, including but not limited to:

- HIV/AIDS
- Environmental degradation
- 'Failed cities' and slum growth

How can US policy shift from a strategic narrative of systems and zero-sum games, to one of humans? *Human security* provides the answer. AFRICOM allows a proactive arena for engagement before conflict and catastrophe.

Questions from the floor asked whether AFRICOM represented this cognitive shift, or whether resources would be better allocated to organisations such as USAID, shored up with military training and resources.

AFRICOM, it was stressed, would not take over the developmental role. There was a specific recognition that without jobs, food and health, security is not sustainable. But there is a hope that it does represent a shift in thinking. Alternative approaches to security problems are required, and international policing requires a coherent mix of military and civilian bodies. International institutions must preserve legitimate political authority and provide:

- Rule of law
- Fairness and justice

- Support to ground-up building of a social contract

'Into Africa, Always Something New: Telling Africans what their Security Problems Are'

Dr David Chuter, an independent policy analyst, deconstructed the Western approach to African security. Africa, he said, is the only region in the world which is not in charge of the interpretation of its own history and current situation. Western dominance in economic and intellectual power led to an agenda that forced upon the continent a set of ill-suited narratives and policies.

The West, essentially, is telling Africa what its security problems are. This undermines indigenous solutions and local development of solutions to conceptual problems. A further complication arises from competing foreign agendas. While there is no Western conspiracy, there are lobbies who seek to define African security problems. For example, this is what international organisations do; they define problems as ones they can solve. Developmental organisations will define security one way; finance ministries another.

If AFRICOM is a solution, what are the problems to which it is obliged to respond? The problem is that there is no unified African opinion, which precludes a real ownership debate. It is unrealistic to expect consensus on continental security in Africa where none exists even in Europe.

- We must accept that Africans may provide the 'wrong' answers, and take into account African history and military traditions
- Are militia-based armies a solution? No one has asked this question
- We implicitly assume that small, professional armies are the solution

In the discussion, a variety of points were raised. One immediate question was whether the West should simply extract itself from African security. The response argued that we must understand what we are doing, and why we are doing it. There are alternative analyses, such as those grounded in economic history: the history of state formation is the history of security provided by a central area of the country towards the periphery. But African states were not formed in this way.

Participants then asked how the Chinese might be engaged in Africa. Here, there is a difference in perception: Chinese involvement comes from a different historical context. China does not share any conception of a 'white man's burden', and does not adopt a wider agenda or enforce its own ideology. This intervention could actually be positive, providing what is needed without attachment.

Session Five: International Security Relationships

The final session examined the security relationships between African states and foreign actors in a variety of contexts. One of the key findings was that AFRICOM is now only one of many players, all competing for influence, and thus its influence may be diminished. The second presentation examined how AFRICOM would relate to cases of state failure and weak states in southern Africa.

New Aid and Security Partnerships

Ms Jo Osikena, of the Foreign Policy Centre, situated the development of AFRICOM against the backdrop of a multipolar world order. Though this distribution of power is still taking shape, Africa remains a strategic priority for many states. The engagement of newly-industrialised countries is a vital element in any analysis of AFRICOM's impact.

There are a number of drivers of change in relations between African states and the rest of the world:

- Backlash against the US democracy-promotion agenda and War on Terror
- Promotion of multilateralism and global governance
- Economic self-interest and commodities exports
- Assertive foreign policies
- Brazilian-initiated south-south co-operation

The first driver of change is the backlash against US programme of liberal democracy promotion, and the War on Terror. Liberal democracy is a historically specific form of government, and may not be universally desirable. Democracy must be tailored to individual needs and the nature of society. Should external actors seek to influence political development in sovereign states? Africa has seen a marked increase in the number of functioning democracies.

The second driver is the promotion of multilateralism and attempts to rebuild the credibility of institutions of global governance. The Indian-African partnership illustrates this point. Geo-politically, India is recognised as a legitimate global spokesman for developing countries, and pushes for redistribution of power in the Bretton Woods institutions.³ However, India's involvement is not altruistic: its aid is conditional, and it is a donor only where it has markets.

³ Chiefly, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund

The third driver is economic self-interest and the quest for commodities and natural resources. China is most illustrative of this point: its footprint is apparent in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2004, its imports from Africa totalled \$28 billion while exports reached over \$26 billion. As a development partner, it is set to overtake the World Bank. But China continues to draw criticism as it appears to use Security Council power to block action against the Sudanese government for its actions in Darfur.

The fourth driver of change is a range of assertive foreign policies to demonstrate global relevance. For example, China's involvement in Africa generates support for it in the Taiwan question: currently, forty-eight African states do not recognise Taiwan.

The final driver of change relates to Brazil and its new role of co-ordinator of the global south in international trade talks. Brazil is less concerned with immediate political and economic gain. Its development of south-south co-operation is strategic and it seeks to rework global governance structures: it has the support of many African states in its pursuit of a permanent seat on the Security Council.

Therefore, AFRICOM must be placed in context. It is only one of many players on the continent. Its impact is likely to be limited. It may also be misleading to place such a high premium on respect for human rights: in the words of Jeffrey Sachs, it is a caricature to suggest that new donor countries are only involved out of self-interest, whereas traditional donors are not.

AFRICOM and Weak and Failed States

Mr Miles Tendi discussed the utility of AFRICOM in addressing weak and failing states. Ideas to deal with state failure do not consider what is possible by foreign actors. The demand to fix states is high, but resources are limited. Further, there is a lack of knowledge of what approaches work and which instruments are suited to the task.

AFRICOM has much that it could offer to states at risk in southern Africa, which would bolster regional security. Arguably, though, the strongest resistance to even the idea has come from southern Africa. This highlights a key point: we must appreciate the nature of local governments - in southern Africa's case, they are post-liberation regimes, and therefore wary of foreign intervention.

No matter how good the intentions of the US in setting up AFRICOM, it faces an obstacle of local perceptions. Actions are filtered through memories; recent years have seen a costly delegitimisation of US authority. But, African problems remain. What can be done about them? Multilateralism is one solution. The outgoing US administration has favoured unilateralism; instead, working with countries with more

neutral histories may be a better avenue for pushing forward agendas discussed at this conference.