



MISGUIDED INTENTIONS: RESISTING AFRICOM

Captain Moussa Diop Mboup, Senegalese Army;
Michael Mihalka, Ph.D.; and Major Douglas Lathrop, U.S. Army, Retired

“I think that, in a certain sense, we probably did not do the work necessary to win support for AFRICOM.”

—Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, 13 June 2008¹

Captain Moussa Diop Mboup is the peace operations desk officer in the General Defense Staff of the Senegalese Armed Forces, Training and Organization Division, Dakar. He received an M.A. in international relations from Webster University of Missouri and an MMAS from the U.S. Command and Staff College.

Michael Mihalka, Ph.D., is currently a professor at the School for Advanced Military Studies. He has lectured at universities in the Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. Dr. Mihalka received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Michigan.

Major Douglas Lathrop, U.S. Army, Retired, spent most of his career as a sub-Saharan African foreign area officer. Mr. Lathrop is an instructor for the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He holds B.A. degrees from Western Michigan University and University of Saint Mary; and an M.A. in national security affairs and African studies from the Naval Postgraduate School.

PHOTO: Senegalese port workers prepare for the arrival of USS *Fort McHenry* at the port in Dakar, Senegal, 5 November 2007. Africans fear America has a hidden agenda, skewed by the war on terror and a self-interested scramble for resources. (AP Photo, Rebecca Blackwell)

AFRICA'S PROFILE rose sharply during the George W. Bush administration. President Bush expressed the strategic change in unequivocal terms: “Africa is increasingly vital to our strategic interests. We have seen that conditions on the other side of the world can have a direct impact on our own security.” Bush more than quadrupled the aid sent to Africa. He launched a number of programs that help Africa, including the Millennium Challenge Account, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the Africa Education Initiative, the President's Malaria Initiative, the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, and the Initiative to End Hunger in Africa. On the military side, his crowning achievement was the establishment of a new combatant command, Africa Command (AFRICOM), which is adopting a new interagency style to reflect the range of issues it faces from terrorism to AIDS. However, Africans themselves met AFRICOM with skepticism and suspicion.

Media reaction to AFRICOM throughout Africa was tough. In Johannesburg, the *Business Daily* protested, “The expansion of an American strategic geopolitical military base on the continent will worsen many of the problems Africa has at present.”² *Le Reporter* in Algiers said, “The African countries should wake up after seeing the scars of others (Iraq and Afghanistan).”³ And Dulue Mbachu, a Nigerian journalist, lamented: “Increased U.S. military presence in Africa may simply serve to protect unpopular regimes that are friendly to its interests, as was the case during the Cold War, while Africa slips further into poverty.”⁴ The African blogosphere also reacted quite negatively, seeing AFRICOM as a springboard for further U.S. exploitation of the continent and interference in their domestic affairs.⁵

Many African officials have had nothing better to say. Abdullahi Alzubedi, the Libyan ambassador to South Africa, declared to a journalist:

How can the U.S. divide the world up into its own military commands? Wasn't that for the United Nations to do? What would happen if China also decided to create its Africa command? Would this not lead to conflict on the continent?⁶

Only smaller African countries such as Liberia have shown any enthusiasm for the project, in part because they believe the U.S. will serve as an effective counterweight to the local regional hegemonies.⁷ Indeed these hegemonies, in particular Nigeria, South Africa, Algeria and Libya, were early and vociferous critics. There are a number of reasons why Africans resist the presence of AFRICOM, and they vary by region, but four stand out.

The Increasing Influence of China

The increasing influence of China provides African nations with an alternative that, at least in the near term, is in many ways much more appealing. This has tremendous importance for U.S. Africa policy. The African continent has become one of the key battlegrounds of the upcoming “Cold War” between the United States and China. Therefore, the resistance to an increased American engagement in the continent is an early sign of an emerging fight over zones of influence. In that fight, China’s pragmatic, opportunistic political warfare strategy is winning the first rounds. (China has pursued a similarly successful strategy in Central Asia.)⁸

Russia, too, might become a player. Gazprom, the Russian gas firm, is competing to take over gas fields abandoned by Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria.⁹ Several Chinese firms have also expressed interest in fields in Ogoniland that contain gas reserves estimated at 10 trillion cubic meters.

Africans and most journalists find as disingenuous the continuing U.S. denials that AFRICOM has nothing to do with China. One of the first questions asked in June 2008 of the then assistant secretary of defense for Africa policy, Theresa Whelan, was, “Why was China missing from her briefing?” She responded:

It was missing for a reason, because this isn’t about China. Everybody seems to want it to be about China and maybe that is a little nostalgia for the Cold War, I don’t know. But it isn’t about China. It is about U.S. security interests in Africa in the context of global security. China, yes, has become more engaged in Africa, both—primarily for economic reasons. They have interests in African natural resources and extracting those resources. They also have interests in African markets. That’s fine. The United States isn’t

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concerned with Chinese economic competition. I mean, we’re a capitalist nation. We’re built on the principle of competition. So that is not really an issue for us.¹⁰

Africans simply do not believe this, and neither do many Americans.

A 2007 briefing making the rounds in Africa lists four common perceptions of U.S. reasons for AFRICOM: Africa’s natural resources, its democracy deficit, the increasing presence of China, and terrorism.¹¹ Other analysts say directly: “The Pentagon claims that AFRICOM is all about integrating coordination and ‘building partner capacity.’ But the new structure is really about securing oil resources, countering terrorism, and rolling back Chinese influence.”¹²

American Antiterrorist Strategy

The African continent is not impervious to American antiterrorist strategy blowback. The antiterrorist strategy has convinced African nations of the self-centeredness of U.S. security concerns in Africa. The War on Terrorism has become a political hot potato for some African nations, especially those with significant Muslim populations that fear its destabilizing and radicalizing effects. In addition, African civil groups, human rights activists, and political opposition parties vigorously denounce its negative impact on civil liberties and democratic reforms. Some non-governmental organizations believe that the presence of U.S. troops on African soil will have the opposite effect intended by AFRICOM.

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AFRICOM is designed to bring stability to Africa, but only as it serves U.S. interests. Many Africans believe that AFRICOM will actually destabilize the continent and put U.S. partners in Africa at risk. For all the talk of it being a new, innovative engagement, AFRICOM may simply serve to protect unpopular regimes that are friendly to U.S. interests while Africa slips further into poverty, as was the case during the Cold War.¹³

African countries and regional organizations have similar views. The South African Development Community, which represents 14 southern African countries, declared that none of its members would host AFRICOM. Said South African Defense Minister, Mosiuoa Lekota:

At the interstate defense and security committee meeting held in Dar es Salaam, the SADC defense and security ministers took the position and recommended that sister countries of the region should not agree to host AFRICOM—in particular, to host [U.S.] armed forces.¹⁴

He added that all 53 members of the African Union should not host U.S. forces, and if they did, threatened that “other sister countries may refuse to cooperate with it in other areas other than that particular area.”

A 2007 U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute analysis concludes that U.S. counterterrorism efforts since 2001 in Africa have been counterproductive:

Though often tactically successful, these efforts—against Algerian insurgents in North Africa and an assortment of Islamists in Somalia—have neither benefited American security interests nor stabilized events in their respective regions. This failure is ascribable in part to the flawed assumptions on which the GWOT in Africa has rested. The United States has based its counterterrorism initiatives in Africa since 9/11 on a policy of “aggregation,” in which localized and disparate insurgencies have been amalgamated into a frightening, but artificially monolithic whole. Misdirected analyses regarding Africa’s sizable Muslim population, its overwhelming poverty, and its numerous ungoverned spaces and failed states further contribute to a distorted pic-

ture of the terrorist threat emanating from the continent.¹⁵

In other words, counterterrorism in Africa has begun to mirror anti-Communism during the Cold War. Al-Qaeda has become the modern day bogeyman, directing far-flung and disparate efforts when many of the problems are local. The U.S. has not yet learned its lesson from the fiasco of the Vietnamese War.

Appearance of Irrelevance

AFRICOM may have rendered itself irrelevant in the eyes of African leaders who would have welcomed concrete, substantial security assistance from the United States. Undeniably, security remains a high concern in Africa and would have provided a formidable bargaining chip all the more credible because of the backing of the most powerful military in the world. However, initially putting forward an implausible democratization and humanitarian agenda has wasted leverage. The result has been to feed suspicion, incredulity, and concerns about the militarization of American diplomacy. Although AFRICOM points with pride to its interagency structure, African leaders view it with suspicion. What African leader will welcome a military organization to teach him democracy and good governance?

One analyst believes the conflation of democratic idealism and the military has led to the worst of both worlds—no democracy and no security:

Rather than a clear vision, U.S. officials have painted a confusing picture of an organization that seemingly plans to mix economic development and governance promotion activities, heretofore the responsibility of civilian agencies, with military activities. Africans, given the history of military coups that once plagued the continent, tend to regard this militarization of civilian space with great misgivings.¹⁶

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Another analyst has similar views: “Neither could the military create conditions under which democracy could grow and flourish. Much has been done in the name of democracy that has resulted in destabilization and destruction of the host country, a process not easily reversed.”¹⁷

AFRICOM’s Initial Bilateral Strategy

AFRICOM’s initial bilateral strategy has kept it from gaining acceptance. A more comprehensive assessment of the current diplomatic setting in the African continent would have led its architects to identify two essential elements. The first is the continent’s commitment to further integration and its preference for collective security mechanisms to address its instability. The second and perhaps more crucial element is that this security orientation is driven by the local regional hegemony—South Africa, Nigeria, and to some extent Libya—all of whom make a point of thwarting non-African interference. South Africa, Nigeria, and Libya have voiced the most radical opposition against AFRICOM in their “zones of influence.” A far better strategy would have been to open an early dialogue with the continent’s regional structures and engage them directly.

To be sure, in the face of almost uniform resistance, AFRICOM has begun to tone down some of its more innovative features. The media speculates that each country AFRICOM commanders visit on trips to the continent will serve as AFRICOM’s location, but AFRICOM always denies the claims. For example, when the head of AFRICOM, General William E. Ward, visited Uganda in April 2008, AFRICOM’s chief of public information said, “We have no interests in creating more bases in Africa and in Uganda in particular.”¹⁸ Morocco, Algeria, and Libya have refused to allow a U.S. base on their territory.¹⁹

In addition, AFRICOM has downplayed its original emphasis on interagency and humanitarian assistance. One analyst recently

commented, “They are significantly walking back from interagency. What they’re now saying is that they will more efficiently and effectively deliver military programs.”²⁰

This shift has borne some fruit. The Nigerian government has begun to soften its tone towards AFRICOM. When questioned about the combatant command, the Nigerian president gave a confused answer, but noted that AFRICOM was about traditional military assistance. The Nigerian minister of foreign affairs talked about “AFRICOM 2,” implying that Nigeria much preferred an AFRICOM that would combat terrorism and build the capacity of African soldiers to the old “AFRICOM 1,” through which the U.S. intervened on the continent without consulting local governments.²¹ Moreover, he said this would increase Nigeria’s chances for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

General Ward has done much to dispel initial reticence. For example, former President Festus Mogae of Botswana recently endorsed AFRICOM.²² One Ghanaian commentator saw his country as the “perfect host” for AFRICOM.²³ Nevertheless the big three—Libya, Nigeria, and South Africa—still view AFRICOM with suspicion. The notification that President Barack Obama would not visit Nigeria on his planned trip was interpreted in part



DOD, TSGT Jeremy T. Lock

U.S. Army General William E. Ward, commander of U.S. Africa Command, talks with Ugandan People’s Defense Force Colonel Sam Kavuma while touring the Gulu district of Uganda, 10 April 2008.

as owing to Nigeria's resistance to AFRICOM.²⁴ Mary Yates, then-deputy to the commander for civil-military affairs in AFRICOM, admitted that AFRICOM "didn't get rolled out very well. And you know, when you work in Africa, consultation is an important thing. You'd better go and listen and have about 10 cups of tea. And that probably did not occur."²⁵

A Public Relations Failure?

Some analysts have argued that poor public relations significantly contributed to the early resistance to AFRICOM. Brett Schaeffer of the Heritage Foundation claims:

Because the U.S. was so hesitant in announcing the details, it allowed people to fill the void with these conspiracy theories which don't have any basis on which to come to their conclusions . . . All the U.S. can do is explain clearly what role it sees for AFRICOM—which I see as very positive.²⁶

However, no amount of public relations is going to disabuse regional hegemony of the notion that renewed U.S. interest in Africa will result in action that may run counter to their interests. Nor will any amount of denial convince Africans that AFRICOM is not about countering the Chinese (or the Indians or the Russians). They see yet again another version of the "Great Scramble."²⁷ Worse, they see the rhetoric of democratic idealism as a modern-day version of the "white man's burden," or civilizing mission. The current U.S. government may have forgotten the demeaning rhetoric of the 19th century, but Africans surely have not. Some of them liken the G8 meeting in 2006 that kicked off this recent interest in Africa to the Berlin conference in the 19th century that carved up the continent. No African attended that conference either.

Strategy Recommendations

To correct its early missteps, AFRICOM's entry strategy and strategic communication plan should strive to advance the following lines:

- Recast the U.S. strategy toward Africa in more comprehensive terms to provide coherence, consistency, and long-term focus. Guidance should acknowledge Africa's new centrality for the U.S. and provide political impetus for the mobilization of resources and the development of a dedicated bureaucracy.

- Establish a formal collaboration framework involving AFRICOM, the African Union, and the Regional Economic Communities, including joint planning and coordinating structures. A formal recognition of AFRICOM by the African Union's Executive Council and its regional extensions would constitute a critical milestone. Accordingly, AFRICOM should renounce its usual bilateral strategy and focus on collaboration with the continental institutions.

- Jointly elaborate AFRICOM's strategy with the continent's collective security mechanisms, such as the African Union's Peace and Security Council and the regional economic councils' mechanisms for conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Negotiate memorandums of agreement with these structures.

- Redefine AFRICOM's concept and refocus the command on security issues. Maintain the civil, humanitarian, and liberalization agenda under the umbrella of the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, which have already demonstrated their effectiveness in that regard and have the confidence of Africans down to the local community level. This would also greatly appease African leaders' concerns about a militarization of U.S. Africa policy.

- Bolster AFRICOM's security package and express a U.S. commitment to provide logistic and intelligence support to African Union peace operations. Depending on the circumstances, especially in the context of Chapter VII type missions, AFRICOM's support to these missions could provide even more air support (transportation and close-air support). The command's mission statement indicates that it is adopting a more security-focused posture, emphasizing "sustained security engagement through military-to-military programs" and "other military operations as directed to promote a stable and secure African environment in support of U.S. foreign policy." AFRICOM should accentuate this reorientation and consolidate it around negotiated security cooperation mechanisms and combined planning.

- Seize the opportunity of UNAMID's current build-up to demonstrate U.S. resolve to support peace initiatives on the continent through logistic and intelligence support.

- Focus AFRICOM's training assistance on multilateral terms through the African Standby Force

and its regional brigades and provide it through battalion- and brigade-level exercises, command post exercises, and U.S.-supported peace training centers in each region. The Kofi Annan International Peace Training Center could provide an interesting laboratory for that concept. AFRICOM could assist in augmenting the capacity of the center with funds, equipment, and instructors.

Strategic Communication Recommendations

Following are recommendations for communications that would foster a more constructive dialogue:

- Engage the African political leaders on the actual rationale behind AFRICOM to eliminate their negative perceptions against the command. In that

regard, a comprehensive strategy document issued at the political level would be helpful in clarifying U.S. strategic objectives. There is little doubt that the African nations would understand and might even accept the legitimate U.S. right to pursue its global interests.

- Open dialogue with the African civil society, clarify the objectives of the command, and underline its benefits for the security and stability of the continent.

- Tune down the antiterrorist narrative and shift it to addressing specific African security problems. Restore the centrality of Africa's security problems in AFRICOM's agenda.

- Launch media campaigns throughout the continent to further emphasize the benevolent nature of AFRICOM and its assistance agenda. **MR**

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