Beyond AFRICOM: 
Toward a Comprehensive U.S. Africa Policy

BY COLIN THOMAS-JENSEN

With increased media attention focused on Darfur and Somalia, U.S. policy toward Africa is under more scrutiny than usual. Major decisions taken during George W. Bush’s second presidency could have profound and lasting change on the ability of the United States to lead the world in resolving the continent’s most pressing predicaments: poverty, corruption and good governance, HIV/AIDS, and the many festering conflicts that prevent Africa from reaching its full potential. The recent establishment of Africa Command (AFRICOM) — the U.S. military’s newest unified combatant command — has focused attention on the relationship between U.S. military and civilian agencies in pursuit of foreign policy goals in Africa and beyond.

Most Africans crave a more mutually beneficial relationship between the United States, their governments, and African regional organizations. Although the jury is out on whether the overhaul of the foreign policy toolbox heralds a stronger U.S. commitment to dealing with the many challenges in Africa, the United States is already applying new models of civil-military cooperation in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. The driving force behind U.S. policy in both regions is the so-called Global War on Terror — combating terrorism and violent extremism — and the current approach is failing spectacularly. In the Horn, the potential positive impact of greater civilian-military cooperation is undercut by the Bush administration’s political strategy. American policy in the Horn is stoking conflict, fanning extremism, and increasing the virulent anti-Americanism that fuels terrorist networks. In the Sahel, the fashionable fusion of military and development assistance is woefully miscalculated, exposing the dramatic and increasing gap between U.S. civilian and military capacities, and failing to address the root causes of violence and extremism in the region.

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Using the Horn and the Sahel as examples, this essay identifies critical weaknesses of U.S. counterterrorism efforts — the policy tools and the capacity to implement policy — in Africa, and recommends basic steps that the next administration should take to prevent conflict more assertively and effectively and, by extension, reduce the threat to international peace and security posed by weak and failing states.¹

AFRICOM and the “Three Ds”

Despite encouraging progress in places like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Burundi, Africa remains a complex and volatile security environment; civil wars bleed across borders and crimes against humanity occur with appalling regularity. The interlocking conflicts in the Horn of Africa, the Chad basin, and the Great Lakes have destabilized vast swathes of the continent and stretched the capacity of the international humanitarian community and UN peacekeeping close to breaking point.

Until very recently, responsibility for Africa within the U.S. military was divided among three geographic combatant commands: Central Command, Pacific Command, and European Command. Africa Command, or AFRICOM, currently exists as a sub-command of European Command headquartered in Germany, and is expected be a fully operational stand-alone command on September 30, 2008, when all African nations except Egypt will fall under its area of responsibility. The Bush administration’s decision to establish a single geographic combatant command for Africa undoubtedly reflects greater commitment to tackle security issues on the continent. The critical question is how AFRICOM will work with U.S. civilian agencies — particularly the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) — to more comprehensively and effectively tackle African security priorities.

Within U.S. policymaking circles, the discussion of AFRICOM boils down to two competing narratives. For civilian agencies, particularly a State Department threatened by the extraordinary resources that the military brings to the table, AFRICOM is the latest move by the Pentagon to militarize U.S. foreign policy. The Pentagon counters that AFRICOM is simply its response to the increasing strategic importance of Africa (as clearly articulated in the United States’ National Security Strategy²), and that State and USAID need to enhance their engagement on the continent. The truth is almost certainly somewhere in the middle, but the increasing capacity gap between the U.S. military and civilian agencies represents a serious problem from the perspective of both civilian and military actors. In a recent policy speech,
U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates noted that “having robust civilian capabilities available could make it less likely that military force will have to be used in the first place, as local problems might be dealt with before they become crises.”³

The burden is on the United States to communicate to Africans what AFRI-COM is and what it means for U.S. engagement with Africa on security-related issues. But U.S. officials have failed thus far to articulate clearly how, if at all, AFRICOM changes the way in which America does business in Africa. Bush administration officials have described AFRICOM as a bureaucratic realignment within the U.S. government that will not have a profound impact on U.S. policy. Alternatively, they have talked AFRICOM up as a radical rethink of the traditional combatant command. This new command is not about fighting wars, the messaging goes, but rather it supports the so-called “Three Ds” approach: defense, diplomacy, and development.

This very mixed messaging, and what many consider a confusion of security and development agendas, has elicited reactions ranging from bewilderment to vehement opposition from some African governments and many African civil society groups. Such sentiments are not difficult to understand. On the surface, the notion that the U.S. military can and should enhance U.S. diplomacy and development presupposes that the American-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan — where the military has a lead role in development and the Pentagon runs roughshod over the State Department — have been successful. Africans know as well as anyone that despite military success in quickly toppling brutal regimes, the U.S. military has failed miserably to stabilize either country, development efforts have been largely ineffectual, and lasting political solutions remain fleeting.

Generally speaking, two interlinked strategic goals shape U.S. policy toward Africa: fighting terrorism and securing energy resources. A third, sustaining U.S. influence in the face of China’s expanding economic, political, and military ties across the continent, is the topic du jour on the think-tank circuit, but China ranks a distant third with policymakers. Articulating and achieving these policy objectives requires a clear understanding of the situation on the ground and an appropriate application of the Three Ds. Counterterrorism in particular demands a carefully calibrated mix of diplomacy, development, and defense initiatives that will eliminate the most immediate threats and concurrently counter the conditions that spawn extremism and allow terrorist networks to thrive.

Unfortunately, the capacity of State to “do” diplomacy and USAID to “do”
development has been dramatically hollowed out since the end of the Cold War and the onset of the Global War on Terror. Secretary Gates lamented “the gutting of America’s ability to engage, assist, and communicate with other parts of the world,” – the “soft power,” which had been so important throughout the Cold War. “During the 1990s,” he continued, “with the complicity of both the Congress and the White House, key instruments of America’s national power once again were allowed to wither or were abandoned.”

The Department of Defense (DOD) is attempting to fill the void, while morale at civilian agencies is nearing rock bottom. A recent working paper by Stewart Patrick and Kaysie Brown noted the changing priorities:

> The massive capabilities and resources of the Pentagon exert a constant pull, tugging at civilian leadership in U.S. foreign policy. Because there is no prospect State will get adequate funds in the right accounts, there is temptation to go in the other direction, by providing DOD with new authority...Between 1998 and 2005, DOD’s share of overseas development assistance increased from 3.5% to nearly 22%, whereas USAID’s decreased from nearly 65% to less than 40% in the same period.

Although State and USAID have area expertise and experience in diplomacy and development, the funneling of authorities and resources from civilian agencies to the military has rendered them less and less effective. Moreover, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan snatch diminishing resources away from other, less strategically important parts of the world, such as Africa.

Simply put, the United States does not do two of the Three Ds very well. And even when it tries to formally integrate its approach, as it has in the Sahel and the Horn, U.S. policy choices have often been counterproductive in addressing the root causes of conflict and violent extremism.

**Failed Diplomacy in the Horn**

The overarching strategic objective for the U.S. in the Horn of Africa is an important one: to counter the spread of extremist ideologies and combat terrorism in a region with a demonstrated track record of al-Qaeda attacks and terrorist cells. However, the Bush administration’s counter-terrorism efforts in the Horn have too often prioritized military or covert action, relied on relationships with autocratic leaders, and made political compromises, damaging U.S. credibility and increasing anti-Americanism across a volatile region.
Following 9/11, the United States identified the Horn of Africa — particularly Somalia, northern Kenya, and the vast, largely ungoverned space of eastern Ethiopia — as a potential rendezvous point and safe-haven for extremists fleeing from the U.S. attack on Afghanistan. Terrorists, including those associated with al-Qaeda, have preyed on the lack of a functioning central government to smuggle weapons through Somalia’s porous borders, unguarded ports, and uncontrolled airstrips. Somalia has consequently become a terrorist staging ground and a haven for the perpetrators of al-Qaeda bombings against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the bombing of a beachfront hotel in Kenya, and a failed attempt to bring down an Israeli passenger aircraft off the Kenyan coast.

The aim of U.S. counterterrorism policy — not just in Africa, but worldwide — is to capture or kill terrorists and to counter the conditions that breed violent extremism and terrorism. American actions in the Horn, and Somalia in particular, are accomplishing neither, primarily because both its policy and footprint in the region are primarily militaristic.

The U.S. disengaged politically from Somalia in 1994 when, following the tragic deaths of 18 army rangers in the streets of Mogadishu, American forces pulled out. The U.S. provided only $250,000 to support the $10 million peace process that led to the formation of the Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government in 2004. Rather than address Somalia’s chronic statelessness at the source of its appeal to international terrorists and the vacuum in which extremism flourishes, U.S. policy toward Somalia has a narrow directive: the apprehension and rendition of a small number of foreign al-Qaeda operatives the U.S. government believes are in Somalia under the protection of local Islamists.

In October 2002, the United States established Combined Joint Task Force — Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), a military base in Djibouti housing 1,500 military and civilian personnel. The Congressional Research Service describes CJTF-HOA’s mission as the following:

CJTF personnel train the region’s security forces on counter-terrorism, collect intelligence, serve as advisors to peace operations, conduct activities to maintain critical maritime access to Red Sea routes, and oversee and support humanitarian assistance efforts. CJTF-HOA also conducts civilian-military operations throughout East Africa as part of an effort to “win hearts and minds” and enhance the “long-term stability of the region.” These civil-military operations include digging wells and building and repairing schools, hospitals, and roads, and are also
However, the primacy of military tools in pursuit of the counterterrorism agenda is not winning hearts and minds in the Horn. Although CJTF-HOA engages in “hearts and minds” activities (described by one soldier stationed in Ethiopia as “Peace Corps with a weapon”) such as building schools and digging wells, the most high-impact U.S. actions in the Horn have been the CIA’s covert support for Somali warlords, targeted military strikes inside Somalia, and the State Department’s clumsy diplomacy and ineffective efforts to help resolve overlapping conflicts across the region.

In 2003, U.S. intelligence officials began funding Somali warlords to pursue alleged terrorists on America’s behalf. In early 2006, these warlords began calling themselves the “Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism,” a not-so-subtle ploy to attract U.S. support. Covert American backing for these warlords (up to $150,000 per month based on interviews with the recipients) was conceived as a strategic partnership to achieve narrow counterterrorism objectives. The strategy backfired. Intense fighting between the American-backed warlords and Islamist militias propelled the Islamists to power.

At the same time, the State Department sought to re-open the “final and binding” ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission, the independent body established by a painstakingly negotiated 2000 peace agreement to end the bloody civil war between Ethiopia and its regional rival. To Ethiopia’s dismay and anger, the Commission’s 2002 ruling awarded the conflict’s flashpoint — an isolated village called Badme — to Eritrea. The Clinton administration was instrumental in brokering the agreement, but when Ethiopia refused to accept the Commission’s ruling, the Bush administration sat on its hands. As Ethiopia and Eritrea engaged in a war of words and stepped up their support for each other’s opposition groups, the State Department sought to re-open the Commission’s ruling and award Badme to Ethiopia. Journalist Michela Wrong puts it succinctly: “While presenting itself as a neutral player in a bitter contest between two African regimes, Washington has in fact played the old Cold War game, favoring realpolitik over international law—with disastrous results.” By signaling its intent to undermine the peace agreement to back its close counterterrorism ally, the United States dumped fuel on the
fire of proxy war inside Somalia between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Eritrea stepped up its military support for Somali Islamists and Ethiopian armed opposition groups with bases inside Somalia. Not surprisingly, Ethiopia bristled at the prospect of an Islamist government in Somalia backed by its fiercest rival and containing individuals whom it holds responsible for terrorist strikes in the 1990s. With a nod and a wink from the State Department, Ethiopia invaded Somalia in late 2006 and quickly routed the Islamists. The U.S. military shared intelligence with the Ethiopians during the invasion and, in its aftermath, launched two air strikes at terrorist targets and sent Special Forces into Somalia to determine their success.

The Ethiopian invasion may have advanced the U.S. counterterrorism agenda in the short run—the Islamists are out of power, some figures of concern have likely been killed, and a “friendly” regime has been installed in Mogadishu—but the lack of a viable political/security plan is glaring, and dangerous. The central lesson from Iraq is that when overwhelming military force is not linked to a political strategy, it fans the flames of insurgency and terrorism. Ethiopia's military presence, the widespread atrocities it has committed against civilians in Mogadishu, and its political support for a non-inclusive transitional Somali government, has spawned a recruiting bonanza, not just for the Islamists, but also for militias of clans excluded by the transitional government. Violent extremism now has circumstances in which to flourish: the return of warlordism, a foreign occupation, and the financial support of extremist elements in the Persian Gulf.

American miscalculations or inattentiveness, including the State Department's deafening silence in the face of mounting evidence of Ethiopian war crimes against Muslim populations in Somalia and the Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia, has made matters worse. Extremist ideologies and Anti-Americanism have escalated dramatically in the region, especially in Muslim communities in Kenya and Ethiopia, which, until recently, the United States considered moderates and allies. And in a region in which al-Qaeda has attacked U.S. and other Western interests, these miscalculations have the potential not only to fan the flames of internal and regional conflict, but also to rebound negatively on America itself.

**Failed Development in the Sahel**

The evolving relationship between U.S. military and civilian agencies is demonstrated in the Sahel, the vast bridge between the arid Maghreb region of North Africa and tropical West and Central Africa. Sahelian states are
large, impoverished, resource-poor (especially compared to their southern neighbors), and even further off the U.S. foreign policy radar than the rest of Africa. France has traditionally been the major Western power in the Sahel, a region it had once colonized.

Niger is one such state. Often cited as the poorest country in the world, Niger has for the past three years ranked dead last on the UN Development Index. One in five Nigerien children will not reach her fifth birthday, health and education infrastructure is virtually nonexistent, and water and arable land are scarce. According to a recent survey by the Center for International Development and Conflict Management, Niger has the third highest risk of insecurity in the world, behind Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet despite grinding poverty and political volatility, Niger ranks 71st in the world in the amount of aid it receives per capita and a woeful 96th in U.S. aid per capita.

Poverty and instability are linked in Niger, but not in the way one might think in a country that is ninety percent Muslim. According to a 2005 International Crisis Group report on Islamism in the Sahel, “those who subscribe to the theory that poverty breeds religious fanaticism will be disappointed in Niger.” This is not to suggest that violent extremism is not a problem. For al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other extremist groups, the porous borders and loosely governed northern reaches of Niger and its neighbors offer tempting sanctuary. The Nigerien army has clashed in recent years both with Algerian-based jihadists and Islamic militants based in northern Nigeria. But the principal source of instability in Niger is neither Islamic extremism nor terrorists traversing the Sahel, but rather the deteriorating livelihoods and unresolved political fate of the Tuaregs, one of the Sahel’s most studied communities.

The Tuaregs in both Niger and Mali rebelled against their central governments between 1990 and 1995. In both countries, the rebellion ended with peace settlements promising amnesty to Tuareg militants and reintegration into schools and civil service for ex-combatants. These agreements ensured that greater services and relief would be delivered to the impoverished Tuareg population, and that decentralization measures would be accelerated in order to promote development of the entire country. In Niger, this temporary cessation of hostilities did not hold and tensions between the Tuaregs and the southern-based government persisted throughout the next decade.

In early 2007, a new Tuareg rebel group called the Movement of Nigeriens for Justice (MNJ) formed to protest the government’s failure to implement the provisions of the peace accords, to draw attention to the continued mar-
ginalization of the Tuaregs, and to share in the wealth generated through uranium mining activities in the North. The MNJ have battled Nigerien soldiers and taken hostages, kidnapped a Chinese uranium mining official, and bombed the airport in Agadez, a historic Tuareg stronghold in northern Niger. Niger’s ruling party has organized several demonstrations in the capital city of Niamey, where thousands of citizens have gathered to demand that the Tuaregs release army hostages and lay down their weapons.

As violence between Tuareg rebels and the Nigerien government intensifies and spreads into Mali and perhaps beyond, a key question for U.S. policymakers is how to address the root causes of instability and extremism in Niger. In its 2005 report, Crisis Group argued that much of the insecurity in northern Niger stems from the failure of the national government to adequately address Tuareg grievances and to work to resolve the root causes of the rebellions. Indeed, most observers argue that the United States and other donors should treat development and counterterrorism as interlinked issues in the Sahel. Sadly, the Bush Administration’s attempt to follow this advice in Niger exposes the weaknesses and faltering capacities of U.S. development assistance.

Niger is one of nine countries participating in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a $100 million dollar per year interagency program that runs through 2013. In March of this year, the Commander of EUCOM, General Bantz J. Craddock, told the House Armed Services Committee that, “TSCTP seeks to maximize the return on investment by implementing reforms to help nations become more self-reliant in security and more stable in governance”\(^\text{11}\). If only the same were true for Niger. The TSCTP is essentially a military training program; development is window dressing.

Although USAID’s TSCTP budget in Niger has increased steadily from a miniscule $750,000 in fiscal year 2005 to a meager $5 million requested for the financial year of 2008; there is no USAID mission in Niger to monitor the effectiveness of its initiatives. Meanwhile, the U.S. military has stepped up its efforts to train and equip (T&E) the Nigerien military to patrol the open spaces in the North where AQIM might gravitate more effectively. The Defense Department spent over $8.5 million on T&E activities in Niger during the financial year of 2007. Additional TSCTP activities are sensitive and funding is consequently opaque.

Development assistance to Niger focuses on the usual broad objectives: governance, health, education, and economic growth. The Administration requested $18.5 million for development assistance to Niger in 2008 (includ-
The Bush administration has argued that Africa Command will further elevate the profile of Africa.

While the U.S. military training under the TSCTP may be reducing cross-border transit routes used by terrorists, the program could actually be fuelling the rebellion in northern Niger. As pastoralist livelihoods have come under stress due to drought and desertification, groups such as the Tuaregs have looked to other sources of revenue, including smuggling. The collapse of traditional livelihoods — exacerbated in part by misguided development program — has created a generation of frustrated, impoverished, and increasingly militarized young men. The logic of TSCTP’s promoting stability through development, good governance, and regional cooperation is sound, but inadequate and misguided development resources expose the hollowness of the Three Ds as currently practiced.

Getting U.S. Policy on Track

Africa remains at the bottom of the U.S. foreign policy totem pole. While much of the debate and discussion over U.S. policy toward Africa occurs within the closed (and usually elitist) world of D.C.-based think-tanks and high-level commissions, a growing number of Americans are closely following events on the continent and pushing policymakers to take more assertive action in order to address the most pressing problems. The One Campaign, Product Red, and other high-profile (often celebrity-driven) public advocacy campaigns have increased Americans’ exposure to Africa. Moreover, the genocide in Darfur has generated the largest mass movement on an African issue since the anti-Apartheid struggle of the 1980s. Even the civil war in Uganda has captured public attention and generated effective activism.

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elevate the profile of Africa, particularly in the continent’s battle with other parts of the world for congressionally allocated resources. Many diplomats and development professionals who have spent their careers working on Africa are less optimistic.

AFRICOM, and the capacity that the U.S. military brings to the table, is a critical component of a comprehensive foreign policy approach to the continent. However, there are two scenarios that the Bush Administration, its successor, and Congress must work assiduously to avoid. The first is the marginalization of AFRICOM. As a stand-alone combatant command, AFRICOM does have a seat at the table with the other geographic commands. But a seat at the table does not guarantee good service. It is entirely conceivable that AFRICOM will end up with table scraps from EUCOM, CENTCOM, PACOM, and Southern Command, or SOCOM. And with fewer resources at its disposal, AFRICOM will almost certainly devote itself to narrow counterterrorism activities and validate the widely held suspicion that AFRICOM is a Trojan horse for an expanded U.S. military control over Africans’ affairs.

Some within the diplomatic and development community might argue that this is a good thing — that AFRICOM should not be engaged in diplomacy and development. Their argument would be much stronger if the State Department and USAID had greater capacity for such diplomacy and development itself. Building this capacity should begin with the U.S. government devoting the necessary resources, i.e. the people and the money, to help civilian agencies do their jobs more effectively in Africa.

Policymakers focusing on Africa should consider the following basic steps to achieving a balanced Three Ds approach:

-Integrate the standing up of AFRICOM with the ongoing process of foreign assistance reform: The Bush administration must restructure how it distributes and delivers aid worldwide, and the next U.S. administration will most likely drive these reforms across the finish line. Although AFRICOM will have civilian components that include a State Department deputy and advisors from USAID, these two complex bureaucratic realignments must be more closely linked if the U.S. is serious about adopting a more coordinated Three Ds approach.

-Increase the civilian agencies’ capacity — people and money — on the continent: The Three Ds require a robust country presence if the State Department and USAID are to achieve U.S. diplomatic and developmental objectives. Resolving conflicts requires a diplomatic “surge capacity” that the State Department currently does not possess. Implementing effective foreign as-

sistance demands in-country expertise and close monitoring of programs on the ground that USAID presently lacks.

- **Counter growing perceptions of the militarization of U.S. foreign assistance:** The United States should restrict the activities of its military personnel to train and equip programs, and implement all humanitarian and development projects through non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and private development firms. The Department of Defense brings welcome resources to the table, but there must be a clearly defined division of labor between civilian and military personnel.

- **Work multilaterally to achieve shared objectives:** The problems facing Africa are vast and the international community has a shared stake in helping Africa reach its full potential. Coordination among donors is often haphazard and development programs shortsighted. The situation is improving, particularly in the public health sector, but the U.S. still must coordinate its development activities much more closely with other donors and focus sustained attention over the longer term to the root causes of instability. Generally speaking, priorities should include security sector reform to improve security, justice reform to reduce impunity, natural resource management to end illicit flows of money, and economic growth to create jobs and protect livelihoods.

- **Work directly with African governments, sub-regional and regional organizations:** International efforts to support Africa will inevitably fail without the reciprocal support of Africans themselves. African governments have made significant strides in establishing institutions — national, sub-regional, and regional — to address the continent’s most pressing problems, and strong support for effective institutions must be the backbone of U.S. policy toward Africa.

The two examples cited in this paper illustrate the alarming inadequacy of the Bush administration’s implementation of the Three Ds. However, institutional changes within the U.S. government and a growing American constituency for Africa have coalesced to create a unique moment for Africa — an opportunity for Bush’s successor to take stock of past mistakes and aggressively pursue a coherent approach to Africa that furthers U.S. foreign policy objectives and improve the lives of millions of Africans. Enhanced diplomatic capacities and a more considered, intelligent, and better-resourced foreign aid program are critical to being certain that this moment is not lost.

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-Sinead Hunt served as lead editor for this article.
NOTES


4 ibid.


