
Sub-Saharan Africa and the

Unified Command Plan

By JOHN E. CAMPBELL



Amphibious training
at Cap Serrat.

U.S. Navy (Seth Rossman)

The United States is in a position to play a key role in improving the security environment in Africa. One suggested initiative is establishing a regional command for the continent.

According to the *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* submitted by the Secretary of Defense for Fiscal Year 2001, regional commands “shape

the environment, respond to the full spectrum of crises, and prepare for the future. The geographic CINCs are responsible for the planning and conducting of all military operations, including military engagement activities, and serving as the single point of contact for all military matters within their theaters of operations.” The Secretary’s annual report emphasizes that the primary responsibility of unified commanders remains the development of strategic and contingency

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plans for military operations. In practice, however, CINCs spend much of their effort on implementing the shape, prepare, and respond functions of national security strategy. Indeed, since passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986, regional CINCs have gained more stature and may have become the single most influential figures helping shape and implement foreign policy within their regions. According to an account in *The Washington Post*, they “control headquarters budgets outside of Washington that total \$380 million a year” and have long “jockeyed with diplomats and intelligence agencies to shape U.S. foreign policy.”¹ During the 1990s power shifted to CINCs primarily because of their budgetary might.

Continental Challenge

In the case of Africa, the potential of a CINC to influence regional affairs is diffused because responsibility is divided between three of the five regional unified commands—U.S. European Command (EUCOM), U.S. Central Command (whose geographical boundaries include Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan), and U.S. Pacific Command which has responsibility for Madagascar.

Of these commands, challenges facing EUCOM in operating effectively in the region are the most daunting. Its area of responsibility stretches from northern Europe to Sub-Saharan Africa. Its main focus is clearly on NATO and European security. The CINC is dual-hatted as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, with headquarters at Mons, Belgium, while EUCOM headquarters is located in Stuttgart, Germany, with day-to-day operations run by his deputy. Given the command’s many roles, coupled with the increasing importance of engaging around the world, the added responsibility of managing affairs in Africa might exceed the ability of a unified commander in Europe.

One argument for creating a unified command for Sub-Saharan Africa is that foreign policy in Africa has



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been reactive rather than proactive, causing the military to undertake a continuing series of contingency operations.² The prospects for future interventions are high. The United States will, according to this rationale, require the capacity to intervene with military forces. The only way to make these interventions efficient and effective is assigning proponenty to a dedicated headquarters.

The underlying assumption is that the current arrangement—dividing Africa among three unified commands—does not ensure “that strategic objectives are accomplished and that diplomatic and political goals are achieved.” But does a dedicated headquarters put the operational cart before the strategic horse? The answer lies in returning to the fundamental purpose of such a command—supporting national security strategy.

Guidelines for Engagement

A National Security Strategy for a Global Age (December 2000) continues to emphasize the longstanding practice of shaping the international environment, responding to threats and crises, and preparing for an uncertain future. This strategy is implemented through integrated regional approaches. It calls

for a transformation of U.S.-African relations with

*emphasis on democratic and pragmatic approaches to solving political, economic, and environmental problems, and developing human and natural resources. . . . Our immediate objective is to increase the number of capable states in Africa, that is, nations that are able to define the challenges they face, manage their resources to effectively address those challenges, and build stability and peace within their borders and their subregions.*³

Based on this assessment of Sub-Saharan Africa, the primary concern is nationbuilding. Further, it appears that Washington perceives the greatest security challenge as the lack of democratic states and the inability of states to govern. The strategy concludes, “prosperity and security . . . depends on African leadership, strong national institutions, and extensive political and economic reform.”⁴

While the current administration has yet to publish a new national security strategy, there is no indication that African security will receive greater prominence. While many things have changed since he was sworn in, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated during his confirmation hearings before the Senate Armed Services

Committee in January 2001 that “We’re not geniuses at nationbuilding.”⁵ The implication is that the military will be less involved in these tasks in places like Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the interest of some in the administration in dealing with issues such as the AIDS pandemic, military engagement will likely be limited to promoting regional stability and advancing U.S. interests with modest investments in ways and means for the foreseeable future.

EUCOM is implementing these efforts through its Africa Engagement Plan, which has several objectives: maintaining freedom of navigation, providing prompt response to humanitarian crisis, and promoting stability, democratization, and military professionalism. These goals translate into a litany of endeavors, most notably the

military engagement will likely be limited to modest investments in ways and means

African Crisis Response Initiative, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, humanitarian assistance, military medical exercises, demining, and security assistance. All are concerned primarily with training militaries in basic peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, and the mechanisms of civilian control. Further, the concept for implementing the strategy is through subregional engagement. This approach is focused on leveraging resources, fostering collective security, and creating responses for peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. The subregional organizations in Africa are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Eastern Africa Cooperative (EAC), and Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Actual command activities focus on small unit training with limited military to military contact.

Modesty Rules

Creating a Sub-Saharan unified command fails to address the fundamental issues. The problems of engagement in Africa are not primarily, or even substantially, about command

and control of military operations. Indeed, while a unified command might provide better focus on Africa, doing so may not be consistent with national policy. The danger in creating such a command would be to place DOD out front of, and perhaps out of step with, the rest of the foreign policy apparatus. What needs emphasis is ensuring that the military plays a proper role in Africa based on national security strategy—and then organizing efforts to best achieve national objectives.

Some analysis have suggested that in the future U.S. interests will be to “promote regional stability, economic prosperity, and democracy to combat transnational threats.”⁶ Military involvement will be almost exclusively in the form of humanitarian assistance. Importantly, the study called for the United States to shift from crisis response to peacetime engagement in order to better shape conditions. Specifically, it called for this transition to be accomplished through training programs like the African Crisis Response Initiative and small unit training exercises through the Joint Combined Education Training Program. Its assessment further suggested better coordination with European partners to leverage collective efforts. While military activities have their limited place, some have concluded that “African institutional development is the single most important objective.”⁷

Richard Holbrook, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, summed up African needs to Congress: “[The United States has] an interest in helping Africans resolve their conflicts and ridding their societies of horrible diseases like HIV/AIDS. And we have an interest in helping Africa’s people build societies based on democracy, liberty, and political freedom.”⁸

Still other proposals call for reassurance rather than deterrence; consolidation or creation of state institutions, and building a regional security community. The keys to creating viable states lie in support from the international community for state building, with more emphasis on police, justice, and correctional services. Specifically, there needs to be less of a military focus.⁹

A regional command is not the answer to building viable states and governable societies in Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, such a command might actually hinder the process by placing too much emphasis on the military and diverting attention and resources from nationbuilding. Accordingly, it appears that Washington should not create a unified command.

That said, the United States should improve its ability to manage military engagement. While EUCOM activities will play an important role, it should be within a coordinated foreign policy effort. Instead of establishing a new unified command, the geographic boundaries for the EUCOM area of responsibility should be redrawn to match the Department of State concept for the region, essentially the Sub-Saharan area. And as outlined in the current national security strategy, engagement should be targeted at the *subregional* level. In particular, redrawing unified command boundaries will keep the major subregional actors, ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC, in the command area of responsibility.

The United States should also better coordinate with European Allies. EUCOM is in the best position to assist here since it has a long history of working with them through NATO. Many Alliance members also have traditional ties to Africa, particularly the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Portugal.

EUCOM should also take the lead in advocating better international military education training (IMET) opportunities. Such efforts are the basis for training foreign military leaders on the fundamentals of civilian control of the military and provides professional military education through schools in the United States. Many European allies have similar programs and thus can reinforce the civilian control concept. Accordingly, IMET for Sub-Saharan African militaries can be coordinated within Europe by EUCOM and be part of engagement strategy.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff could also create a new subregional command as part of EUCOM to manage the African

SOF training
Senegalese soldiers.



1st Combat Camera Squadron (David D. Underwood)

engagement strategy. Further, this headquarters could provide a second theater special operations command. Today, EUCOM has a single such command for its entire theater of operations. An additional capability would expand the command's ability to engage on the right level, with the right means, consistent with national objectives. Special Operations commands are uniquely qualified to participate in engagement. Their principal missions include foreign internal defense, which involves protecting societies from lawlessness. Collateral activities include coalition support, demining, security assistance, and humanitarian assistance.

Foreign policy and security strategy for Africa are focused on building credible states and democratic governance. Sub-Saharan Africa does not involve the same vital U.S. interests as other geographic areas represented by existing unified commands. Creating a

unified command exclusively for the region would overemphasize the military aspect of foreign policy. Although there are steps the United States can take to ensure that the military is best prepared to conduct engagement, it should not create a regional command until Africa becomes a greater focus of national security strategy. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Dana Priest, "A Four Star Foreign Policy?" *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2000.

² Richard G. Catoire, "A CINC for Sub-Saharan Africa? Rethinking the Unified Command Plan," *Parameters*, vol. 30, no. 4 (Winter 2000–01), pp. 112–13.

³ President of the United States, *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age* (Washington: The White House, 2000), p. 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵ Donald H. Rumsfeld, "Rumsfeld's New Order," *Air Force Magazine*, vol. 84, no. 3 (March 2001), p. 67.

⁶ Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Strategic Assessment 1999: Priorities for a Turbulent World* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1999), p. 162.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸ Richard C. Holbrooke, "Text: Holbrooke Briefs U.S. Senate on U.N. Peacekeeping in Africa," July 12, 2000, <http://www.eucom.mil/africa/usis/00jul12.htm>.

⁹ See Jakkie Cilliers, "South Africa and Regional Security," Institute for Security Studies, briefing to the Sub-Saharan Africa regional studies group, Air War College, March 12, 2001.