Next Front? Evolving United States–African Strategic Relations in the “War on Terrorism” and Beyond

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Recent years have seen a shift in United States foreign and security policy vis-à-vis Africa, a process that has been accelerated by the needs of America’s post-9/11 “global war on terrorism.” This evolution away from the “hands off” approach to the continent is a recognition of its geopolitical significance not only as a major front in the counterterrorism struggle, but also an increasingly important theatre for strategic competition for resources and influence between the U.S. and its near-peer competitors on the global stage, including the People’s Republic of China. By way of concluding this panoramic perspective, the article will give a preliminary assessment of the emergent policies and structures of U.S. military and security engagement in Africa which lay the foundations for a more comprehensive framework, including a possible unified combatant command for the continent.

EDITOR’S NOTE: On February 6, 2007, President George W. Bush announced the creation of a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa that will be operation by the end of fiscal year 2008. The new command, dubbed AFRICOM, will have as its area of responsibility all of Africa except for Egypt which will continue to fall under the Central Command (CENTCOM).

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the American homeland, the United States has marshaled its strategic resources to fight a “global war on terrorism.” While the countries of the greater Middle East have figured most prominently as theaters of operations in that conflict, other areas of the globe, including Africa, have likewise experienced a shift in U.S. patterns of engagement as well as the underlying reassessment by American policymakers and analysts of their place in the overall global geography of security and other interests.

This article seeks to explore the shift that has taken place with respect to traditional U.S. foreign and security policy vis-à-vis Africa. It begins by briefly reviewing the very real evolution that has occurred in the assessment of Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, within U.S. strategic vision since the Cold War. It will then proceed to examine in greater depth Africa’s growing significance to U.S. national interests, particularly those relating to America’s international counterterrorism effort, which occasioned the aforementioned analytical and programmatic shift. Finally, it will attempt to give a preliminary assessment of the policies and other actions the U.S. government has initiated toward strategically engaging African states in recent years. It goes without saying that in pursuing a panoramic perspective of evolving U.S.-African strategic relations, this study will necessarily sacrifice some of the nuance and specificities that would have been possible in a series of more exhaustive and heterogeneous, possibly state-by-state, surveys.
From the Cold War to the War on Terror

It has been a longstanding cliché—and, alas, generally self-fulfilling prophecy—that Africa is the stepchild of U.S. foreign policy, with official attitudes and policies in Washington ranging from benign neglect at best to callous indifference at worst over the course of two centuries.¹ And even when a curious mix of motivations led an unlikely alliance of American abolitionists, slave owners, merchants, and philanthropists to establish Liberia on the west coast of Africa, official U.S. policies toward the continent continued to follow a “hands off” approach.² The exception to this rule came during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union’s attempts to secure a foothold in Africa led the U.S. to respond by lavishing attention and resources on the continent. It is worth recalling that it was the twenty-two day tour across Africa in 1957 of that consummate foreign policy realist, Richard Nixon, at that time vice president of the United States, that led to the creation of an Africa Bureau within the U.S. Department of State. Beginning in the Kennedy administration, the U.S. began to develop “special relationships” with geostrategically important states that were deemed to serve as bulwarks against communist expansion, including South Africa and Congo-Kinshasa (later Zaire and now the Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC).³ For its part, the Soviet Union did likewise: after an initial foray into West Africa, where the Marxists Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea and Modibo Keïta of Mali were especially receptive,⁴ the Soviets concentrated their efforts on Somalia (later exchanged for Ethiopia), Angola, and Mozambique.⁵ The subsequent history of the Cold War proxy battles between the United States and the Soviet Union is well known.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War brought about the transformation of the geopolitical world into the system characterized by America’s “unipolar moment.”⁶ For Africa, it largely meant that, with America’s attention diverted to the newly freed states of Eurasia, there was even less attention to be had from an increasingly disengaged Washington. And the disastrous result of the one exception, the decision by the George H. W. Bush administration to send U.S. troops to lead an international humanitarian mission in Somalia, only accelerated the pace of the America’s withdrawal from the continent. For the rest of the 1990s, Africa was deemed little more than the fitting backdrop for the apocalyptic visions like influential journalist Robert D. Kaplan’s lurid panorama of a post–Cold War world increasingly bifurcated between “societies like ours, producing goods and services that the rest of the world wants, and those mired in various forms of chaos.”⁷

It should be noted, however, that there were two exceptions to this rule that may prove, over time, to be of far greater significance than even their creators envisioned. First, freed by the end of the Cold War from the constraints of the zero-sum competition with their Soviet competitors and the attendant realpolitik calculations, American policymakers began placing a greater emphasis on democratization and good governance in their dealings with African states which had up to then largely been characterized by various genre of authoritarian rule—it should be recalled that only two, Botswana and Mauritius, had a record of remaining democratic continuously since gaining their independence.⁸ By the end of the 1990s, under steady pressure from the United States and other Western nations, virtually all sub-Saharan African states—even those that have collapsed or are on the verge of collapse—opened themselves to what Jean-Germain Gros has termed the “first phase of democratization,”⁹ the formal opening, however tentative, of the political system to competition.¹⁰ Second, as was the case with democratic reforms, the end of the Cold War likewise shifted leverage in economic matters to policymakers in the West who could more freely cut off aid and other ties from states recalcitrant in accepting conditionalities. On the
positive side, programs like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), signed by President Bill Clinton in 2000 and subsequently expanded by President George W. Bush, offered tangible incentives for African countries to continue their efforts to open their economies and accelerate their integration into the global economy. From the American perspective, the strength of this approach was the linkage of domestic concerns (export markets for American goods and services and, hence, jobs in the United States) with foreign policy objectives (reducing foreign dependence on aid and promoting democracy), both bundles of which enjoyed broad bipartisan support in Washington.\footnote{Having campaigned for office on a foreign policy platform of realism, President George W. Bush entered the White House accompanied by subdued expectations from Africanists. It was expected that, harkening back to the Nixon administration’s strategy of relying on regional powers to ensure stability, the new administration would largely build on its predecessor’s success of America promoting trade and investment on the continent while emphasizing Africa’s need to do more for itself. Thus it took the shock of the 9/11 attacks to shift the focus of American policymakers and analysts back to Africa in a concerted manner as U.S. geopolitical vision was reassessed in light of what became known as the “global war on terrorism.” The shift is not without its ironies considering the long history—largely forgotten by many decision makers in Washington and virtually unknown to the American public—of U.S. conflict with terrorists in Africa, from the 1973 assassination of U.S. Ambassador to Sudan Cleo A. Noel, Jr., and his deputy, George Curtis Moore, as well as the Belgian chargé d’affaires and two Saudis, by Palestine Liberation Organization terrorists to the coordinated 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam which presaged the full measure of the al Qaeda threat.}

Having campaigned for office on a foreign policy platform of realism,\footnote{In short, while U.S. policy might be motivated by the cold calculus of political realism, moral principles are not divorced from those interests and can, in fact, help advance them. Unfortunately, old habits die hard even among foreign policy realists and other seemingly more immediate challenges soon took precedence. As far as America’s “global war on terrorism” was concerned, attention quickly became focused almost exclusively on the} President George W. Bush entered the White House accompanied by subdued expectations from Africanists. It was expected that, harkening back to the Nixon administration’s strategy of relying on regional powers to ensure stability, the new administration would largely build on its predecessor’s success of America promoting trade and investment on the continent while emphasizing Africa’s need to do more for itself.\footnote{In Africa, promise and opportunity sit side by side with disease, war, and desperate poverty. This threatens both a core value of the United States—preserving human dignity—and our strategic priority—combating terror. American interests and American principles, therefore, lead in the same direction: we will work with others for an African continent that lives in liberty, peace, and growing prosperity.} Thus it took the shock of the 9/11 attacks to shift the focus of American policymakers and analysts back to Africa in a concerted manner as U.S. geopolitical vision was reassessed in light of what became known as the “global war on terrorism.” The shift is not without its ironies considering the long history—largely forgotten by many decision makers in Washington and virtually unknown to the American public—of U.S. conflict with terrorists in Africa, from the 1973 assassination of U.S. Ambassador to Sudan Cleo A. Noel, Jr., and his deputy, George Curtis Moore, as well as the Belgian chargé d’affaires and two Saudis, by Palestine Liberation Organization terrorists to the coordinated 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam which presaged the full measure of the al Qaeda threat.

**Africa’s Newfound Strategic Significance**

The 9/11 attacks changed the calculus of Africa’s strategic significance vis-à-vis the United States. According to the September 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington drove home the lesson that “weak states . . . can pose a great danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.”\footnote{In short, while U.S. policy might be motivated by the cold calculus of political realism, moral principles are not divorced from those interests and can, in fact, help advance them. Unfortunately, old habits die hard even among foreign policy realists and other seemingly more immediate challenges soon took precedence. As far as America’s “global war on terrorism” was concerned, attention quickly became focused almost exclusively on the} And perhaps with the possible exception of the greater Middle East nowhere is this analysis truer than Africa, where poverty and state weakness have, unfortunately, been par for the course. Consequently, the document went on to acknowledge:

> In Africa, promise and opportunity sit side by side with disease, war, and desperate poverty. This threatens both a core value of the United States—preserving human dignity—and our strategic priority—combating terror. American interests and American principles, therefore, lead in the same direction: we will work with others for an African continent that lives in liberty, peace, and growing prosperity.\footnote{In short, while U.S. policy might be motivated by the cold calculus of political realism, moral principles are not divorced from those interests and can, in fact, help advance them. Unfortunately, old habits die hard even among foreign policy realists and other seemingly more immediate challenges soon took precedence. As far as America’s “global war on terrorism” was concerned, attention quickly became focused almost exclusively on the}
Middle East abroad and fixated on “homeland security” at home. In the interests of returning American counterterrorism attention to the continent, it would be useful to recall, however summarily, why Africa is a focal point for terrorism in terms of its extensive facilitating environment, potential targets, and extent terrorist interest, as well as why the region is of overall strategic significance to the security of United States.17

Facilitating Environment for Terrorism

The National Security Strategy of 2002 correctly identified failed or failing states as a major threat to the U.S., the experience of Afghanistan after the Soviet retreat being paradigmatic. The “quasi-states” of Africa, to borrow the formulation of political theorist Robert Jackson, may be “internationally enfranchised and possess the same rights and responsibilities as all other sovereign states,” but their governments “are often deficient in the political will, institutional authority, and organized power to protect human rights or provide socio-economic welfare.”18 These capacity-challenged states—somewhere between one-third and one-half of all sub-Saharan African countries are estimated to fall in this category19—provide potential haven for terrorist groups and other transnational criminal networks taking advantage of the inability of ostensibly sovereign governments to assert authority beyond the environs of their capitals. While the volte-face of Libya’s Mu‘ammar Qadhafi after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has hopefully exorcized the specter of state sponsorship of international terrorism from the continent, Africa’s weak states and corrupt rulers still willingly or unwittingly provide haven and other support for all manner of international terrorists and other nonstate actors.

In addition to weak state capacity, many African countries suffer from their own endemic political violence. While both public and private preoccupation in the United States tends to focus on “international terrorism,” most African governments are more concerned with the threat of “domestic terrorism,” cases which rarely receive any press in the American media. The problem actually begins with the definition of terrorism. Most African states are parties to the former Organization of African Unity’s Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, which defines “terrorism” as:

Any act which is a violation of the criminal laws of a State Party and which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom of, or cause serious injury or death to, any person, any number of group of persons or causes or may cause damage to public or private property, natural resources, environmental or cultural heritage and is calculated to:

(i) intimidate, put in fear, force, coerce or induce any government, body, institution, the general public or any segment thereof, to do or to abstain from doing any act, or to adopt or abandon a particular standpoint, or to act according to certain principles; or

(ii) disrupt any public service, the delivery of any essential service to the public or to create a public emergency; or

(iii) create a general insurrection in a State.20

In contrast, American priorities in the war on terrorism are informed by Title 22, Section 2656 f (d), of the U.S. Code which defines “terrorism” as premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually with the goal of influencing an audience, while “international terrorism”
is defined as terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country and a “terrorist group” is any group practicing, or that has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism. That the U.S. has a different understanding of the definition of “terrorism” than many members of the African Union becomes evident when many incidents in Africa go unreported in official, semi-official, and other American documentation. The practical result of the divergence between the two definitions of terrorism is eloquently illustrated, for example, in the U.S. State Department’s Congressionally mandated Patterns of Global Terrorism report. The 2003 report, published in April 2004, identified 190 terrorist attacks worldwide, only four of which were located in Africa. Ignored were the literally thousands of terrorist acts perpetrated against civilian targets by substate actors in Congo, Liberia, Sudan, and Uganda. Likewise the National Counterterrorism Center’s report of “significant” incidents the following year noted only nine terrorist episodes in Africa out a total of 651 worldwide during 2004.

Consequently, there are very real consequences to these legal distinctions, including funding for counterterrorism and plain old attention by policymakers. Of course, the goals of international and noninternational terrorist groups differ in both objective and scope of activity. However, nothing prevents international terrorist groups from making alliances of convenience with noninternational terrorist groups, while the latter can expand their scope to include international powers that might be viewed as supporting the local authorities against whom they fight. And while there is no shortage of violent non-Muslim groups in Africa, sub-Saharan Africa is also plagued by a significant number of indigenous Islamist groups including the various subgroups of the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia, the Eritrean Islamic Jihad, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Ethiopia, and the Allied Democratic Forces/National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF/NALU).

In some places, in addition to failed or failing states and preexistent conflicts, Africa is also plagued by the phenomenon of growing Islamist militancy. This is an important element because terrorism does not arise out of political failure without some sort of ideological “accelerant.” Islam is, in many respects, an “African religion” that over the centuries has interwoven itself into Africa’s social fabric, in many places being intertwined with—rather than replacing—earlier beliefs and practices and giving rise to phenomena like “Islamic divination” and “Muslim charms” that are widely popular in West Africa among the tariqa (Sufi brotherhoods), but which would be anathema to orthodox Sunni theologians and jurists anywhere else in the Muslim world. But all of this is changing. What is happening, albeit with little attention from the West, is that the generally pacific, syncretistic African Islam is being swept aside by a militant Islamism imported from the Middle East that is not only transforming local societies, but also threatening to turn an increasingly significant region into an environment hospitable to extremist violence—with reverberations that will be felt throughout the continent and beyond.

While the direct link between poverty and terrorism has been largely disproved by the scholarly literature, if not necessarily in popular imagination, there is no denying that the environment created by Africa’s endemic poverty, social injustice, and political alienation nonetheless enhances the ability of religious and other extremists to propagate their radical ideologies and of terrorists to find local collaborators and other support for their violence. To cite just one example, while there has been some research on correlations between HIV/AIDS and conflicts on the continent, there has been no research to date linking the crisis of sub-Saharan Africa’s estimated 12 to 20 million AIDS orphans and what U.S. policymakers view as terrorism, there has been considerable work on the role of child soldiers in conflicts across the continent. Certainly children have been used to carry out gruesome terrorist acts during the localized conflicts in the DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone,
Uganda, and other places. Would it require much to turn some of them into international terrorists? In short, it was not coincidental that Osama bin Laden operated from Khartoum in the 1990s and that al Qaeda’s first strikes against the United States took place on African soil. Nor was it yet another coincidence that the same al Qaeda cells attacked Israeli interests in Kenya in 2002. As Karl Wycoff, then associate coordinator of the State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, explained a Congressional committee in 2004: “The main contributing factors include proximity to the Arabian Peninsula and the failed state of Somalia, large areas where the governments’ control is weak or nonexistent, weak counterterrorism and police capabilities of host nations, the probable continued presence of the al-Qaeda cell that carried out the 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, and armed conflicts that have long plagued the region.”

A Wealth of Targets to Choose From

Terrorism, however, requires opportunity if it is to translate radical intentionality into practical effect. Jakkie Cilliers, the executive director of the Institute for Security Studies, a singular institution of its kind in Africa, has succinctly summarized the situation in the following manner:

The opportunity targets presented by peacekeepers, aid and humanitarian workers, donors and Western NGOs active in the continent are lucrative targets of subnational terrorism and international terrorism. Africa is also replete with potentially much higher value targets ranging from the massive oil investments (often by U.S. companies) in the Gulf of Guinea to the burgeoning tourist industry in South Africa.

Take just the hydrocarbon sector by way of illustration. West African hydrocarbons are particularly attractive to American companies for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the higher marginal profit rates to be made per unit, both because of ease in extraction and transport and because, in the case of oil, the quality of the crude is particularly adapted to U.S. refineries. The strategic value of this supply is magnified when one adds the consideration in various policy circles of the desirability of reducing America’s dependence on volatile Middle Eastern sources. While West Africa does not yet confront planners with the geopolitical difficulties of other alternatives to the Middle Eastern reserves such as those of Central Asia, nonetheless the element of risk to America’s newfound oil supplies is very real and present—and increasing with time if one looks at its three constituent elements of threat, vulnerability, and cost.

Threat is the frequency or likelihood of adverse events. Sporadic attacks by a small group with local grievances, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), have nonetheless succeeded in cutting oil production by America’s fifth-largest supplier, Nigeria, by an estimated 500,000 barrels per day, or approximately 25 percent, since the beginning of 2006. And this in a country that is barely holding together amid increasing sectarian tensions grafted upon a crisis of democratic governance, and that is heading for presidential and parliamentary elections on April 21, 2007 that may well determine the fate of the nation. In short, even without looking beyond Nigeria to other, even more rickety, oil producing regimes (like El Hadj Omar Bongo’s Gabon or Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo’s Equatorial Guinea), much less complicating the picture with discussions of resource competition with the likes of China and India, the threat to
America’s West African supply, which has historically been low, especially in contrast to the volatile Middle East, and remains so, is nonetheless steadily increasing.

Vulnerability is the likelihood of success of a particular threat category against a particular target. With a few exceptions like the more than 1,000 kilometer-long Chad–Cameroon pipeline, most hydrocarbon production in West Africa is on the littoral, either in delta regions like Nigeria’s or in offshore fields like Equatorial Guinea’s. While this fact lessons vulnerability to the type of hit-and-run attacks that have plagued Iraqi production since the U.S. invasion, it also makes vigilance harder because it calls for the type of blue-water and brown-water naval capacities that African countries can only dream of acquiring. Even a regional powerhouse like Nigeria boasts more admirals and commodores than vessels in its fleet. So it is not surprising that according to the International Maritime Bureau, two of the deadliest bodies of water in the world in terms of pirate attacks and casualties are the coasts of Somalia and Nigeria. And if al Qaeda could successfully attack an armed vessel of the U.S. Navy, like it did to the 

U.S.S. Cole in 2000, causing some $287 million in damage with just one explosive-laden speedboat, imagine how much easier it would be assault an oil platform or tanker manned by nonmilitary personnel.

Cost is the total cost of the impact of a particular threat experienced by a vulnerable target, including both the “hard costs” of actual damages and the “soft costs” to production, the markets, etc. Although the price of a barrel of crude oil has softened somewhat recently, the global market is so tight that any shocks caused by cuts to production or supply would be devastating economically. Conversely, viewed from the perspective of the terrorists, the physical damage to the Cole alone was an extraordinary return on their investment, as would the global economic fallout from any successful maritime attack on the oil supply. In fact, from the point of view of the economic warfare strategy laid out by bin Laden, an attack on commercial targets in the water makes much more sense than any land-based disruptions.

David Goldwyn, who served as assistant secretary of energy in the Clinton administration, for example, testified at one Senate hearing: “While the region’s geological prospects are good, the risk of an oil supply disruption from the region is rising from internal and external sources. We are in no position to endure a serious oil disruption from the Gulf of Guinea today. The global oil market is stretched to capacity.”

In short, the combination of these three factors—threat, vulnerability, and cost—raises the overall risk considerably. And this is just one sector.

“Al Qaeda Moves to Africa” (Again)

In June 2006, an online magazine for actual and aspiring global jihadis and their supporters, Sada al-Jihad (“Echo of Jihad”),

which a year earlier took the place of Sawt al-Jihad ("Voice of Jihad"). as the publication of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, ran four-page article by Abu Azzam al-Ansari entitled “Al Qaeda is Moving to Africa.” The author of the article was quite up-front about the jihadi agenda for Africa:

There is no doubt that al Qaeda and the holy warriors appreciate the significance of the African regions for the military campaigns against the Crusaders. Many people sense that this continent has not yet found its proper and expected role and the next stages of the conflict will see Africa as the battlefield.

With almost admirable detachment from rancor, Abu Azzam then proceeded to enumerate and evaluate what he perceives to be significant advantages to shifting terrorist operations to Africa, including: the fact that jihadi doctrines have already been spread in
many African countries; the political and military weakness of African governments; the easy availability of a wide range of weapons; the geographical position of Africa vis-à-vis international trade routes; the proximity to old conflicts against “Jews and Crusaders” in the Middle East as well as emergent ones like Darfur, which is explicitly mentioned; the poverty of Africa, which “will enable the holy warriors to provide some finance and welfare, thus, posting there some of their influential operatives”; the technical and scientific skills that potential African recruits would bring; the presence of large Muslim communities, including ones in conflict with Christians or other Muslims; the links to Europe through North Africa “which facilitates the move from there to carry out attacks”; and the fact that Africa has a wealth of natural resources, including hydrocarbons and other raw materials, which are “very useful for the holy warriors in the intermediate and long term.” Consequently, Abu Azzam concluded:

In general, this continent has an immense significance. Whoever looks at Africa can see that it does not enjoy the interest, efforts, and activity it deserves in the war against the Crusaders. This is a continent with many potential advantages and exploiting this potential will greatly advance the Jihad. It will promote achieving the expected targets of Jihad. Africa is a fertile soil for the advance of Jihad and the Jihadi cause.

An interesting note about Abu Azzam is that, however unintentionally, he answered Western analysts and academics inclined to point to the significant presence in Africa of Sufi and other Islamic traditions that the Wahhābī and Salafi ideologies have historically tended to condemn as heterodox, as if the former were an inoculation against the latter. Abu Azzam took a more pragmatic approach in order to exploit the continent’s geopolitical and strategic advantages: “The Sufis have no doubt a huge presence in Africa, more than in any other continent. Many holy warriors in other countries have learned that working with the Sufis is easier than working with any other sect, such as the Shi’ites or the Communists.”

Although he did not mention them specifically, one cannot help but wonder if Abu Azzam was not thinking about the potential of grafting his own violent campaign of global jihad onto African traditions of military campaigns historically carried out by charismatic African leaders under the banner of Islam, including the empire-building jihad of Uthman dan Fodio in what is now northern Nigeria. In fact, the Sufi brotherhoods among that region’s largely Muslim Hausa and Fulani peoples have longstanding ties with the Middle East and, following the colonial interlude, proved receptive to the ministrations of Saudi-educated imams who looked down upon more moderate expressions of Islam. Recently, with the restoration of democracy, Islamist tendencies in the West African giant have taken on a political edge as Muslims from the north have felt sidelined as they are no longer accorded the automatic dominance that they enjoyed under British colonialism and postindependence military rule, a sense of grievance accentuated by the realization that their region, unlike the southern areas, is resource poor. It was in this context of Muslim political decline on the national level that northern politicians began raising—quite successfully, one might add—the banner of shari‘a to reinforce their positions. In summary, increasing economic and political marginalization, combined with the intrusion of “religious” ideologies into a still maturing polity, make for a volatile situation even before the entrance of foreign extremist elements.

Likewise, while Senegal, a relatively stable and prosperous country with an overwhelming Muslim population, has managed to maintain, since the tenure of its extraordinary independence leader and first president, the humanist scholar Léopold Sédar Senghor. The
country’s civil authorities have paid due deference to the leaders of its influential Sufi brotherhoods—including the Tidjaniyya, Muridiyya, Quadriyya, and others—who, in turn, accept the secular government’s control of civic matters. The current president, Abdoulaye Wade, for example, lets out that he is a Mouride, an adherent of a reformist group within the Hizbut Tarquiyyah brotherhood. However, outside the relatively moderate traditional religious establishment, there are a number of radical Islamist groups whose leaders have been trained in the Middle East. These are particularly active among younger Senegalese, especially university students, as the innocuous-sounding name of one of these groups, the Associations des Etudiants de l’Université de Dakar, indicates.36

In summary, al Qaeda and its allies are already setting their sights on Africa as the venue of choice for future operational bases. And the ground is well prepared.

Other U.S. Strategic Interests

While counterterrorism efforts aimed chiefly at radical Islamist forces have been the chief focus of the strategic reengagement of the United States in Africa, there are other concerns driving America’s policy shift.

There is an increasing body of literature on linkages between organized criminal activities and international terrorist networks in Africa. Former Washington Post correspondent Douglas Farah, for example, described how al Qaeda procured somewhere between $30 million and $50 million worth of diamonds from the RUF and its Liberian patron, Charles Taylor, in the month prior to 9/11.37 In contrast to Osama bin Laden, who saw in the gemstones a means to hide his money, the present author has documented how Hezbol-lah’s Hassan Nasrallah’s sees in the same stones a way to make money, using the extensive Lebanese Shi’a communities in places like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. Recall that last year alone somewhere between $170 million and $370 million worth of uncut gems out of Sierra Leone by members of this diaspora, according to Ambassador Daudi Mwakawago, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in the country.38

The link between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa is less well documented. However, it is safe to presume that a significant connection exists. It is known, for example, that Nigeria is the transshipment point for approximately one-third of the heroin seized by authorities in the United States and more than half of the cocaine seized by South African officials. It would seem obvious that this traffic has all sorts of possibilities for international terrorism. For another, there is the very lucrative qat trade in the Horn of Africa and there is evidence that profits from it are partially financing the conflict in Somalia.

Aside from the issues of criminality, there are the threats represented by Africa’s poorly secured, porous borders and vast ungoverned territories. These latter areas can be conceived as on a spectrum ranging from the physical to the non physical, ranging from ungoverned territories to areas of competing governance to areas of “legal” exploitation to opaque areas of activity. Much of the Sahel is an example of an ungoverned physical space; the inability to police of the infamous Nigerian internet scams is an example of an opaque area of activity. These ungoverned spaces, however, have been duly “exported” through the African migrations to the West where the same spectrum has been duly reproduced: from the effectively ungoverned/ungovernable banlieue of a major French city to the poorly policed hawala-type remittance systems operative among African immigrant communities in the United States. The present author has recently documented, for example, how one such money transfer company, Dalsan, played a significant role in financing the radical elements of the Islamic Courts Union.39
Piracy, especially off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Guinea, is another concern that currently figures low among terrorism-related priorities. Should, for example, jihadi elements already present in Africa ally themselves with pirates, the damage that maritime terrorism could do to the global economy—shipping and energy supplies—would be devastating.

And beyond terrorism-related security issues, Africa is increasingly becoming a theater for strategic competition between the United States and its near-peer competitors on the global stage, like the People’s Republic of China (PRC), for both resources and influence. Apart from the Central Eurasian region on its own northwestern frontier, perhaps no other foreign region rivals Africa as the object of Beijing’s sustained strategic interest in recent years. In fact, at a deeper level, there are certain unsettling linkages between the PRC’s interests in Africa and some of the other challenges to America arising from the continent.40

America’s Commitments to Date

No non-African country has done more than the United States to combat and prevent terrorism on the continent. Since the attacks on the American homeland, four multilateral programs have been established by the U.S. in Africa:

- The Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), based at Camp Le Monier in Djibouti helps develop capacity in the Horn of Africa and partially along the eastern littoral of the continent (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen). While CJTF-HOA’s official mission is to identify and disrupt terrorist networks which threaten both U.S. security interests and the long-term stability of the subregion, its modest resources (under 2,000 personnel) has meant that its efforts have largely been devoted so far to training allied forces in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya, as well as carrying out civic action programs like building schools and clinics for and providing medical assistance to civilian populations.

- The East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative (EACTI) complements CJTF-HOA activities by equipping, training, and assisting the governments of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda in their counterterrorism efforts, including military training for border and coastal security, programs to strengthen control of movements of peoples and goods across borders, aviation security, assistance to counter terrorist financing, police training, and educational programs to counter extremist influences.

- The modest Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) provides similar counterterrorism assistance in Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger using personnel from U.S. Special Forces attached to the U.S. European Command (EUCOM).

- The new U.S. Department of State Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), launched last year and supported by the Department of Defense’s Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara (OEF-TS), will include Algeria, Nigeria, Morocco, and Senegal as well as the four countries of the PSI. If delivered as promised, the TSCTI will assist in improving political as well as military and security capacities.

All of this being said, however, much needs to be done. Other than inclusion of Nigeria and Senegal in the TSCTI, there are no fully operational multilateral initiatives beyond “ordinary” military-military cooperation for whole subregions of the continent: West Africa, Central Africa, and Southern Africa. Moreover, existing programs largely focus on the admittedly daunting challenges African states face on the ground. Provision needs to be made for building up the waterborne counterterrorism capacity of America’s partners.
In addition, longer-term strategies must be developed to address the factors that have created a facilitating environment for terrorism on the African continent.

In addition to these special initiatives, American assets within North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) structures have also begin looking south toward Africa. Most of Africa falls under the aegis of the U.S. military’s EUCOM, with the balance coming under the area of responsibility (AOR) of Central Command (CENTCOM) and, to some extent, the Pacific Command (PACOM). At a September 2006 hearing before the Committee on Armed Services of the U.S. Senate which was discussing his confirmation to be the next commander of EUCOM, Army General Bantz Craddock affirmed:

> The increasing strategic significance of Africa will continue to pose the greatest security stability challenge in the EUCOM AOR. The large ungoverned area in Africa, HIV/AIDS epidemic, corruption, weak governance, and poverty that exist throughout the continent are challenges that are key factors in the security stability issues that affect every country in Africa.

It is conceivable, as press reports have long hinted, that an African Command might be added to the five already existing unified combatant commands around which the U.S. military is organized. In fact, during his confirmation hearing General Craddock declared:

> From a unity of command and unity of effort perspective, a change in U.S. command arrangements in Africa has merit and should be considered. A separate command for Africa would provide better focus and increased synergy in the support of U.S. policy and engagement, but it would also require a significant commitment of resources.

Three days later, speaking at a briefing, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signaled his support for the creation of a new command for Africa, stating that he and Marine Corps General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were pressing the military for a proposal to set up an Africa Command. “Pete and I are for it,” Rumsfeld was quoted as saying, while Pace confirmed that establishment of the new command as a geographic combatant command will be included in the Pentagon’s Unified Command Plan for 2007 and that the current EUCOM command, Marine Corps General James Jones, was formulating a formal recommendation.

Until the new command structure is created, one can expect the U.S. to continue negotiating bilateral agreements like the ones currently in force with Djibouti and Kenya. The latter, signed in 1981, was originally conceived as a support for American activities in the Middle East. Its provisions allow for the U.S. to maintain a modest prepositioned supply facility at the airport in Mombasa and to use, on short notice, the international airports at Nairobi and Mombasa and the seaport at Mombasa for military and humanitarian missions. In the quarter-century of its existence, the U.S.-Kenyan Access Agreement has enabled U.S. forces to have a forward base from which to respond to a variety of needs ranging from the military intervention in Somalia in the early 1990s to the massive relief operation mounted following the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

Over time, some of these bilateral relations are slowly evolving into components of a more comprehensive regional security architecture. An example is the involvement of U.S. Naval Forces Europe and the U.S. Sixth Fleet engagement of the Gulf of Guinea region over a ten-year period. Cooperative exercises aimed at increasing maritime safety and security, increasing maritime domain awareness, and building the capacity of the naval and coastal
forces of countries on the western littoral of Africa have moved gradually towards building a broad coalition of partners with interest in the stability of a strategic coastal region.

Conclusion: Prospects for the Future

While it has been difficult to get policymakers and analysts to accord it the attention that it deserves, there is no denying Africa’s increased strategic significance to overall U.S. national interests. The data speaks for itself:

- Currently sub-Saharan Africa supplies the U.S. with 16 percent of its petroleum needs. According to a report prepared for the National Intelligence Council, within a decade, the West African subregion will play an increasingly important role in global energy markets, providing more than one-quarter of North American oil imports by 2015, thus surpassing the total volume of oil imports from the Middle East.
- The continent also boasts the world’s fastest rate of population growth: by 2020, today’s more than 900 million Africans will number more than 1.2 billion — more than the combined populations of Europe and North America. Nor do these absolute numbers tell the whole story: by then, the median age of Europeans will be 45, while nearly half of the African population will be under the age of 15.
- Despite the dynamic potential implicit in the natural and human resource figures just cited, Africa also suffers from many woes. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the world’s economic basket case, with a per capita GDP of barely $575. The United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Report 2005 determined that of the thirty-two countries found to have “low development,” thirty-one were in Africa. While sub-Saharan Africa is home to only 10 percent of the world’s overall population, more than two-thirds of the people living with HIV are sub-Saharan Africans — and they are the relatively fortunate: the vast majority of the estimated 25 million people worldwide whose deaths are attributable to HIV/AIDS are Africans, including two million in 2005 alone.

Consequently, the Unites States’ National Strategy for Combating Terrorism of February 2003 correctly acknowledged that while many terrorist organizations have little in common with the poor and destitute, they exploit these conditions to their advantage. The document asserts that the U.S. will undertake steps designed to identify and diminish the conditions contributing to state weakness and failure, including helping resolve regional disputes, and fostering economic, social, and political development, market-based economies, good governance, and the rule of law. As President George W. Bush noted in his September 2005 address to the United Nations High-Level Plenary to commemorate the organization’s sixtieth anniversary:

We must defeat the terrorists on the battlefield, and we must also defeat them in the battle of ideas. We must change the conditions that allow terrorists to flourish and recruit, by spreading the hope of freedom to millions who’ve never known it. We must help raise up the failing states and stagnant societies that provide fertile ground for the terrorists. We must defend and extend a vision of human dignity, and opportunity, and prosperity — a vision far stronger than the dark appeal of resentment and murder. To spread a vision of hope, the United States is determined to help nations that are struggling with poverty.

The most recent iteration of the National Security Strategy of the United States of America went on to declare that “Africa holds growing geo-strategic importance and is a
high priority of this Administration.” Of course, the U.S. must now carry out these promises if it is serious about combating terrorism and other forms of extremism in Africa. Africa today represents a major strategic opportunity for the United States, both in terms of the war on terrorism and in terms of advancing overall national policy objectives. Writing before the more recent Islamist advance in Somalia, Princeton Lyman, former U.S. ambassador to South Africa and to Nigeria, observed:

Africa is neither a seething sea of anti-American feeling nor a continent threatened with major terrorist emplacement in any one country. It is, however, a continent that offers terrorist opportunities to develop active terrorist cells, to recruit terrorist for actions elsewhere, to obtain financing, and to provide a safe haven for wanted terrorists. It also offers the United States a unique opportunity to engage with a strong center of moderate Islam in West Africa and to understand how religion, poverty, and politics can turn a region into a receptive arena for radical and potentially violent sympathy with terrorist organizations.

The resources and attention given to the continent since September 11, 2001, have been impressive by historical standards of U.S. engagement on the continent. Nonetheless, in absolute terms, they are still less than adequate given the scope of what is at stake. The focus has largely been short- or, at best, medium-term in scope: tracking terrorists, providing training, and, to a certain extent, reinforcing counterterrorism capacities. What is needed is a sustained, long-term strategic engagement—diplomatic and developmental as well as military and security—that anchors Sub-Saharan Africa firmly in America’s orbit before terrorists or others make it the next front.

Notes


16. Ibid.


32. See Karl Maier, This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002).

34. Available at http://www.sada-aljihad.ca.tc/ (last accessed October 1, 2006).
43. U.S. CENTCOM’s AOR includes the African countries of Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia, and Sudan, as well as the waters of the Red Sea and the western portions of the Indian Ocean not covered by U.S. PACOM.
44. U.S. PACOM’s AOR includes Comoros, Mauritius, and Madagascar, as well as the waters of the Indian Ocean, excluding those north of 5° S and west of 68° E (which fall into U.S. CENTCOM’s AOR) and those west of 42° E (which fall into U.S. EUCOM’s AOR).
47. Nor is the military the only arm of the U.S. government in need of reorganization to overcome divided responsibilities for Africa. Princeton N. Lyman and J. Stephen Morrison, “The Terrorist Threat in Africa,” Foreign Affairs vol. 83, no. 1 (January/February 2004): 86, noted: “Similarly, an empowered anti-terrorism task force is needed to overcome the internal division in the State Department separating those who deal with North Africa from those who deal with sub-Saharan Africa.”
48. Craddock, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, op. cit.


