On February 6, 2007, President George W. Bush launched a major evolution in American military posture when he formally announced that he had directed the Pentagon to establish a new unified combatant command, Africa Command (AFRICOM), by October 2008. Officially, AFRICOM’s mission will be to “enhance our efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote our common goals of development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa” by strengthening bilateral and multilateral security cooperation with African states and creating new opportunities to bolster their capabilities.¹

The President’s decision, although anticipated by some astute observers, was nonetheless quite extraordinary. Back in 2000, then-candidate Bush had responded in the negative when asked whether Africa fitted into his definition of the strategic interests of the United States. “At some point in time the president’s got to clearly define what the national strategic interests are, and while Africa may be important, it doesn’t fit into the national strategic interests, as far as I can see them,” Bush told PBS’ Jim Lehrer.²

Bush’s campaign remark may have offended Africanists, but it nonetheless reflected a foreign policy truism of the time; with the exception of Cold War era concerns about Soviet attempts to secure a foothold on the continent, American interests in Africa historically have been framed almost exclusively

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in terms of preoccupation over the humanitarian consequences of poverty, war, and natural disaster. Today, however, things are substantially different. While the moral impulses of Americans remain strong, since 9/11 a more strategic view of Africa has begun to emerge in Washington.

Broadly conceived, there are three major areas in which Africa’s significance for America—or at least the recognition thereof—has grown exponentially in recent years. The first is Africa’s role in the “Global War on Terror” and the potential of the poorly governed spaces of the continent to provide facilitating environments, recruits, and eventual targets for Islamist terrorists who threaten Western interests in general and those of the United States in particular. Indeed, in some regions, like the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, this has already become a reality. The second important consideration is Africa’s abundant natural resources, particularly those in its burgeoning energy sector. The third area of interest remains the humanitarian concern for the devastating toll which conflict, poverty, and disease, especially HIV/AIDS, continue to exact in Africa.

**Terrorism’s trail**

There is no denying that for the foreseeable future, irrespective of the results of the 2008 election, U.S. security policy will be dictated largely by the “Global War on Terror,” the “Long War,” or whatever the designation du jour for the fight against transnational Islamist terrorism happens to be. The Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy rightly acknowledged that “weak states... can pose as great a 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.”

With the possible exception of the greater Middle East, nowhere is this analysis truer than in Africa. There, regional conflicts arising from a variety of causes, including poor governance, external aggression, competing claims, internal revolt, and ethnic and religious tensions, all “lead to the same ends: failed states, humanitarian disasters, and ungoverned areas that can become safe havens for terrorists,” the National Security Strategy notes.

Over the past decade, al-Qaeda’s 1998 terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, and on an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, and, simultaneously, on an Israeli commercial airliner in 2002, have hammered home the deadly reality of the terrorist threat in Africa. Perhaps the most eloquent reminder of the particular vulnerability of the continent to terrorism, however, comes from the terrorists themselves. In June 2006, a new online magazine for actual and aspiring global jihadis and their supporters, Sada al-Jihad (“Echo of Jihad”), featured an article by one Abu Azzam al-Ansari entitled “Al-Qaeda Is Moving to Africa.” In it, the author was remarkably frank:

> 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 rather commendable analytical rigor, Abu Azzam then proceeded to enumerate and evaluate what he
perceived to be significant advantages to al-Qaeda’s shifting terrorist operations to Africa. These include:

- the fact that jihadi doctrines have already been spread within the Muslim communities of many African countries;
- the political and military weakness of African governments;
- the wide availability 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 new ones like Darfur, where the author almost gleefully welcomed the possibility of Western intervention;
- 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 to the jihadi cause;
- the presence of large Muslim communities, including ones already embroiled in conflict with Christians or adherents of traditional African religions;
- 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.”

Abu Azzam concluded his assessment on an ominous note:

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.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this analysis as devoid of operational effect. Shortly before the publication of the article, the Islamic Courts Union, an Islamist movement whose leaders included a number of figures linked to al-Qaeda, seized control of the sometime Somali capital of Mogadishu and subsequently overran most of the country. While forceful intervention by neighboring Ethiopia in late December 2006 dislodged the Islamists, Somalia’s internationally-recognized but utterly ineffective “Transitional Federal Government” has yet to assert itself in the face of a growing insurgency which has adopted the same non-conventional tactics that foreign jihadis and Sunni Arab insurgents have used to great effect in Iraq.

Meanwhile, another al-Qaeda “franchise” has sought to reignite conflict in Algeria and spread it to the Sahel, the critical boundary region where sub-Saharan Africa meets North Africa and where vast empty spaces and highly permeable bor-
ders are readily exploitable by local and international militants alike. Last year, the Algerian Islamist terrorist group Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (usually known by its French acronym, GSPC) formally pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and began identifying itself in communiqués as “Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb.” The link to al-Qaeda was confirmed by bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who, in the “commemorative video” the terrorist group issued on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, declared that bin Laden had instructed him “to give the good news to Muslims in general and my mujahidin brothers everywhere that the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat has joined [the] al-Qaeda organization.” Zawahiri hailed the “blessed union” between the GSPC and al-Qaeda, pledging that it would “be a source of chagrin, frustration and sadness for the apostates [of the regime in Algeria], the treacherous sons of [former colonial power] France.” Results have not been long in coming; last April, al-Qaeda’s new affiliate claimed credit for a pair of bomb blasts—one close to the prime minister’s office, the other near a police station—that rocked Algiers, killing two dozen people and wounding more than a hundred, shattering the calm that the Algerian capital had enjoyed since the conclusion of the brutal civil war of the 1990s.

Perhaps most menacing, however, is an increasingly apparent willingness on the part of transnational Islamist terror networks to exploit the grievances nursed by some African Muslim communities, and to reach out to other, non-Muslim militants to make common cause against mutual enemies. While there is no shortage of violent non-Muslim groups in sub-Saharan Africa, the region has long been plagued by a number of indigenous Islamist groups like the Eritrean Islamic Jihad, Ethiopia’s Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and the Allied Democratic Forces/National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF/NALU). More recently, evidence has emerged that outside forces have been providing these groups with strategic guidance, tactical assistance, and operational planning. The ONLF, for example, has been battling successive Ethiopian governments for years with the goal of splitting the ethnic Somali region from the country. However, it was only within the last year that the group acquired from somewhere the wherewithal to mount the most spectacular attack within Ethiopia since the fall of the Derg dictatorship in 1991.

Terrorist groups have also profited from the weak governance capacities of African states, which have afforded them the opportunity to raise money by soliciting sympathizers, and to trade in gemstones and other natural resources as a means to launder and make money. Former Washington Post correspondent Douglas Farah, for example, has reported on how al-Qaeda procured somewhere between $30 million and $50 million worth of Sierra Leonean “conflict diamonds” through the good offices of then Liberian president Charles Taylor in the month before the September 11 attacks. Similarly, Hezbollah is known to have used the extensive Lebanese Shi’a communities in places like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea to make money in an illicit market estimated by the United Nations to be worth between $170 million and $370 million. Thus, it is not surprising that the most recent iteration of the National Security Strategy goes out of its way to affirm that
“Africa holds growing geo-strategic importance and is a high priority of this Administration.”

The new Gulf

In his 2006 State of the Union address, President Bush called for the United States to “replace more than 75 percent of our oil imports from the Middle East by 2025” and to “make our dependence on Middle Eastern oil a thing of the past.” According to the Department of Energy’s Energy Information Administration, America has already made significant progress in its effort, thanks in large measure to the abundant energy resources of Africa. This past March, Nigeria edged past Saudi Arabia to become America’s third largest supplier, delivering 41,717,000 barrels of oil that month, compared to the Kingdom’s 38,557,000. When one adds Angola’s 22,542,000 barrels to the former figure, two African states now supply more of America’s energy needs than Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates combined.

This natural wealth makes Africa an inviting target for the attentions of the People’s Republic of China, whose dynamic economy, averaging nine percent growth per annum over the last two decades, has created an almost insatiable thirst for oil and other natural resources. China is currently importing approximately 2.6 million barrels of crude per day, about half of its consumption. More than 765,000 of those barrels—roughly a third of its total imports—come from African sources, especially Sudan, Angola, and Congo (Brazzaville). Is it any wonder, then, that apart from the Central Eurasian region on its own northwestern frontier, perhaps no other foreign locale rivals Africa as the object of Beijing’s sustained strategic interest?

Last year, the Chinese regime published its first ever official white paper on policy toward Africa. This year, ahead of his twelve-day, eight-nation tour of Africa—the third such journey since he took office in 2003—Chinese President Hu Jintao announced a three-year, $3 billion program in preferential loans and expanded aid for Africa. These funds come on top of the $3 billion in loans and $2 billion in export credits that Hu announced in October 2006 at the opening of the historic Beijing summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Intentionally or not, many analysts expect that Africa—especially the states along its oil-rich western coastline—will increasingly becoming a theater for strategic rivalry between the United States and its only real near-peer competitor on the global stage, China.

Yet, for all its global importance, the African littoral—especially the Gulf of Guinea, the Gulf of Aden and other waters off Somalia, and the “Swahili Coast” of East Africa—have seen comparatively few resources poured into maritime security. This deficit only worsens when one considers the scale of the area in question, and the magnitude of the challenges faced. Depending on how one chooses to define the Gulf of Guinea region, the nearly 3,500 miles of coastline running in an arc from West Africa to Angola, for example, are highly susceptible to piracy, criminal enterprises, and poaching, in addition to the security challenge presented by the area’s burgeoning oil industry.

The International Maritime Bureau’s Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships Report covering the first quarter of 2007, for instance, noted that while the number of reported attacks declined significantly compared to one year earlier, the figure
for incidents off the coast of Nigeria had doubled. At the same time, the Gulf of Guinea’s oil-producing states have long struggled with the practice of “illegal bunkering,” the tapping of pipelines for oil which is eventually loaded onto tankers and sold to refineries elsewhere at a considerable profit. There is also an increasing drug trade through the subregion: 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. European law enforcement officials meanwhile report that poorly-scrutinized West Africa has become the major conduit for drugs shipped to their countries by Latin American cartels.

In response to these challenges, the National Strategy for Maritime Security issued by the United States in 2005 declared that:

Assisting regional partners to maintain the maritime sovereignty of their territorial seas and internal waters is a longstanding objective of the United States and contributes directly to the partners’ economic development as well as their ability to combat unlawful or hostile exploitation by a variety of threats. For example, as a result of our active discussions with African partners, the United States is now appropriating funding for the implementation of border and coastal security initiatives along the lines of the former Africa Coastal Security (ACS) Program. Preventing unlawful or hostile exploitation of the maritime domain requires that nations collectively improve their capability to monitor activity throughout the domain, establish responsive decision-making architectures, enhance maritime interdiction capacity, develop effective policing protocols, and build inter-governmental cooperation. The United States, in cooperation with its allies, will lead an international effort to improve monitoring and enforcement capabilities through enhanced cooperation at the bilateral, regional, and global level.

Humanitarian impulses

While concern over terrorism and other potential security threats, as well as the growing importance of Africa’s hydrocarbon and other natural resources, has amplified America’s focus in recent years, the humanitarian impulses that motivated policy toward the African continent for so long have not been lost. If anything, they have acquired new importance as the United States reassesses and reconfigures its strategic engagement with Africa. Consider the following data points:

- Africa boasts the world’s fastest rate of population growth. By 2020, Africans will number more than 1.2 billion—more than the combined populations of Europe and North America. And by then, the median age of Europeans will be 45, while nearly half of the African population will be under the age of 15.

- The dynamic potential implicit in the demographic figures just cited is, however, constrained, by the economic and epidemiological data. The United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Report 2006 determined that of the 31 countries found to have “low development,” 29 were African states—more than half of the membership of the African Union. While sub-Saharan Africa is home to only 10 percent of the world’s population, nearly
two-thirds of the people infected with HIV—24.7 million—are sub-Saharan Africans, with an estimated 2.8 million becoming infected in 2006, more than any other region in the world.\(^{18}\)

Thus, while the 2003 \textit{National Strategy for Combating Terrorism} correctly argued that terrorist organizations have little in common with the poor and destitute, it also acknowledged that terrorists can exploit these socioeconomic conditions to their advantage.\(^{19}\) President Bush confirmed this concern when he noted in his 2005 address on the occasion of the United Nations’ 60th anniversary:

\begin{quote}
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.\(^{20}\)
\end{quote}

The Bush administration therefore has consolidated the comprehensive trade and investment policy for Africa introduced by its predecessor in the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) of 2000, which substantially lowered commercial barriers with the United States and allowed sub-Saharan African countries to qualify for trade benefits. It has also made combating HIV/AIDS on the continent a priority; 12 of the 15 focus countries in the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) are in Africa. Similarly, of the 25 countries currently eligible to receive funding under the Bush administration’s Millennium Challenge Account, which provides assistance for programs targeted at reducing poverty and stimulating economic growth, 12 are in Africa.

\section{Adapting to a shifting landscape}

Given the looming nature of the terrorist threat, as well as the newly recognized geostrategic importance of Africa, it is not surprising that the U.S. military has taken the lead in America’s new engagement across the continent.

To date, the largest commitment has been the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), a unit created by the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in late 2002 and based since May 2003 at Camp Lemonier, a former French Foreign Legion outpost in Djibouti. The approximately 1,500 military personnel, American civilian employees, and coalition forces who make up CJTF-HOA have as their mission “detecting, disrupting and ultimately defeating transnational terrorist groups operating in the region” of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia, and Sudan (as well as Yemen across the Gulf of Aden).\(^{21}\) CJTF-HOA pursues its objective of enhancing the long-term stability in its area of responsibility (AOR) by a combination of civil-military operations and supporting international governmental and non-governmental organizations. The task force also undertakes more traditional military-to-military training and other collaborative efforts, including some which certainly enabled Ethiopian forces
to launch their offensive against the Islamists in Somalia last year. In certain exceptional circumstances when actionable intelligence was available, the physical proximity of CJTF-HOA to the frontlines has enabled the U.S. to quickly and directly engage high-value terrorist targets.

Parallel to the CENTCOM effort, the U.S. State Department has launched a similar multilateral program, the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI). This modest effort seeks to provide border security and other counterterrorism assistance to Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger using personnel from U.S. Army Special Forces attached to the Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) of the U.S. European Command (EUCOM). As a follow-up, the State Department launched the Trans-Sahara CounterTerrorism Initiative (TSCTI) in 2005, adding Algeria, Nigeria, Morocco, Senegal, and Tunisia to the original four PSI countries. The Sahel countries have also received support from State Department programs—especially the Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) program and the Terrorist Interdiction Program (TIP)—and other U.S. government agencies, including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of the Treasury.

These efforts in the Sahelian sub-region have already borne fruit. For example, Amari Saifi, a former Algerian army officer-turned-GSPC leader responsible for the daring 2003 kidnapping of 32 European tourists, was himself captured after an unprecedented chase across the open deserts of Mali, Niger and Chad involving personnel from seven countries. Saifi now serves a life sentence in the far-less-open confines of an Algerian prison.

While the United States has historically deployed naval forces to Africa only to rescue stranded expatriates, EUCOM’s naval component—U.S. Naval Forces Europe (NAVEUR)—has taken the lead in maritime engagement in the Gulf of Guinea. In late 2005, the dock landing ship USS Gunston Hall and the catamaran HSV-2 Swift conducted five weeks of joint drills with forces from several West African nations, including Ghana, Guinea, and Senegal. In early 2006, the submarine USS Emory S. Land deployed to the region with some 1,400 sailors and Marines as part of a U.S. effort to boost maritime security and strengthen regional partnerships. Currently, the Whidbey Island-class dock landing ship USS Fort McHenry is in the Gulf of Guinea on an extended six-month deployment as part of a multinational maritime-security-and-safety initiative to help eleven African countries build their security capabilities, especially maritime domain awareness.

Targeted grants from the State Department’s International Military Education and Training (IMET) program have also been effective in building the capacities of America’s African partners. During the 2007 fiscal year alone, some 1,400 African military officers and personnel are expected to receive professional development at U.S. military schools and other training assistance at the cost of some $15.6 million. On a significantly broader scale, the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) aims at training and equipping 75,000 military troops, a majority of them African, for peacekeeping operations on the continent by 2010. The five-year, $660 million GPOI program is especially important, not only because of the general reluctance of the American public to permit the deployment of troops to the continent absent explicit threats to U.S. interests, but also because it responds to African aspirations for
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continental and regional peace and security institutions.\(^{24}\)

Despite these not insignificant achievements, until the February 6th announcement of the creation of AFRICOM, U.S. efforts in Africa were handicapped by an antiquated structural framework inherited from times when the continent was barely factored into America’s strategic calculus.\(^{25}\) For defense planning purposes, most of Africa—42 of the continent’s 53 countries—fell under the aegis of the EUCOM, with the balance part of the AOR of CENTCOM\(^ {27}\) or even that of the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM).\(^ {28}\) By contrast, the new command is slated to embrace all of Africa except Egypt, which will remain with CENTCOM. The goal, as EUCOM commander Army General Bantz J. Craddock noted in his confirmation hearing last year, is that AFRICOM “would provide better focus and increased synergy in support of U.S. policy and engagement.”\(^ {29}\)

**Pursuing the strategic imperative**

The progressive establishment of AFRICOM represents the latest step in the evolution of the delicately-balanced geopolitical framework that the United States has carefully constructed in the wake of 9/11 to achieve its national objectives on an African continent that is increasingly of great strategic importance.

On the other hand, just as the humanitarian-only approach to Africa was insufficient, so, too, will be a purely military approach. The National Security Strategy of 2002 correctly observed that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing states.”\(^ {30}\) It is the latter that have given rise to the “ungoverned spaces” where terrorists can find safe haven, just as it will be the same which ultimately threaten the country’s energy security via the vulnerability of West African supplies, particularly those in volatile Nigeria. Thus the Pentagon has designated “stability operations” as a “core U.S. military mission” which ought to “be given priority comparable to combat operations.”\(^ {30}\) While traditional “hard power” operations remain a responsibility of the combatant command, the implication is that “soft power” instruments, including diplomatic outreach, political persuasion, and economic programs, are also part of the strategic package.

The new American security framework for Africa is still taking shape. However, it is already evident that the architecture is one that neither lends itself to quick fixes nor promises all that many immediate results. Rather, it calls for a steady approach and sustained commitment in the pursuit of a long-term strategic objective which will secure U.S. interests as well as African needs. But, given the high stakes involved, nothing less should be expected.

4. Ibid.


25. Until 1952, when North Africa was added to the European Command’s responsibilities, no part of Africa was even included in any U.S. military command structure. Only in 1960, with mounting concerns about Soviet penetration of the continent, was the rest of the continent allocated to various commands.

26. EUCOM’s AOR embraced Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, in addition to some fifty Eurasian countries.

27. CENTCOM’s African AOR included 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.

28. U.S. PACOM’s African AOR included 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 were in CENTCOM’s AOR) and those west of 42° E (which were part of EUCOM’s AOR).
