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Geostrategic Shift

Washington, D.C. -- Pentagon planners are quietly reconfiguring the U.S. military presence in a region that is rich in oil, susceptible to Islamist terrorists, and is gaining strategic attention worldwide. It's not Iraq, but the African continent. These moves will be the subject of a key Congressional hearing today on Capitol Hill, where some have cast the Pentagon's new eye on the continent as the "militarization" of U.S.-African relations. Done right, this development should be welcomed, not feared.

Earlier this year, the Pentagon declared its intention to create a new unified combatant command, U.S. Africa Command or AFRICOM. To date, responsibility for Africa has been split between three different commands. This is more than a bureaucratic reshuffle, though.

The U.S. military's new strategic view of Africa is being driven by the continent's growing triple threat: Islamist terrorism, energy security and rising Chinese influence. Africa's ungoverned spaces offer ideal operating grounds for extremists. The continent recently surpassed the Middle East as the United States' largest supplier of crude oil. And while the U.S. has slowly recognized the strategic significance of Africa, the Chinese - with their indifference to transparency and the rule of law - have ramped-up their presence on the continent. Looking to secure Africa's natural resources and markets, some 800 Chinese companies (most linked to the state) are engaged in Africa.

Critics have derided this as the "militarization" of U.S.-African relations. It is not. Realizing the complexity of the challenges on the continent, the Pentagon is pursuing an unprecedented structure for this command, including a broader "soft power" mandate seeking to proactively prevent conflicts. It also includes a larger civilian component than normal in its ranks. Indeed, a senior civilian from the State Department will be the deputy commander. One top Pentagon official suggested Africa Command would be judged a success "if it keeps American troops out of Africa for the next 50 years."

A common criticism is that Africa Command will supplant the State Department in setting policy. This is not an illegitimate concern. In other regions of the world, combatant commanders carry more weight with a head of state than most ambassadors. That makes the appointment of a strong civilian deputy commander especially critical, along with flexibility from the Pentagon to accept such a break in military doctrine. The State Department would do better by fully embracing Africa Command and articulating its formation as added leverage, not competition.

Ironically, those fretting about the "militarization" of U.S. Africa policy are frequently pushing for U.S. engagement in Africa's humanitarian crises. They fail to see that a command dedicated to Africa's unique political, economic, social, and other challenges will help the U.S. to respond and even check human suffering. The 1994 genocide in

Rwanda might have been checked had the Pentagon been more focused on the continent. Today, the U.S. is providing airlift and training for Africa Union peacekeepers in Darfur. The command's holistic view of Africa will allow for comprehensive responses to such crises, which will certainly continue.

The prospect of the command's headquarters has also stirred debate and speculation. The headquarters for AFRICOM means a planning staff of less than 1,000, many of them civilian – not a troop headquarters. In fact, the Pentagon is adamant that Africa Command doesn't translate into new troops stationed on the continent and no new bases. In keeping with a small footprint, the Pentagon currently envisions a “networked” command headquarters dispersed throughout the continent. But wherever the four-star general resides will instantly be considered the de facto AFRICOM headquarters. The Pentagon might as well seek a definitive home for it.

So if AFRICOM doesn't mean more troops and bases for Africa, how will it contend with the triple threat above? The responsibility for counter-terrorism and providing a stable environment to harness their natural resources will still lie with Africans. That is why the central mission of Africa Command is improving the capacity for Africans to deal with these issues themselves, including training and assistance to professionalize local militaries with a focus on human rights and respect for the rule of law. Bolstering capacity in maritime security can help shield sea commerce and off-shore oil production from the threat of piracy and sabotage. Also look for Africa Command to have a "hearts and minds" focus on health and infrastructure projects designed to extend the local government's influence, ease suffering, build relationships, and gather important information along the way.

Despite a general positive outlook towards America, some Africans are suspicious of U.S. motives. Couple that with African sensitivities to colonialism and that creates a hostile environment in some circles. Overcoming that will require extensive consultations with Africans and better public diplomacy leading up to its October 2008 start date.

The role of the U.S. military outside of combat operations is foreign to many who have dedicated their lives to helping Africans. But for the sake of Africans, and the vital interests of the United States, let's hope they do not push away the helping hand that Africa Command brings.

Rep. Ed Royce chaired the Africa Subcommittee from 1997-2005