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The Mission of AFRICOM: Enabling African Sovereignty

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"Lack of knowledge is darker than night." African Proverb

A reading of the March 2008 Congressional Research Services report on AFRICOM, recent articles in the national media, and testimonies from various experts before Congress offer insight into the opportunities and challenges of our newest combatant command (COCOM). While I hesitate to simplify this complexity, I think that perhaps the central challenge lies in the definition and understanding of what the command is to produce. A quote from an unknown AFRICOM officer that said, "We can consider it a success if we do not have American troops on the ground in Africa for 50 years" offers some hint — perhaps, of one result of such a product — but not what it actually is.

The Historic Role of COCOMs

A COCOM's primary role has historically been to produce war plans. Given the wide spectrum of what we call "war" these plans can range from evacuation operations to major combat but in all cases the idea is to use U.S. forces and/or a U.S. backed coalition to shape an environment either momentarily or for a foreseeable future. To support this production, COCOMs are manned with trained people using proven processes to work through the intricacies of such war plan production with the idea that forces from service components and agencies will carry out and/or direct the missions and tasks.

However, what is the product of a COCOM that does not produce war plans? What is the product of a COCOM that, rather than using U.S. forces afar to protect us at home, enables foreign forces at their home to protect us from afar?

The New Battle: Enabling Sovereignty

And so it might be for AFRICOM to consider not how to extend U.S. capability into a foreign environment but rather how to use U.S. capability to enhance that environment. In other words grow not give, teach not tell, them not us. What this approach does is it allows AFRICOM to develop the sovereignty of African nations by enabling governments and other leadership entities to provide services as described **BY** their people **TO** their people and by doing so strengthen their society. This is critical because if a government cannot do this,

then its people are not really sovereign no de jure sovereignty without de facto sovereignty.

But sovereignty is a huge concept and its pursuit could be endless and I am in no way suggesting that it is AFRICOM's duty to describe or achieve sovereignty for another nation. What I do believe is that by using it as the strategic goal and by working with Africans, the command can organize itself to fully understand what sovereignty means to each nation, and detail the objectives and ultimate activities that, when initiated, will lead them to it.

Information Gathering and Sharing at the Center

A few years ago while talking about the [Global War on Terror (GWOT)] and what EUCOM was prepared to do to support Algeria, that country's J-3, LTG Mohammed Baziz, reminded me that the GWOT did not begin on September 11, 2001. He shared that for Algeria, the war on terror started many years and thousands of lives before that day. Baziz saw terror as a complex mix of criminality, mischief, ignorance and the opportunity all of that offered to those that wanted true destruction. While he valued our national technical products and understood why we had to filter them, he believed that the time delays involved made them useful only as an enhancer to his own knowledge which was largely based upon information from the populace. In fact when we discussed the activities and locations of certain terrorists he was not only frustrated that I had information that he did not have but also that neither of us together had the real story. I think he knew that he would never have the comprehensive capability he needed to protect his country and due to security issues we would never achieve it together. Given that Algeria is one of the most advanced countries in Africa in this regard, it is easy to see that the more under developed nations have even more of a problem.

And so perhaps it is here that AFRICOM can start in its quest to enable sovereignty. Perhaps the initial thrust should be in the enhancement of information gathering and analysis and sharing and the planning and execution capabilities that cascade from there. Because without information there can be no knowledge and without that there can be no real sovereignty. Perhaps AFRICOM's approach builds not so much on providing information but more on enhancing the gathering, sharing and use of the information that is resident within the society. After all, when you think about it, that is where the information to fight the GWOT resides. The late U.S House of Representatives Speaker, Tip O'Neil, once said, "All politics is local." The same is true for the GWOT because, "All terror is local" and what it is needs to be defined by those who are terrorized by it and the way they fight it must defined by those that do the fighting.

Some would argue that if U.S interests are not at the center of such things then we have no business funding and resourcing them. Here again is the difference between AFRICOM and other COCOMs. The command is not centered on defending the U.S. with military forces from afar, but it is centered on defending the U.S. by developing increased allied capacity at their home.

AFRICOM can be a leader in helping sovereign nations defend themselves by increasing their ability to collect information from disparate open sources and analyze the data for what it all means in context to providing services. This

most certainly includes security from terror and rampant criminality. Second, the COCOM can help nations share this information both internally and to a wider audience when appropriate as well as help transform the data into plans and execution activities. Such a platform will allow decision makers to query data bases, gain situational awareness, understand the environment, develop plans to effect that environment and then administer activities to support those plans. Imagine a proactive decision maker that applies this system to counter terrorism and criminal activity for sure but also can use the system to counter the spread of HIV-AIDS or even develop and administer a multi-year agricultural project.

While many will argue that Africans are so suspicious that they will never share information, failure to develop the capability will doom the region to a dangerous ignorance. In fact, AFRICOM's predecessor, EUCOM, was indeed a noble provider of service and support to much of Africa and provided pieces of this capability to the region some access to the Internet, some communications equipment, some English language training and a huge dose of advocacy in front of Congress and others. EUCOM also provided filtered information from classified sources in the effort to support the GWOT. However, we did not take the next step to help the Africans develop their own comprehensive system that is sovereign to each nation and that also supports regional and continental spectrum groupings such as the Regional Economic Councils (RECs) and the African Union (AU). Ideally, such a system(s) would be developed and owned (with assistance) by the nations themselves and the technologies selected would be based upon the processes the Africans find most useful. National systems will be cooperative and the idea will be to combine them to support a REC or AU goal.

Leveraging Unclassified Technology

Here is how such a system could bring immediate value. A central piece of the African vision is to provide stability to the continent by the use of regional standby brigades. Each of the five African regions is responsible for developing the capability whereby nations pledge forces and a central, regional headquarters plans operations to provide a range of services across the region. However, none of the regions has the ability to identify and characterize the readiness of pledged forces let alone plan and actually conduct operations with them.

The information sharing system envisioned above would be designed to allow U.S. entry and data flow as appropriate. This is critical as most of the desired information regarding impending terrorist activities is "known" in the environment in which they are living and not necessarily on U.S. classified data bases. It is the kind of information known by regular people as they observe what is happening around them. Information and the communications systems that analyze and forward it must be supported by unclassified technology systems, such as available earth mapping and virtual chat applications to foster collaboration and real-time response to situations as they happen in an area of operation. Doing so would alleviate the concern of providing African governments access to secure Defense Internet protocol networks while providing these moderate ruling parties access to valuable information that will help them counter insurgents and terrorists within their own borders. Moreover, such a system would go beyond just providing a collaboration

center. It would also enable wide coalitions such as the 1,000 ship Navy the operational means to plan and conduct activity.

COCOMs are vital to the protection and preservation of U.S. interests. However, in today's dynamic and volatile global environment they may need to evolve their "product" to best suit the environment they intend to shape. In doing so, they can be of even greater value by helping nations abroad grow and prosper and become more sovereign providers of service to their people and achieve greater positive outcomes as a result.

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