

## Data can drive African sovereignty

Last Byte | The mission of Africom

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*"Lack of knowledge is darker than night" is an African proverb that easily applies to the Africa Command, the newest U.S. combatant command. The role of combatant commands has evolved over the years, and Africom has taken another step forward. It will not design war plans, but instead will enable African countries to work together to ensure their security. As one officer said, "We can consider it a success if we do not have American troops on the ground in Africa for 50 years."*

In other words, faster growth not charity, teach not tell. That approach allows Africom to develop the sovereignty of African nations by enabling governments and other leadership entities to provide services for their people themselves and by doing so strengthen their society. If a government cannot do that, then its people are not really sovereign.

Perhaps Africom's initial thrust should be information gathering, analysis and sharing and the planning and execution capabilities that cascade from them.

Without information, there can be no knowledge, and without knowledge, there can be no real sovereignty. The command's approach could grow by focusing not so much on providing information but on enhancing the gathering, sharing and use of the information the society already has.

As the late House Speaker Tip O'Neill often said, "All politics is local." The same is true for the global war on terrorism: "All terror is local." Those who are terrorized need to define terrorism and how it is fought must be defined by those who do the fighting.

Some would argue that if the United States' interests are not at the center of such activities, then we have no business funding and providing resources to support them. Here again, that is the difference between Africom and other combatant commands. Africom is not centered on defending the United States with military forces from afar, but it is centered on defending the United States by developing increased capacity of our allies.

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. Those activities would help protect them from terrorism and rampant criminality. The command could help nations share that information internally and with a wider audience when appropriate and help transform the data into plans and activities.

Such a platform would allow decision-makers to query databases, gain situational awareness, develop plans and then lead activities to support those plans. Imagine a decision-maker applying that system to counter terrorism and criminal activity.

Such a system could bring immediate value. It could be designed to allow data to flow to U.S. systems as appropriate. That is critical because most of the desired information regarding impending terrorist activities is "known" in the environment and not necessarily on U.S. classified databases. It is the kind of information known by people as they observe what is happening around them.

The same system could help halt the spread of HIV/AIDS or even develop and administer a multiyear agricultural project.

Combatant commands are vital to the protection and preservation of U.S. interests. However, in today's dynamic and volatile global environment, they might need to evolve their capabilities to best suit the environment they intend to shape.

In doing so, they can be of even greater value by helping nations grow and prosper and become sovereign providers of services to their people.

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