

Policy Memo

DATE: October 17, 2009

RE: African Security and the Future of US Africa Command, a roundtable summary from the 50th Strategy for Peace Conference

Africa faces a set of major social, economic, and political challenges and trend lines that, together, could impede the region from providing peace and prosperity for its people. Indeed, conference participants expressed greater concern over systemic conditions, and the problems they could spawn, than over individual conflicts. As our discussion took stock of the overall context in which US Africa Command (Africom) works, participants highlighted:

- Birth rates that will double the continent's population within the next three or four decades.
- Commensurate growth of cities (especially slums) that lack the infrastructure to handle it.
- A youth bulge needing gainful employment.
- A persistent digital divide (in contrast with widespread cell phone use).
- Urban as well as rural environmental stresses (e.g. deforestation).
- Meanwhile, the best and brightest leave (brain drain).
- Corruption; the hijacking of the organs and resources of the state; and a dearth of quality leadership.
- Winner-take-all politics and governance.
- Narcotrafficking and other transnational criminal networks.
- Radical Islamic terrorist groups.
- Weak control of borders and coastal waters.

As daunting as these challenges are, there is ample basis for hope that sustained, comprehensive, and collaborative efforts could yield significant progress. The interconnections among problems mean that well coordinated whole-of-government efforts are crucial. It's more important to integrate different agencies into a common strategy than to "stay in your lanes"—making Africom an invaluable opportunity for new interagency models. Africom also offers an exciting chance to deal with problems proactively, rather than waiting for severe crisis to erupt.

Participants also stressed that African strategic and security concerns are often quite different, at least in their emphasis and priority, from the US perspective.

These assessments pointed toward the following overall challenges:

- Finding the common ground between African and American concerns.

- Breaking down massive long-term problems into digestible pieces (without losing sight of the larger context/challenge/opportunity).
- Deciding how much to concentrate efforts on a few countries (e.g. Liberia) or spread activity broadly across the continent.
- Moving from commitment to the value of the whole-of-government approach and interagency goodwill to new and effective models of unified effort.
- Moving from commitment to sustained (rather than episodic) engagement to clearer concepts of conflict prevention, stabilization, and the spread of peace and prosperity.

Participants believed that the practical issues for Africom and its other US government counterparts will be to:

- Look for the best local partners, using both top-down and bottom-up approaches.
- Assess the quality and effectiveness of local leaders.
- Remain aware of the particular value that the United States—as an outside actor trying to leverage limited resources—is contributing to solution of the problem.
- Be alert to potential subregional initiatives that would help multiple countries at once.
- Align their activities with strategies for the region and subregions and achievable objectives.

Even more specifically, the discussion made a number of recommendations to Africom, Department of Defense (DoD), the State Department, and USAID:

- Staff up the State Department and USAID complements at Africom as much and as quickly as possible.
- Take advantage of local regions within countries that enjoy relative stability—often referred to as the “ink blot strategy.” (One participant judged that two-thirds of Somalia offers such opportunities.)
- Take care to offer security sector reform and training that makes sense for the given countries—i.e. ensure that “supply” matches “demand” and genuine need.
- Consider an emphasis on control of borders and coastal waters as a potential sphere of shared African and American interests.

Given the unique (and still quite young) structure and mission of Africom, a number of important questions remain:

- What is Africom’s conflict prevention strategy?
- Do we know our criteria for prioritization, given resource constraints?
- What is Africom still figuring out regarding the workings of whole-of-government efforts?
- Since Africom is a military command unlike any other military command, do we have clarity yet on its essential function?
- How will Africom, and the other US government agencies, work with civil society?

- What is the strategy for dealing with countries plagued with poor leadership?
 - Is the search for honest actors who genuinely work in the public interest central to dealing with this problem?
 - Does that put the focus on delivery of services and public sector performance (supported by regular payment of salaries)?
 - How do you keep from provoking the strong resistance that can arise when outsiders directly challenge established local power structures (e.g. the recent flare-up over the aid package to Pakistan)?

Each year the Stanley Foundation convenes the Strategy for Peace Conference on a wide range of US foreign policy issues with experts from the public and private sectors who meet in autonomous roundtables. This year's event focused on the challenges of state fragility for US and global security in an interdependent world. Specifically, via three concurrent roundtables, participants addressed the potential contributions of AFRICOM to problems of state fragility in Africa; the possibility of better US efforts at multilateral leveraging of latent international capabilities and capacities; and finally, the need for a new US strategy for strengthening fragile states overall. More information on the entire conference is available at <http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/articles.cfm?ID=603>.

The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the view of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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