



## Transcript

# The United States Africa Command: Protecting US Interests and Supporting African Capacity

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**Alex Vines:**

General Ham has been commander of the US Africa Command in Stuttgart since March 2011. He was previously the commanding general of US Army Europe and the Seventh Army. He has a very long and distinguished career and has served in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Macedonia and Iraq. General Ham has received a number of awards and decorations. General, thank you for coming to speak here again and I invite you to go to the podium, or if you prefer to sit down.

**General Carter Ham:**

Thank you very much. When one is first invited to Chatham House, you don't really know exactly what to make of that because first of all you never think of yourself as having arrived in a position where anyone's particularly interested in your views – so I was very anxious and very excited to receive this invitation. I got a lot of good advice about coming up here – the first rule was one that Alex just mentioned: just because it's Chatham House, don't believe that it's under Chatham House rules (*sic*). So that's okay.

But the fact of the matter is there's a lot for us to talk about. There's a lot going on in Africa, as there always is, and there's certainly a lot going on within United States Africa Command. If I may just make one brief comment about my military background: as Alex rattled off the number of places where I've served and places that I've been and positions I've held, you didn't notice in that any mention of Africa. I've not served in Africa before. In fact, for the United States military, Africa, to be completely honest, is not a part of the world the United States military has focused on very intently until recently. We had previously only a very small number of US military intelligence analysts who focused on Africa, and an extraordinarily small community of attachés with repetitive assignments and experiences on the African continent. But for most of us American military offices, Africa has been an afterthought. It's not been the scene of significant planning, or potential military conflict, or any other reason to think about Africa.

That changed in the mid-2000s. I think amidst military engagement in other parts of the world, there was a growing recognition in the United States that Africa was increasingly important to the United States in a number of areas – certainly economically, but politically and diplomatically as well – from a development standpoint and also from a security standpoint. So in the mid-2000s there was a decision to establish a United States military command that was exclusively focused on the African continent. Those of you who have

focused on this before will know that previously the United States European Command, headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, had responsibility for US military activities in Europe and in Africa. So in 2008, the two headquarters split, one remaining focused on Europe and a new command, under the direction of General [William 'Kip'] Ward, established to focus on the continent of Africa, its island nations, and importantly, less Egypt. Egypt remains in the area of responsibility for the US military under United States Central Command, because of its essential connections to the broader Middle East. But there's an interesting little asterisk in our implementing direction that tells the commands what to do that says for Egypt, for matters related to African security, then US Africa Command interacts with Egypt and in fact I have had the great opportunity to do so in the time I've been here.

As Alex mentioned I've been in the job about a year and a half. It's been exciting and broad-ranging; I'm encouraged by the optimism and opportunity that I find as I travel about Africa, but also we have to be realistic about the many challenges – some of which are security challenges – that Africa faces. For US Africa Command our mission can be distilled simply to say that we advance the United States' interests in Africa, and we think we do that best by enabling and strengthening the defence capabilities of African nations so that they are increasingly capable of providing not only for their own security but to contribute to regional stability and security as well. Of course, as all US military commands must be, we stand ready to implement and conduct military operations when so directed by our president. Operations in Libya last year would be a good example of that type of activity.

Our activities are governed by a number of different US publications, two of which I would mention and commend to you: the first is a document that was released earlier this year called the Presidential Policy Directive for sub-Saharan Africa. The official title is a comprehensive 'US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa'. That document outlines in broad terms what it is that the United States government seeks to achieve in partnership with the African nations. It's focused on four primary pillars, the first of which is to strengthen democratic institutions – a common US goal in many places; secondly, to spur economic growth, trade and investment – an area I think for the United States of growing importance on the continent of Africa; thirdly, to advance peace and security – this is the goal that the US Africa Command is most keenly interested in; and fourthly, to promote opportunity and development.

In my view, as part of that US government strategy, the 'advance peace and security' pillar is a supporting effort to all of the other objectives. You don't get good governance, you don't get economic development, you don't get growth

and opportunity if you don't have adequate security and stability. So we think that our efforts contribute in a significant way to the overall US government's goals.

A second document, I suspect many of you have read, approved by President Obama in January this year and released by [Defense] Secretary [Leon] Panetta, is the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance. That document is most well-known because it is in that document where the rebalance of US military efforts in the Asia-Pacific was first formalized in an official document. It's a great document and it does lay out the priorities for the United States Armed Forces. When the document was released, I had the opportunity to talk with many of my African counterparts, both military and civilian, and frankly they were concerned, because when you read that document, you will see that the word 'Africa' appears precisely one time. So our African partners looked at that and said, 'Does this mean that you no longer care about Africa?'

And I'd say that we have to be realistic. From a geostrategic point of view, Asia-Pacific is the focus of highest priority for my nation. But rather than think that the number of times the word appears is important, look at the tasks that are outlined in that document for the United States Armed Forces and see what you think about the relevance of Africa then. Unsurprisingly at the top of the list of tasks for the United States Armed Forces is the defeat of Al-Qaeda and its associated network and to prevent further attacks on America, Americans and American interests. That's not surprising to you. The sad fact is we do a lot of that work in Africa today. We want to work to a point where we don't have to do as much work.

Secondly, there's a lot of discussion in the document about the necessity for continued strategic access to the global commons: for economic growth, to allow free access globally to markets and for the global economy to continue to prosper. Certainly we do a lot of that work in Africa.

A third priority is what we call 'building partner capacity' – as I said, strengthening the defence capabilities of ally and partner nations, so that they can first of all deter conflict, so that the commitment of military forces, whether they be US or other, is less and less likely. We think that's a high priority, and we certainly do that in Africa as well. An increasingly important priority for the United States military is the prevention and response to mass atrocity. Sadly, Africa has had this experience, and we work carefully with our African partners in that area as well.

And lastly, the United States military is expected to be prepared to assist others with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief wherever that may occur, and certainly that is work conducted in Africa as well.

So that range of tasks says to me that the United States military still has a relevant role and will have a relevant role in Africa for many years to come. We seek to work in close partnership with our African partners as we move forward. I'd suggest just a few comments about a couple of current topics, and then I would welcome your questions and comments so we can have a broader discussion.

So I'll highlight three current topics, current issues, that US Africa Command is involved in. I won't talk about Mali as I suspect you're going to ask me about Mali, so we'll save that one for the Q&A period. But let me talk about three others.

First of all, Somalia: if you had told me a year ago that Somalia would have a president, a constitution and a parliament, that the city of Mogadishu and the port city of Kismayo would be largely free of al Shabaab, that al Shabaab would be under duress by the African Union Mission forces in Somalia (AMISOM), I would have said you're crazy; there's no way that could possibly happen. But yet that is exactly what has happened. It is to me the best example of what can happen when African leaders, military and civilian, make the decision that they are going to accept responsibility, they are going to lead and act to accomplish a mission, and they ask for a little bit of international community support, and the international community was able to provide most of that. I'm very proud that the United States has been a piece of that. Most of our effort has been in training and equipping the AMISOM forces who have fought so bravely, and sadly many lost, in the fights in Somalia. I think our effort has contributed to the success. We've provided some intelligence which we think has been helpful. So I think perhaps this is perhaps a good model of an African-led, international community-supported endeavour. Perhaps there are some parallels to Mali – we can talk about that.

The second current topic that I would mention is Libya. It is important to recognize that in the current situation of great fragility in Libya the one thing that is very positive is that for the first time in more than 40 years, the Libyan people have been able to vote and select their own leaders. It's messy, it's problematic and there are lots of challenges. There are no government institutions to speak of. There are well-armed and -equipped militia operating outside of government control across the country. Lots and lots of challenges to be sure. But the fact that Libyans are choosing their own government is a

good sign. The presence of violent extremist organizations and a growing network in Libya is truly worrisome and we are working with the Libyan security elements to try to help them build the capability to deal with that growing threat. On the military side, we have good relationships with the military chiefs in Libya and are finding ways to help them in border security, maritime security, building a national counterterrorist force and other capabilities that nation so desperately needs.

The third current topic I would mention is the effort to bring Joseph Kony and the other senior leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army to justice. Those of you who monitor African things know this is a long-standing problem and it is only recently that the United States has become significantly engaged in this. But it is again another example of African-led and international community-supported. The African Union Regional Task Force, the four countries of the region, Uganda, South Sudan, Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, increasingly working together – still some problems to be sure – and a little bit of support from the United States, again in the areas of intelligence, logistics support, some financial support that enabled rotary-wing and fixed-wing lift for tactical mobility of African forces, a small cell of about 100 US Special Forces that are operating in the region alongside our African partners as well. Again I think this is a good way for us to support an African-led endeavour with what you might call unique US military capabilities. The mission is not done, Kony is still at large, but there have been significant successes, in terms of increased defections and escapes, increasing effectiveness of the African forces, so again I think that mission is on a positive trajectory.

Let me close there and welcome your questions and simply say that again, as I have the opportunity to travel about the continent of Africa and meet with senior military and civilian leaders, they understand the complexity of the security challenges that they must confront. They're increasingly understanding that it requires an African and a regional African approach. Individual nations for the most part are no longer able to address the threats that prevent themselves regionally and transnationally. We think our best role again is helping them address those threats with capabilities and assistance that they most need.

Earlier on in my tenure I had the opportunity to travel a bit, and in an early encounter with an African chief of defence, we had our normal discussions about the current situation, about our security assistance, cooperation and the like. And as I was getting ready to leave, he said, 'General, listen. We're a big country but we have a small population. We don't have a lot of money. We

have some significant security challenges – we need a bit of your help. We need your help.’ That all made perfect sense to me and I understood what I was saying. But then he said something that was unexpected to me, and has taken me a while to truly understand. He said, ‘more than your help, more than your assistance, what we really want is partnership.’

I will admit when he said that to me, I didn't really understand what he was talking about. I've come now, in the year and a half or so since then, to better understand what he was after. He was after a relationship that was mutually beneficial, both bilaterally and regionally. He was after a relationship in which all parties treat one another with dignity and respect. And to recognize that we're a blessed country, we have a lot of capacity, but what we don't have is understanding, and context, of the challenges that so many Africans face. But when we do this together then we have a real chance for success, and that's what we hope to do at US Africa Command. So with that, again thanks for allowing me to be here and I very much welcome your questions or comments.