



Transcript Q&A

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

General Carter F Ham

Commander, United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)

Chair: Alex Vines

Research Director, Area Studies and International Law; and Head, Africa Programme,
Chatham House

16 November 2012

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Question 1:

Going back a few years to 2004, the US was involved back then with the Pan Sahel Initiative. Of the four militaries who the US partnered with back then, all four have overthrown or tried very hard to overthrow their civilian governments. What have you learned about partnership with African militaries since then?

General Carter Ham:

One of the things I think we've learned is that it is not sufficient to focus exclusively on tactical activities. We're very good at training in tactical and technical matters – we have a lot of recent operational experience in our forces, so we're very good about that. We've got to spend more time at the senior leader levels talking more about the real role of militaries in free societies, so what we try to help African militaries build are security forces that are not only technically and tactically capable, but also responsibly subordinate to legitimate civilian authority; that operate under the rule of law; are respectful of human rights and see themselves as servants of the population. That's really easy to say; that's really hard to do. But I think that those have to be goals to which we strive, and I think at least for those senior leaders with whom I interact, they understand that and will work in partnership to try to achieve those goals. We won't always be successful but we have to keep those goals in mind as we move forward.

Question 2:

A few weeks ago the Under Secretary of State (*sic*) Dr [Reuben] Brigety was here and he was asked about Mali and the post-conflict phase. He stated that, as he knows, there is no plan for the post-conflict phase in Mali. So I was just wondering, at this stage in military development – after the lessons of Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, is it really feasible that the US is going to go into an operation like this without having thought about the post-conflict stabilization phase of that operation?

And just leading on from that and looking further into the Mali issue, a lot of the commanders in a lot of the towns that have been taken over by the insurgents are smuggling hotspots; lots of the commanders are smuggling criminal leaders. So how much of the criminal investigation side of it is part of your plan, and how much of it is going to be purely kinetic and purely military?

General Carter Ham:

Well first of all I would never contradict Reuben Brigety – he's a good friend and very knowledgeable, and a much better dresser than I am. I suspect he was here with a bow tie and complete.

Before I answer your specific question, let me make a brief comment. This is not a US plan. It must not be a US plan. This effort must be in reality and in perception an African-led plan. And that's exactly what is being developed under direction from the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) heads of state, the ECOWAS planners met in Bamako to develop the plan that is called for by the [UN] Security Council resolution and called for by the ECOWAS heads of state. The United States and others did in fact have planners there in an advisory capacity at the request of ECOWAS as we move forward. But there should be no mistake, this is and must be an African-led plan. To that end, I think the plan that has been developed has a sound framework. I do believe in my military judgement that there are areas of the plan that require further attention. I think there is a necessity to further define the logistics requirements: how do you sustain a force for an extended period of time over long distances in relatively harsh terrain, and a multinational force at that?

I think the discussion of the non-military aspects of the campaign need further explanation and addressing in the plan. But I'm also confident that that will happen. I think – again the base plan to me is sound, it's workable. It needs some attention, but I think now in 10 days or so as ECOWAS delivers the plan to the United Nations Security Council for consideration, these kinds of issues will be addressed, as will the types of support that may be necessary from the international community. I think that will play itself out in the coming weeks.

I think you are right to identify the presence of illicit networks, illegal trafficking in persons and drugs and weapons, financing – this is certainly present in the same region and the networks upon which that illicit trafficking is conducted are the same networks that support the terrorist organizations operating in northern Mali. One of the efforts that I think is important in an overall campaign plan – not just military – are to find opportunities to separate out the criminal aspects, separate out the politically motivated entities, and focus specifically on the terrorist presence and deal with the political in different ways.

Question 3:

I would like to ask about Joseph Kony and Mr [Omar] Bashir in Sudan. Do you think Mr Bashir in Sudan is more dangerous than Joseph Kony? Because he helped Kony himself to hide in the border between South Sudan and Darfur, and also Mr Bashir has sent weapons to many countries, to Somalia, to others. Why didn't the United States help the international community to arrest Mr Bashir, because Bashir is more dangerous than Kony?

General Carter Ham:

I would take exception with your description. I think the United States has been pretty firm about President Bashir. He is under International Criminal Court warrant, the United States has imposed sanctions against Sudan, so I think the actions have been taken quite strongly. And the United States has been extraordinarily supportive of the Republic of South Sudan, to include its move toward independence last year – a ceremony which I was privileged to attend. There's no question that Kony is an evil man and those who are cognizant of his activities and those of his group are very supportive of the efforts underway to bring him to justice. If we knew where Kony was, if we had evidence of his location, I'm confident the Africans would go and get him. There are lots of rumours of where he is and where he isn't and that's why this effort continues. I'm confident it will ultimately be successful because it is African Union-led and supported by particularly four other nations. I'm convinced the effort against Kony will ultimately be successful.

Question 4:

I would like to ask whether or not your command has undertaken the long-term strategic view of where you are going long-term in Africa, and the rising issues. You've mentioned two documents, but one you did not mention is the CIA one about the impact of climate change on the global security landscape. And particularly, as you know, Africa is one of the more vulnerable places where that impact may become a growing issue of security for both individuals and the environment. I was wondering whether or not you could give us some idea of where all those issues are going and what you are focusing on within your command in what I call a macro-environment in Africa.

General Carter Ham:

My staff will be very glad you asked that questions, because they are in midst now of undertaking a study of what I call AFRICOM 2025. What do we think will be the future security environment and how will we be best postured from a military standpoint to operate in that changed environment? This is an undertaking – while I'll focus specifically on the command – that reaches out across the US government to many international partners and many international and private organizations – think-tanks and universities – recognizing that we need expertise from a broad array of subject matter experts. I think you are right to raise the issues of the potential impacts of changing climates, particularly for Africa where water and food security are so important and will significantly shape the future environment.

So our work is underway. I think we are several months away from a reasonable product. I'd like to finalize it probably by the spring of 2013, and it will not surprise you to learn that we're working very carefully with the office of the [Under] Secretary of Defense for Policy as well as the two geographic branches of Near Eastern Affairs and Africa Bureau within the Department of State.

Question 5:

General, could you tell us a bit about the funding for AFRICOM, in the sense that defence budgets and so on are being cut or reduced across the US and developed world. Does this impact on AFRICOM?

General Carter Ham:

To use an American term, AFRICOM is a cheap date. Our overall budget is less than \$300 million. Most of that, unsurprisingly, will go to civilian pay. We will withstand some budget reductions, but I don't think that budget reductions will be so dramatic as to require us to make major changes with perhaps two exceptions.

We conduct in lead and resource a number of military exercises around the continent of Africa. Some of them are very large and principally military in focus, with military forces conducting training for a variety of contingencies. Some of the exercises are more focused at the leader level, table top exercises to deal with disaster relief and the like. Heretofore, our exercises have been principally accomplished on a bilateral basis. That's not particularly efficient. I also think it is not reflective of the current operating environment

where we must find ways to operate more broadly and with more partners, both state and non-state actors. So the budget reductions will actually drive us to a policy that I should have made anyway: to focus more on multilateral exercises than bilateral exercises.

The second area where I think budget reductions will have a bit of an impact is in how the international community – the non-African community, if you will – engages with African countries. As most of the non-African militaries like the United States will see some changes and reductions in their budgets, we've got to find ways for us non-Africans to be more collaborative, more imaginative, in our approach and interaction with African countries so that we collectively – we non-Africans – can coordinate our resources in a way that this most beneficial to the country in Africa in which we are working. So I think that'll be the ways in which we most feel the budget change.

Question 6:

There are certain concerns about growing Chinese influence in Africa. How does AFRICOM view the growing Chinese influence in Africa: collaborative or competitive?

General Carter Ham:

Thanks. Again as a newcomer to Africa, I will admit to some surprise in my initial trips around the continent – China is everywhere, really everywhere. And that's probably a good thing. I would not in any way characterize the US–China relationship in Africa, in any way, adversarial. There's certainly economic competition and we see that play out. That's probably healthy for both China and the United States and probably healthy for the African countries where we work as well. But I would say that in my view, China and the United States have taken different views with regard to our interaction in Africa. China, as many of you know and have seen, and I have seen, is very good at infrastructure development – road, bridges, airports, government buildings and the like – constructed by the Chinese, which greatly benefits the African people. And I probably left off the most important thing they do – build football stadiums.

The United States has taken a different approach. We don't focus much on building stuff – we've chosen a different path which is primarily investment in human capital. So overwhelmingly the US assistance and support that is provided to Africa is in the area of healthcare, which is by far the most

significant, and education – specifically women and girls’ education – agriculture and the like. So perhaps not as visible as a football stadium but nonetheless very, very important.

On the military front, again, not adversarial, but I think we need to look for ways where we can work more collaboratively with the Chinese in the military domain in Africa. Let me cite two examples: in Tanzania the Chinese built the facility for the National Defence College. A good facility – and I’m sure the Tanzanians are very appreciative of that. The Tanzanians asked us for a little bit of help in the curriculum development for the programming at the National Defence College. Maybe that’s an example of the kind of collaboration we might be able to do in the future, where we focus on areas where each can apply their strengths to the benefit of a particular African military, or more broadly, across a region. So again I’m realistic in my approach, but I think we should explore opportunities to work more collaboratively across the continent.

Question 7:

I wonder if you could speak a little bit about Al-Qaeda in the [Islamic] Maghreb, specifically what role you think it might have played in the attack on the US consulate in Libya, what kind of a threat you think it poses, not just to Africa, but to the West and the United States, and how important you think that mission being discussed is in rounding it out of Mali?

General Carter Ham:

There are, in my view, and in discussions with senior military and civilian leaders across the region – while there may be some differences in the approach to Mali, there are two larger issues upon which there is universal agreement. The first is the necessity to maintain the territorial integrity of Mali – there is no support for a separatist movement. The second area of broad agreement is that the continued presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in a safe haven in northern Mali is unacceptable to the Malians, unacceptable to the nations of the region and unacceptable to the international community.

The truth is though that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is stronger today than they were a year ago. They have safe haven, they have funding, they are Al-Qaeda’s best-funded affiliated organization, through moneys that they get through kidnappings for ransom, or through their association with the illegal narcotics trade and other illicit trafficking. They have lots of weapons

and lots of fighters, many of whom came either back to or to northern Mali in the aftermath of military operations in Libya. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has clearly espoused their very close allegiance with Al-Qaeda ideology and with Al-Qaeda's senior leadership, and their intent to establish a caliphate and to export violence not only in the region but more broadly across the globe as well. So for those reasons, I view, and I think many others view, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb as a very significant and growing threat, and if left unaddressed will present an increasing risk to the nations and peoples of the region, and increasingly to Europe and the United States as well. For those reasons I think the activities by ECOWAS and others to address this problem require our support and our attention.

Question 8:

General, you mentioned that you hoped to promote regional solutions to security problems. How exactly is it you envisage that working, and to use an example: in the African Union task force that's going after the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army), the Congolese forces are reportedly not allowed to declare LRA fighters in the [Democratic Republic of the] Congo because they'd ideally like the UPDF (Uganda's People's Defence Force) out, because they're accusing them of looting minerals. How would you go about dealing with competing interests in these kinds of regions?

General Carter Ham:

While regional cooperation and coordination is important and I think a necessary goal, that doesn't mean it always works well and is always successful. I think we've had some success but not all the success we need with the African Union Regional Task Force in the effort to bring Joseph Kony and the other senior leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army to justice, but there are certainly frictions among the four primary countries that are engaged in this. We tried to use our good offices and opportunities for dialogue with the four participants to try to work through those regional efforts. We had a number of meetings with the African Union's special representative for LRA, Ambassador [Francisco] Madeira, as well as the chiefs of defence of the four countries. We've met a number of times and we'll meet again next month at a very senior level to try to focus on this problem.

In what I think is a pretty good example of regional cooperation – certainly more work still to be done – is in the area of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, where we have been working not only with the nations there but with

the Economic Community of West African States and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) to craft policies and in some cases laws which allow the sharing of law enforcement intelligence, that allow cross-border operations in hot pursuit, cooperative arrangements between security forces – that's starting to have some positive effect, but there is still lots of work to be done. The last thing I would comment on is that we recognize – and the African Union clearly recognizes – is the necessity of having regional standby forces, and we would like very much to participate in the preparation of those forces in any way that the African Union or its regional economic communities may find helpful.

Question 9:

Thank you very much for your remarks on China–US relations in Africa. I do share with you [the view] that the external partners, either US or China or any other countries, their priorities should be to help Africans develop their own capacity rather than being there to compete for sphere of influence or resources. So I share the general's view that we don't have any strategic competition in Africa. In addition to what the general said, I think that China and the US have a lot in common in cooperation with Africa. For instance in the long run, we have also paid a lot of attention to the cooperation in agriculture, education and environmental protection. My question is, with regard to your African strategy, besides Somalia, the Lord's Resistance Army and Libya, what are the other primary concerns of AFRICOM, and who are your priority partners in Africa?

General Carter Ham:

The priority tasks, as outlined in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance tell us that countering Al-Qaeda and violent extremists remain our highest priority and that's understandable, I think, for a military organization. So those places in Africa where violent extremism exists or seems to be emerging are the areas of highest priority. You mentioned Somalia and the presence of al Shabaab, Mali and the presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and a growing network of variously-named organizations across North and West Africa – and I would include in that Boko Haram and their presence in Nigeria as an area of increasing focus. What we would like to do – and obviously these are pressing and current issues – but we also recognize that these are challenges that can be addressed exclusively by military means. While there may be a military component and a strategy to address violent extremism,

military action in and of itself will not be successful. What we really try to do more broadly across the continent with a regional focus is ensure that our military efforts are fully coordinated with a broader comprehensive strategy that addresses the underlying issues of instability, and those tend to focus on economic development, good governance and education. But those are programmes that require a degree of security in which to flourish. That's how we focus on the longer term.

Question 10:

Do you think there's potential for contradiction between two of the US's aims in Africa – mainly democratization and increasing the capability of the military in African states, such as perhaps in the case of [Ugandan President Yoweri] Museveni who is heavily reliant on his military to remain in power?

Question 11:

General Carter, I want to ask you about the military partnership with Algeria, in relation specifically to the conflict in the Sahel and northern Mali. Algeria as you well know has been firmly opposed to any military intervention. Now that it's happening, what is your management with the Algerian military and the Algerian civilian leaders who are of course very reluctant to any interventions south of their borders?

Alex Vines:

Thank you very much. And I'm going to use my prerogative for a final question because I haven't heard it. General, when AFRICOM was created there was a whole hullabaloo about location: should it be in Africa, should it be in a variety of different African states? Currently you're in Stuttgart. Where is this debate now, about the location of the command?

General Carter Ham:

The balanced effort of US emphasis on achieving its goals is always a particular difficulty. In some countries in Africa where we have a very good security relationship, the other objectives of respect for human rights and democratization are not fully consistent with our objectives. We think that our government is sufficiently sophisticated that we can manage a good sound security relationship with a country and still continue to focus on

democratization and human rights and respect for the rule of law in a different vein. We don't necessarily see them as mutually exclusive. It doesn't mean we abandon one for the other, but it does mean that we have to live in the real world. In the cases of one of the countries you mentioned, it is an ongoing balance. We have legal protections in our own government, for example, for military engagement that preclude us under matters of US law from engaging in military training with individuals or units who have been found to have committed human rights violations. We think those are good protections to have. So again, our goals don't change, but just because a country doesn't yet meet the goals that we'd like doesn't mean that we will necessarily suspend activity in another domain. So an example of that would be the current circumstance with Rwanda, where the United States government has made it clear that we believe that the government of Rwanda is supporting the M23 rebels in the Great Lakes region. We think that is unhelpful, and because of that we have reduced some of our military-to-military engagement.

With regard to Algeria, I just came from Algeria a few days ago and had a very good visit. I won't attempt to characterize the Algerians' position – that's for them to say – but I have found a very deep and comprehensive understanding among Algerian military and civilian leaders of the challenges that are faced in northern Mali and more broadly across the region. What I have found is that Algerians absolutely prefer a negotiated settlement. All of us, certainly those of us in uniform, prefer a negotiated settlement, and we think all effort must be expended to seek a negotiated settlement for the north. While that occurs, I think, and many others think, it is prudent to prepare for the potential military intervention that may be required. So I think that's what we see playing out at present. Specifically, I have been pleased to see Algeria's increased effort on border security, particularly with the border with Mali, so that there cannot be, to the degree that is controllable, free movement by Al-Qaeda and others across the border and I think there have been some good improvements in that regard.

Finally, Alex, to the location of the headquarters: we are in Stuttgart as a consequence of practicality. The staffs were together: European Command was responsible for Europe and Africa. When they split out it made sense for the people to remain in the same general location. In my view – I was at the Pentagon at the birth of AFRICOM, and I think we did a poor job frankly of articulating the mission of the command and how it would operate on the continent, and in that process we alienated some countries and some organizations and created some 'antibodies', if you will, to AFRICOM that

persist today. Because of that and frankly because of the financial cost of relocating the headquarters – I think it is impractical for us to consider Africa – we will continue to operate from Stuttgart where we are well hosted by the German government, and postured well to interact with our African partners.