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AFRICOM, the American Military and Public Diplomacy in Africa

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“AFRICOM is a bold experiment in networked organization among agencies of government, NGOs and the private sector in the United States, in Europe and especially in Africa.”

—Ernest J. Wilson III
Dean, USC Annenberg School for Communication

OFFICIALS OF THE DEFENSE AND STATE DEPARTMENTS cite a commitment to public diplomacy as an essential element of the newly established United States Africa Command (AFRICOM). Questions remain, however, about whether the military can and should engage in public diplomacy. The Center on Public Diplomacy, housed at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, convened an international conference on this question in February 2008. Leading experts and principal stakeholders in AFRICOM examined this new tool of American strategy that combines soft and hard power. The complexities of the task are considerable and must be addressed expeditiously if this experiment in public diplomacy is to succeed.

AFRICOM—A Blueprint for U.S. Smart Power?

According to Ambassador Mary Carlin Yates, the Deputy to the Commander of AFRICOM for civil-military activities, AFRICOM is “an acknowledgment of the growing strategic and global importance of Africa.” At the same time, in response to changing dynamics of globalization, it presents an opportunity to rethink existing institutions to more effectively address transnational threats and trends. By definition it must include new actors and new mechanisms of foreign policy-making and communications.

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pitfalls as a new paradigm of public diplomacy. Essential to the success of AFRICOM as a model of military-based public diplomacy is clarity of concept, mission and strategy. Fundamental to such clarity is the need to be explicit about the underlying national interests driving the process.

It also presupposes a substantial amount of institutional reform or restructuring of the foreign and defense policy community writ large. Here, Ambassador Brian Carlson of the State Department’s Strategic Communication office suggested, the provincial reconstruction teams in Iraq and Afghanistan which aim to deploy all elements of U.S. government power and capability toward a single-minded approach might offer some useful lessons. The relationship between the Departments of Defense and State will be one of the key challenges for AFRICOM, according to Ryan Henry. Similarly, it will be important for non-governmental actors to be able to liaise effectively with civilian and military governmental agencies.

Policy Recommendations

Although fundamental questions remain regarding the appropriateness and efficacy of a military-based public diplomacy, the following steps can contribute substantially to the success of AFRICOM:

- The Department of Defense should better define “public diplomacy” in the context of AFRICOM and develop an appropriately sophisticated plan for engaging in public diplomacy. Simply saying “public diplomacy is important” is inadequate. Secretary Gates has discussed the importance of soft power, but how the military might adopt that approach remains undefined.
- The respective roles of Defense and State in initiating public diplomacy efforts need better definition. Similarly, a chain of command needs to be established in determining the content of U.S. public diplomacy. It is still unclear how policy will flow from the White House through Defense, State and other agencies.
- Foreign governments, NGOs and others interested in Africa’s future should be consulted as public diplomacy ideas are developed. U.S. public diplomacy related to AFRICOM must reflect lessons learned from the long and complex (and often unsavory) history of outsiders’ involvement in Africa.
- The emphasis on listening requires a proactive structure and not just a casual passive acknowledgment of Africans’ concerns and aspirations. There is too little knowledge of the depth and virulence of African opposition, as reflected in African news coverage and public opinion. This is another aspect of public diplomacy that needs careful thought, better definition and greater analysis.

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Located in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California, the USC Annenberg School for Communication is among the nation’s leading institutions devoted to the study of journalism and communication, and their impact on politics, culture and society. With an enrollment of more than 1,900 graduate and undergraduate students, USC Annenberg offers degree programs in journalism, communication, public diplomacy and public relations.



As Ryan Henry, principal deputy undersecretary of defense for policy, points out, public diplomacy should not be “about creating a ‘Brand America’ or getting various people even to like us.” Instead the task “is about harmonizing our actions with our words to generate an alignment among key stakeholders—an alignment of their perceptions with our policy goals and objectives.”

AFRICOM, for all the talk of its being new and innovative engagement, could simply serve to protect unpopular regimes that are friendly to U.S. interests while Africa slips further into poverty, as was the case during the Cold War.

— Nicole Lee
Executive Director, TransAfrica Forum

Public diplomacy is the conduct of foreign policy through alternate means by engaging with a foreign public. Professor Nicholas Cull of the USC Annenberg School has identified five key elements of public diplomacy. The first way in which an international actor engages with foreign publics is by listening. AFRICOM’s Yates acknowledged the importance of listening as “something that all of us who work with Africans need to do better.” The second and third elements are advocacy and cultural diplomacy. The fourth area is that of exchange diplomacy. Fifth is international broadcasting, which has historically been associated with public diplomacy. In sum, traditional exercises of public diplomacy fall squarely under the rubric of soft power. AFRICOM, in contrast, represents a new hybridized form of soft power and hard power “which if combined effectively in initiatives like AFRICOM, can produce ‘smart power’.” (Ernest J. Wilson III)

The purported embrace of “soft power” by the Department of Defense has met with considerable skepticism given past trends to use diplomacy to support strongmen across the continent. According to Nicole Lee, executive director of TransAfrica Forum, “soft power by definition is the use of economics, diplomacy and information to support national interest. It is supposed to be the opposite of military hard power, the opposite of tanks, aircraft carriers [and] other tools of war that basically break things and kill people. Soft power is supposed to be about engendering cooperation through shared values.”

At the same time, some would argue, in the words of Abiodun Williams, associate dean of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies of the National Defense University, that “public diplomacy is too important to be left entirely to non-military agencies...and the military cannot afford to ignore public diplomacy or treat it as an afterthought.” Because AFRICOM “will be operating in an environment of skepticism and suspicion...public opinion in African countries will be a powerful force that will help or impede AFRICOM’s mission.” Williams notes that “the security environment in which AFRICOM operates will evolve and public diplomacy will have to respond to the changing circumstances and changing situation.” And yet

there are clear limits to what public diplomacy can do for African security and American strategy on the continent: “It cannot substitute for clear strategic goals or for a lack of coherence and a unity of effort in implementing U.S. security policies and programs, and it cannot replace the political will required to ensure sustained and steady engagement.” Moreover, as the growing role of China in Africa reflects, “none of Africa’s security interests and problems are going to be solved in an exclusive U.S.-Africa prism” and will require a multilateral approach.

As a practical matter, given the high degree of skepticism and apprehension, Ambassador Mark Bellamy of the Center for Strategic and International Studies states, “The main public diplomacy task that AFRICOM is going to face for the next year or so is really going to be one of explaining its mission” to African audiences and to American constituencies as well. Within the U.S. government and in the NGO community, Bellamy says, there has been concern about “whether the DoD was proposing to get out of its lane,” usurping the role of USAID and other non-military agencies and infringing on “the humanitarian and development space” that various NGOs occupy in Africa. Others observe that although “public diplomacy historically has been seen as...relatively benign, if the military is monopolizing public diplomacy for its strategic ends, that may create some confusion on the part of the members of the public in those countries in which they would like to exercise influence.” (Evan Potter, Canadian Fulbright Fellow, USC Center on Public Diplomacy)

Although “hearts and minds are important,” long-term capacity-building is what matters most, according to Mark Malan of Refugees International. He urges adoption of “a single set of messages,” saying that “Africans read the messages tailored for the American market.” So when U.S. military officials discuss the importance of African oil and the need to “reach deep into ungoverned spaces” in pursuit of terrorists, Africans take note. As for devising the approach of American public diplomacy in Africa, Malan points out that more than AFRICOM is involved. Africans, he said, “have very long memories of slavery, colonialism” and other elements of their history, and this makes achieving credibility an integral part of the public diplomacy task. Underlying the current debates on AFRICOM is a tension between African identity politics and “great regional variations in attitudes towards AFRICOM,” warns Professor Geoffrey Wiseman, acting director of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.

Experts agree that AFRICOM offers great potential but also has its

We cannot continue to pursue 21st century missions in an information digital network age with bureaucratic constructs and thinking laid out in the aftermath of World War II.

—Ryan Henry
Principal Deputy Undersecretary of
Defense for Policy