

# AFRICOM: Round One in a New Cold War?

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## **TWO DOZEN MILITARY BASES IN AFRICA WILL HELP THE UNITED STATES COMPETE FOR INFLUENCE WITH CHINA IN THE OTHERWISE FORGOTTEN CONTINENT**

The forgotten continent of Africa could become the new battleground in the next American conflict.

On Feb. 6, President Bush formally established the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), a unified command structure located on the continent. By 2012, the United States wants two dozen bases in Africa to promote U.S. security interests and “the common goals of development of health, education, democracy, and economic growth.”

Bush announced the creation of AFRICOM a week after Chinese President Hu Jintao landed in Cameroon to start a high-profile, eight-country African tour, during which he signed more than 50 cooperation agreements and pledged to double China’s assistance to Africa by 2009.

Despite a surge in interest during the Cold War, Africa has never played a strategic role in U.S. foreign policy. In 1995, the Department of Defense stated: “Ultimately we see very little traditional strategic interest in Africa.” But with increasing investment from an energy-hungry China, the United States is reconsidering.

“It’s an ideological game,” says Vijay Prashad, director of international studies at Trinity College. “Since China began to enter Africa with a new development agenda, it called the United States’ bluff. Now Africa is becoming the battlefield of ideas over two forms of hegemony.”

According to the State Department, Chinese trade with Africa quadrupled to \$55 billion from 2002 to 2006. China estimates there are 800 Chinese firms investing in Africa.

Neoconservative groups call China’s growing relationship with Africa “alarming” and want a response. “The United States must be alert to the potential long-term disruption of American access to important raw materials and energy sources as these resources are ‘locked up’ by Chinese firms,” reads a 2006 Heritage Foundation policy backgrounder.

While many NGOs have joined U.S. lawmakers in supporting AFRICOM in principle, there is skepticism.

In recent testimony on Capitol Hill, Mark Malan, a program officer with Refugees International, summed up the NGO position: “The main concern of operational NGOs is that AFRICOM will increase the trend towards the militarization of humanitarian action, which raises fundamental concerns about the purpose of such assistance.”

Some critics see AFRICOM as another foothold for the military-industrial complex. “AFRICOM ... reflects the Bush administration’s primary reliance on the use of force to pursue its strategic interests,” writes Salim Lone, a former spokesman for the U.N. mission in Iraq and a columnist with the Daily Nation in Nairobi.

U.S. officials have stated what AFRICOM will not do — “this isn’t about chasing terrorists around Africa”; “AFRICOM isn’t going to be used to protect natural resources”; “AFRICOM will in no way take a leadership role in the area of diplomacy.” Exactly what it will do is unclear.

But that hasn’t stopped AFRICOM from garnering support at home—even from progressives such as Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wisc.). His House counterpart, Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.), is more skeptical. “To the extent that establishing a command where our relationship with Africa is the priority rather than an afterthought can do so, I support it,” said Payne, who chairs the Subcommittee on Africa & Global Health. “However, I do have some serious concerns.”

Others say the Defense Department must tread carefully. “It’s not that the idea itself is bad when you look at some of the things that have happened there, but we need to be very artful in how we proceed,” said a high-ranking Democratic staffer. “This administration has not made it easy for the U.S. to seem credible on security issues. The current environment doesn’t really leave room for error.”

Regardless, Africa’s mounting importance as a global petroleum source cannot be underestimated. Since 2002, U.S. oil imports from Nigeria, Angola, Algeria and Libya have nearly doubled, and according to data from the Energy Information Administration, Africa has surpassed the Middle East as the largest supplier of crude oil to the United States. The National Intelligence Council projects that African oil imports could account for 25 percent of total U.S. imports by 2015. At the same time, China accounted for 40 percent of total growth in global demand for oil in the last four years. Today, more than a quarter of China’s oil imports come from Africa.

That demand indicates Africa will begin to play a much larger role in both U.S. and Chinese foreign policy over the coming decades, as the large powers play yet another round of the age-old “great game.”