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Bring Africa Command Home

Infighting, Lack of Authority Undercut Value

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The Pentagon is seeking a new home for Africa Command, the military headquarters created for the continent in 2007. It is now housed at a base in Stuttgart, Germany, an area The Economist aptly calls "perhaps the least African place in the world."

We say bring it home. Congress, for predictable reasons, agrees. At recent hearings, lawmakers questioning Gen. Carter Ham, AFRICOM's commander, focused not on the war he was then running in Libya but on landing the 2,000 jobs under his command for their voters.

Sen. Jim Webb, a Virginia Democrat, pointed to the Hampton Roads real estate vacated by Joint Forces Command's closure. Rep. Hank Johnson, a Georgia Democrat, bragged of Atlanta's African diaspora community, and more relevantly, international airport. South Carolina's Rep. Joe Wilson, a Republican, argued for Charleston because of the culture it shares with West Africa, boldly trying to turn slavery into an economic asset 150 years after it was abolished.

Pathetic as the spectacle was, it had a certain logic. AFRICOM is basically useless. If it is to exist, it might as well generate jobs at home.

The Pentagon burdened the command with a uniquely ambitious charge. Unlike our other regional commands, AFRICOM was not intended merely to manage military planning in its area. PowerPoint slides full of trendy terms like "interagency process," "unity of effort" "smart power" and "capacity-building" obfuscated AFRICOM's audacious mission: to coordinate other U.S. agencies' efforts to help African governments establish peace and stability, melding war planning, diplomacy and development.

That mission assumes not only that American military officers know the causes of Africa's troubles but that they can empower Africans to fix them. It also recommended a headquarters in Africa.

Things have not gone as planned. For starters, no suitable host emerged. Many of Africa's 55 nations suffered disqualifying conditions - disastrous civil wars, Muslim populations big enough to provoke charges that we were occupying another Muslim nation, or are under NATO attack.

That left only a handful of candidates to bribe for a base. But those African leaders presumably had less confidence than their would-be mentors that modern nation-building is distinct from the colonial variant that caused them so much trouble. So Africa Command remains in Germany, shunned by the governments it aims to assist.

Another problem is the State Department has not sent AFRICOM as many diplomats as it wants. Perhaps Foggy Bottom was reluctant to subordinate diplomats to generals in service of goals that we used to call "diplomacy." They may also cling stubbornly to the idea that our African embassies are a better place than Army bases in Germany from which to engage African governments.

AFRICOM's biggest problem is that its objectives assume powers it lacks. Its

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advocates imply that al-Qaida would be running much of the continent but for training it organized and wells it helped dig. But African chaos is amenable neither to foreign state-builders nor international terrorism. AFRICOM's busy work has no real impact on our security.

It is not that taxpayers get a great deal on the other geographic commands. Southern Command, which deals with South and Central America, fights the counterproductive drug war and Haitian boat people. Northern Command, for North America, is mostly concerned with missions that the National Guard and the North American Aerospace Defense Command has covered. Its biggest enemies are storms, Posse Comitatus and overwrought cyber fears.

European Command ran out of enemies in the 1990s. Even Central Command (the Middle-East) and Pacific Command (Asia), which at least have real threats to hype, largely replicate capacity in the Pentagon or the commands we stand up in the countries where we fight. We should close them all.

Because our leaders likely will not do that, they should at least make AFRICOM a local, rather than foreign, subsidy. Bring it home, as we already have done for Southern and Central Commands. As Massachusetts natives, our first choice for AFRICOM's new home is Fort Devens, a closed base near Boston, just across the ocean from the continent it is to run. The Gulf Coast could also work. New Orleans and Biloxi are both home to military bases and still struggling from Hurricane Katrina and the oil spill.

Washington has some empty offices, three nearby airports and plenty of hard workers well-versed in this brand of technocratic idealism.

Bringing peace and stability to Africa is a tall order for the U.S. military. Bringing a few jobs home is doable. Military programs shouldn't be jobs programs, everyone says. But, as it happens, they are, and we might as well make them local ones.

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