

Introduction: Africa's Rising Strategic Significance

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Africa has never held a central position in U.S. foreign policy, having little strategic significance and lacking a strong and organized domestic lobby to push the continent's issues onto the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Therefore, it came as a surprise to many that the Bush Administration may actually have done more for Africa than its more liberal predecessors, once rhetoric is weighed against reality. The post-9/11 landscape has radically changed the prioritization of Africa in the United States' concept of its strategic interests and the amount of assistance to the continent has accordingly increased. Since 9/11, the U.S. government has vastly expanded its engagement with the continent on virtually all fronts: military, intergovernmental, economic and humanitarian.

The change in the level of attention paid to the continent just a decade prior could not have been more dramatic. In 1993, as millions of Rwandans were killed in genocidal slaughter, the United States did less than nothing: it intentionally kept the country off the agenda at the United Nations. As the situation in Somalia became increasingly unstable in the early 1990s, the United States first backed a warlord with dubious domestic credentials and then withdrew all troops from the country after 18 Army rangers were killed in May 1993. In the wake of this withdrawal, the United States adopted an unofficial policy of "no boots on the ground" in Africa. This was broken only in 2003, when Marines landed, however briefly, in Liberia to quell unrest in that country's civil war. Also in the early 1990s, the United States stood by as the all-out civil war and collapse of the central state in the Democratic Republic of Congo worsened, as all government functions ceased to operate, as ethnic cleansing campaigns took route in several areas of the territory, and the entire central African region became embroiled in the conflict.

Today, however, the U.S. government is actively discussing plans to create a geographic combatant command specifically dedicated to Africa. U.S. agencies are active across the continent in a wide range of activities, from training African peacekeepers to educating millions of Africans in HIV/AIDS prevention programs to engaging with multiple governments to provide capacity building to enhance the rule of law. Other programs seek to build stronger relationships with countries that have large oil reserves, in the aims to creating alternatives to Middle Eastern oil suppliers and to help the countries of the Gulf of Guinea to create a comprehensive and viable maritime security structure. These are just a few examples of the range of activities.

What explains this shift in prioritization? Simply put: a convergence of threats, vulnerabilities and opportunities created by the War on Terror and the advent of high-powered individuals within the Bush administration who have been able to push African-centric issues onto the government's

agenda. As the United States becomes increasingly concerned with reducing the conditions that lead to terrorism worldwide, it has had to acknowledge that chronic poverty, conflict and violence, corrupt governments and unprofessional militaries create critical vulnerabilities for terrorist recruitment and operations. As conflicts in the Middle East cause the price of oil and gasoline to skyrocket, it becomes more imperative to diversify our suppliers of the precious commodity. As a result, the strategic significance of Africa has risen greatly since 9/11. While the continent is not as highly prioritized as other areas of the world it has, nonetheless, entered a new era in U.S. engagement.

This special issue of *Strategic Insights* explores the increasing strategic significance and prioritization of African-U.S. foreign policy. The essays in this issue first provide context for the reader unfamiliar with Africa by providing a background and analysis of the evolution of U.S. foreign policy towards and engagement with the continent. In this section, the essays by Letitia Lawson and Otto Sieber review the history of U.S. foreign policy, outline current levels of engagement, and analyze the rationale behind and proposals for a new Africa Command. Following these two essays, the issue takes up various security issues in Africa: maritime security, terrorism and counter-terrorism, and peacekeeping. The overarching goal is to provide a context for and to probe some of the ramifications of the current elevation of Africa in U.S. national security strategy.

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