United States relations with South Africa: Why now is a critical time to strengthen them

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Introduction

Our security depends upon partnering with Africans to strengthen fragile and failing states and bring ungoverned areas under the control of effective democracies.


Now, more than ever, the United States needs to strengthen its relationship with the Republic of South Africa (RSA). A renewed focus on the African continent by global powers is putting Africa at the centre of a struggle for influence and resources. The US

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provides aid for numerous countries throughout Africa, but South Africa undeniably receives the major share with over US$221 million for Aids relief alone in 2006 (USAID 2006). Yet, while relations on humanitarian aid between the US and South Africa are promising, diplomatic relations in other areas remain strained and prevent the US from collaborating effectively with South Africa to bring peace and security to the African continent. Addressing the challenges that complicate cooperation between the two countries sooner rather than later, will yield enormous returns for the African continent as a whole as well as for US national security concerns in the future.

The RSA is the strongest economic power on the African continent, with a gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006 of US$587.5 billion (more than 67 per cent of which came from the services sector) and a GDP growth rate of 5 per cent. Unfortunately, even with this positive economic performance, the unemployment rate is more than 25 per cent (CIA 2007), which is a significant problem for South Africa. The 1994 transformation from apartheid to black majority rule was to provide a better life for the country’s citizens. Yet, more than ten years after the apartheid era ended, a significant portion of the population remains unemployed. The rate of unemployment (including discouraged workers who left the labour force) was recently estimated at 40 per cent (The Economist 2005). Even the current economic growth has not been strong enough to reduce the unemployment rate. Many of the problems from the apartheid era still plague the country, especially poverty and a lack of economic empowerment among the previously disadvantaged groups (CIA 2007). These problems spread into the wider economy and prevent South Africa from being the leader on the continent that the world expects it to be.

The US is involved in multiple programmes to alleviate many of South Africa’s problems – by means of military assistance, health services, economic aid, and other projects from numerous agencies. The existing programmes, combined with stronger diplomatic and military relationships between the two countries, are critical in ensuring that South Africa becomes a beacon of leadership for other countries. In addition, with South Africa being the hegemon of Africa, better relationships with South Africa are vital to US interests in Africa: South Africa will be able to act as a committed US partner once relations have been strengthened.

The recent announcement that the US is preparing to establish a unified, designated Africa Command (AFRICOM), which will be responsible for the entire African continent except Egypt, presents a new set of opportunities for the US and South Africa to strengthen military and diplomatic relations. This will inevitably lead to a more prosperous South Africa and Africa. By utilising AFRICOM to strengthen ties with South Africa, the US will continue to promote human security, reduce terrorism, and improve trade relations between the two countries. Not only will economic relations between the US and South Africa benefit as a result, but South Africa’s economic development and position as an economic leader on the continent will ensure improved global trade and economic cooperation. Human security will improve with better relations between
the US and South Africa because a stronger South Africa can play a larger role in the humanitarian crises that plague the continent. As a member of the African Union (AU), South Africa is involved in helping to find solutions to problems on the continent although the AU itself has been the object of much criticism due to the policies of many of its members. South Africa is also a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) that comprises 15 countries in southern Africa. SADC established an African Standby Brigade on 17 August 2007 (South Africa 2007) as part of a larger initiative to have an African Standby Force (ASF) with brigades permanently set up throughout different regions on the continent to enable quick response to crises.

In this paper, I shall explain why it is imperative that in addition to focusing its attention on North Africa (owing to the national interests such as oil, terrorism and potential rogue states) the US should also pay extensive attention to South Africa. I shall discuss challenges in the relations between the US and South Africa and illustrate why South Africa is the country in sub-Saharan Africa on which the US should focus its efforts. Subsequently I shall identify current areas and projects of collaboration between the US and South Africa, as well as the programmes in South Africa that will benefit most from continued US assistance. Finally I shall discuss the way forward for the US in dealing with South Africa.

**Background and challenges**

The year 1994 saw the end of apartheid in South Africa. The country had been under sanctions by the United Nations for its apartheid policies throughout most of the Cold
War. Simultaneously, though, South Africa was the principal American ally in opposing Soviet encroachment in the region. According to a defence analyst, ‘during the Cold War, United States foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa had little to do with Africa’ (Lawson 2007). This of course led to a contradictory US foreign policy with regard to South Africa. On one hand, through sanctions the US opposed the apartheid regime, but on the other hand, through coordinated efforts with South Africa during World War II and the Cold War, the US supported the oppressive leadership. Cannons built to help the US fight the Japanese during WW II are still emplaced on Robben Island where South Africa’s first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, was incarcerated.

After 1960, when concerns over Soviet influence in sub-Saharan Africa began to grow, the US assigned responsibility for the region to the US Atlantic Command, then to Strike Command, and finally to Readiness Command before its responsibility dissolved in 1971. This left sub-Saharan Africa out of the US unified command plan structure until 1983, when it was divided into its current configuration of shared responsibility among US Central Command (CENTCOM), European Command (EUCOM) and Pacific Command (PACOM) (Congressional Research Service 2007:10). The failure on the part of the US to see sub-Saharan Africa as important enough to devote resources to (except for interests in fighting the Cold War) helps explain why diplomatic relations between the US and South Africa are not as strong as the US would like them to be.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) did begin to assist South Africa’s military integration efforts in 1993, as apartheid was ending, by working with the US Information Agency on a joint South African National Defence Force (SANDF) visit to the US. The US committed US$120 000 in 1994 and US$250 000 in 1995 (US Department of Defense 1995) to launch a military education and training programme with South Africa. Military assistance continued after the end of apartheid with a programme known as Project Phidisa (a Zulu word meaning ‘to prolong life’), which focuses on treating members of the SANDF and their families who are living with HIV/AIDS. This programme is run by three organisations: the SANDF, the US National Institute of Health, and the United States DoD. The programme’s scope is to establish the impact of HIV infection on the South African military community and to develop appropriate strategies for the effective management and prevention of HIV infection (Project Phidisa nd). In 2004, the US committed more than US$50 million over a five-year period to further Project Phidisa. At the time, the US Ambassador to South Africa stated that the agreement was an ‘outstanding example of the close relationship that exists between the governments of South Africa and the United States, and the shared vision of our people’ (US Embassy in South Africa 2005). Unfortunately, this relationship did not remain strong and the future of the programme is now jeopardised by strained relationships between the US DoD and the South African authorities. Officials from the US have met with the South African Military Health Service several times to seek better cooperation, but the meetings yielded mixed results.1
Even as the US attempts to obtain improved cooperation from South African officials, South Africa is dealing with its own, internal difficulties. Political turmoil erupted in 2007 after the deputy health minister, Ms Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, was fired by President Thabo Mbeki for travelling unauthorised to an Aids conference in Spain. Some criticised her trip saying it was a waste of government funds, while others backed her for taking a more open and scientific approach in dealing with the Aids crisis by meeting with experts from other countries (BBC 2007). Madlala-Routledge is an outspoken critic of President Thabo Mbeki and Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang for the way they have handled the Aids pandemic (Butler 2007). Her removal from office was a significant blow to the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), a non-governmental organisation campaigning for the supply of anti-retrovirals to Aids patients by state-owned hospitals and clinics. The Minister of Health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, has been severely criticised for instructing Aids patients to eat garlic and beetroot, both ‘traditional African remedies’, as a means of treating the disease. Despite public and international criticism of Tshabalala-Msimang’s recommendation of ‘traditional remedies’, President Mbeki continued his adamant support of her. This reinforces the idea that challenges with assistance to South Africa will remain while the country attempts to resolve its internal problems.

Another strain on relations between the US and South Africa is the Article 98 Agreement, a bilateral pact in terms of which countries pledge not to seek prosecution of other countries’ citizens in the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Center for International Policy 2007). South Africa did not sign the agreement, which had a deleterious effect on US cooperation with and funding for South Africa. In 2002, Congress passed the American Service-Members’ Protection Act (ASPA). Section 2007(a) of the ASPA includes the ‘prohibition of military assistance’ to the governments of countries that are parties to the ICC. However, section 2007(c) includes an article 98 waiver, which allows the US president to waive the prohibition of military assistance set out in section 2007(a). Late in 2006, President Bush determined that it was ‘important to the national interest of the United States to waive the prohibition of section 2007(a)’ with respect to certain countries, one of which was South Africa (Georgetown Law Library 2007). As a result, the US now provides international military education and training (IMET) to South Africa, but not foreign military financing (FMF). So, while on the one hand it would seem that cooperation with South Africa would not be in the best interests of the US due to South Africa’s decision not to sign the Article 98 Agreement, on the other hand refusing to cooperate with South Africa leaves opportunity for other countries to step in to fill the void.

Military assistance to South Africa will continue in various forms through AFRICOM. Although AFRICOM is not strictly centred on fighting wars (as commands were in the
past), it will nonetheless face challenges in dealing with South Africa. The security of the US forces that will be operating on the continent is a major concern in establishing AFRICOM. South Africa is the most stable country on the continent and would be an ideal location for additional US military and state department personnel. Yet, South Africa has not been receptive to hosting a US military command. Specifically, on 30 August 2007, South African Defence Minister Mosioua Lekota stated that ‘any country that allowed itself to be a base for the US strategic command in Africa would have to live with the consequences’ (Hartley 2007). This is a critical issue because while the focus of AFRICOM incorporates military and civil relations, the concern that most countries have with hosting the command is over the military presence and how it will be perceived by its neighbours. If South Africa is opposed to hosting AFRICOM despite receiving considerable aid from the US, other countries will in all likelihood also be hesitant.

According to a DefenseLink article, South Africa’s greatest need is not training in the traditional military disciplines, but in resource management, personnel management, human rights and the proper role of the military in a democracy (US Department of Defense 1995). This is an important consideration for AFRICOM. Traditionally major commands have required large numbers of troops in support of their objectives. AFRICOM can instead parcel out its resources as needed to assist the South African military without stretching US forces. One of the challenges that this situation poses for the US is that with the formation of AFRICOM the US itself will have to deal with a new series of issues in working across multiple organisations, including DoD, the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). That being said, as the US works through the challenges of working across agencies, it will be able to apply lessons learnt to help South Africa deal with the problems it faces in working across multiple organisations.

The resource management and personnel management problems that ail South Africa are not likely to go away soon. Ministries, hospitals, schools and other government agencies are struggling to hire enough skilled people (The Economist 2007).

**Why the United States should focus more attention on South Africa**

Allowing the problems that exist in Africa to ‘fix themselves’ is not an option if the US wants to prevent further deterioration of living standards on the continent. As discussed earlier, the US for far too long avoided Africa due to Africa’s seeming ‘insignificance’ to its security interests (with the exception of the Cold War). Now, with the threat that states may be harbouring terrorists, competition from other global powers for resources on the continent, and concern for eradicating poverty and promoting development and prosperity, South Africa is an ideal ally for the US.
Four African countries (Ghana, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa) have consistently ranked in the top ten countries that contributed troops to recent UN peacekeeping operations (Congressional Research Service 2007:13). In order to ensure that these countries can continue providing resources for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, the US must strengthen relations with them. Of these countries, South Africa is the regional hegemon, with the most democratic society and most robust economy. Therefore, as the US progresses with AFRICOM on the continent, much attention should be focused on South Africa.

Another reason that it is critical for the US to focus on better relations with South Africa is that other countries – especially China – are providing massive amounts of aid and direct foreign investment to the African continent. This is a threat to US security as the influence of these competing powers can lessen the influence of the US in Africa. Chinese direct foreign investment in Africa has grown dramatically from about US$50 million annually between the mid 1990s and 2002 to US$100 million in 2003 and US$430 million in 2004. This relationship involves the China-Africa Cooperation Forum, established by China in 2000 to bring Chinese and African leaders together every three years (Center for Contemporary Conflict 2007). In addition to providing direct foreign investment, China recently cancelled about US$10 billion in bilateral debt from African countries (Pan 2007). As Chinese influence and presence on the continent grow, specifically in the more destitute countries, it is imperative for the US to establish a partnership with the continent’s leader in order to gain the influence required to effect change.

South Africa has committed itself to support global efforts to combat terrorism and this is beneficial to US national security. In a report issued in April 2007, South African President Thabo Mbeki is quoted as saying that ‘no circumstances whatsoever can ever justify resorting to terrorism’ (US State Department 2007). This is a powerful statement coming from the president of a country whose citizens for so long, under the apartheid regime, endured conditions that today often lead extremists to acts of terrorism. This steadfast statement from South Africa’s president illustrates another synergy: the US and South Africa can act in partnership to help stop the spread of terrorism. Given the problems of resource management and personnel management experienced by South Africa, partnering to combat terrorism offers an opportunity to utilise US resources and lessons learnt from the global war on terror to aid South Africa and, eventually, the whole continent. US aid to South Africa for anti-terrorism training has increased in recent years, but challenges still exist in respect of US government agencies operating in South Africa.

On the medical front, William Fox (1997:21) made the following statement more than a decade ago: ‘As a matter of homeland defense, the United States must increase disease surveillance and research in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.’ In doing this, the US will not only provide health assistance to other countries, but will also help prevent the spread of diseases abroad, including to its own shores.
Medical crises, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, threaten not only the South African population, but also the country’s security in that HIV/AIDS accounts for 70 per cent of deaths in the SANDF. The infection rate in the armed forces is estimated at between 17 per cent and 23 per cent, with some battalions tested in 2004 showing prevalence rates of nearly 80 per cent. The threat of HIV/AIDS extends well beyond South Africa, though; for example, more Ugandan soldiers are believed to have died from AIDS than from the nation’s 20-year insurgency (Bush 2007).

South Africa plays a leading role in promoting peace and stability on the African continent and has been actively engaged in efforts to resolve conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Rwanda and Burundi (USAID 2006). Military personnel are needed for this type of international peacekeeping and stability, as well as for domestic issues. There is little doubt that the high incidence of HIV/AIDS in the SANDF could seriously affect South Africa’s ability to provide troops for future peacekeeping and stability missions. With fewer troops from the continent’s hegemon, it is likely that support from other nations will also decline. Thus it is of paramount importance that US engagement with South Africa continue and strengthen in order to address the HIV/AIDS crisis, thereby mitigating the country’s military manpower crisis and decreasing the intervention needed from the US and bodies such as the UN.

USAID, the largest bilateral donor and second-largest overall donor to South Africa (after the European Union), is active in the areas of HIV/AIDS, capacity-building, civil society, governance and the environment (USAID 2006). With USAID being the largest bilateral donor to South Africa (more than US$35 million in 2006) (USAID 2006), one would expect that cooperation and programme implementation would not be an issue in South Africa, but this is not the case as many of the programmes suffer from the lack of resource and personnel management discussed earlier. So, while it might seem that using aid (or restricting aid) as an incentive to improve cooperation and efficiency from programmes and accountability for funding provided to South Africa, this method could prove counterproductive. If restrictions and stipulations were imposed, South Africa may be unable to meet the benchmarks required to receive assistance simply because of internal problems faced by the country. At the same time, the US must be cautious in using restrictions and cumbersome stipulations when providing aid, especially in view of the fact that states such as China are willing to provide aid and money with no strings attached.

Another example of why the US needs to reach out to South Africa as a strong ally in Africa is provided by the situation in Zimbabwe. In 2007, at the time of writing, the Zimbabwean economy was experiencing inflation of more than 5 000 per cent, four out of five people were unemployed, and 80 per cent of the population lived in poverty (News24.com 2007). Geographically Zimbabwe borders South Africa to the north. Many refugees seeking to escape the turmoil in Zimbabwe head across the border to South Africa. Over three million refugees have fled Zimbabwe (ABC.net 2007) as the
country’s economy continues to implode under President Robert Mugabe, the sole ruler of Zimbabwe since the country gained its independence in 1980. Mugabe has been criticised for controversial policies such as seizing white-owned farms to settle landless blacks and allegedly committing human rights abuses (Banya 2007).

While the situation in Zimbabwe poses a serious threat to security on the African continent, it also presents an opportunity for the US to utilise the diplomatic arm of AFRICOM to work with South Africa in helping to resolve this problem. As long as Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe accuses Western countries of trying to unseat him (Banya 2007), US attempts to help the struggling state will face challenges. Yet, Zimbabwe’s neighbour, South Africa, is well positioned, both geographically and politically, to negotiate with President Mugabe. However, the situation is complicated by the fact that, although South African President Thabo Mbeki would be an excellent candidate for negotiating with Zimbabwe, he has been reluctant to criticise Mugabe’s policies openly. This may be in part because when Mbeki was arrested in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, during the African National Congress (ANC) struggle against the apartheid government, Mugabe intervened to secure his release. Nonetheless, Mbeki is president of the most powerful nation on the continent and would thus be a great asset to the US as an ally in the region.

How the United States is currently helping South Africa

Table 1 shows the extent of current US financial aid to South Africa. In looking at the amounts dedicated to South Africa, it is obvious that South African relations with the US are not strained due to lack of financial assistance.

A great deal of direct foreign investment also flows into South Africa – the projects listed in table 1 being just some of the programmes funded by US government agencies in South Africa. Project Phidisa (mentioned earlier) is run under the auspices of the SA National Defence Force. In 2004, the US agreed to provide more than US$50 million over five years to further this programme that has provided massive help to the people of South Africa. Furthermore, while AFRICOM will bring with it resources that will benefit South African agencies, it will also add to the resources of the Office of Defense Cooperation and help them in their efforts to coordinate with numerous agencies.

In 2006, USAID budgeted US$35 092 000 for South Africa, making it the largest recipient on the African continent (USAID 2006). With USAID working alongside AFRICOM, funds can be directed towards the critical areas mentioned earlier: resource management, personnel management, human rights and the proper role of a military in a democracy. USAID programmes already address many of these issues, but AFRICOM will integrate those programmes across the State Department, DoD and USAID. Such integration will overcome much of the inefficiency of current programmes so that more money, training and treatment will reach the intended recipients. Once these programmes
are integrated and begin yield positive results, the South African government’s problems in respect of retaining qualified personnel will begin to fade, especially since, with a strong economy and a US$285 billion surplus in 2006 (The Economist 2007), budget deficits are not preventing the government from paying sufficiently high wages to retain high-quality individuals.

In addition to military training, the US DoD currently delivers outreach medical services in many countries. At least twice a year EUCOM conducts medical exercises (MEDFLAGs) in Africa. MEDFLAG activites comprise an exercise in military coordination in the event of mass casualties, the provision of medical training and the sharing of medical information and techniques with African nations. A less obvious, but very significant role of MEDFLAGs is to bring together national and local governments and health care organisations to build relationships that will endure long after the exercise is over (MEDFLAG nd). In addition, US medical teams remain in the host country upon completion of the exercise to provide dental and other medical care to the nation, which furthers relations between the US and host countries. The year 2007 saw MEDFLAG reach its 20th anniversary upon completion of its exercise in Gabon (MEDFLAG 2007), whereas the first MEDFLAG exercise in South Africa was not conducted until 2004. Since 2004 MEDFLAG has succeeded in providing a great deal of aid and support to

### Table 1 Current aid from the United States to South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account</th>
<th>Fin year 2005 Actual (US$ ’000)</th>
<th>Fin year 2006 Estimate (US$ ’000)</th>
<th>Fin year 2007 Request (US$ ’000)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Child survival and health (CSH)</td>
<td>5 328</td>
<td>5 070</td>
<td>5 130</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development assistance (DA)</td>
<td>25 710</td>
<td>24 362</td>
<td>19 279</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic support funds (ESF)</td>
<td>992</td>
<td>1 287</td>
<td>1 300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global HIV/Aids initiative (GHAI)</td>
<td>118 165</td>
<td>191 553</td>
<td>330 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>International military education and training (IMET)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International narcotics control and law enforcement (INCLE)</td>
<td>1 756</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, demining, and related programmes and anti-terrorism assistance (NADR-ATA)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peace Corps</td>
<td>3 137</td>
<td>3 443</td>
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many impoverished South Africans in need of medical care. The next MEDFLAG exercise in South Africa is scheduled for 2010, but a request has been submitted to bring it forward to 2009 and to focus on preparing the independent military health system for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa.² This significant step proves to the people of South Africa that the US is committed to providing support and promoting better relations between the two countries. With one of AFRICOM’s goals being the provision of humanitarian assistance to Africa, this continued commitment of MEDFLAG is an ideal opportunity to see success on that front as well.

Another USAID programme in Africa is the President’s Plan for Emergency Aids Relief (PEPFAR), which provides Aids prevention, care and treatment to numerous countries in Africa. Through PEPFAR, South Africa benefited to the sum of US$221 539 430 in funding from the US in the 2006 fiscal year (Bush 2007:209). PEPFAR presents yet another opportunity for strengthening relations between the US and South Africa. PEPFAR is of critical importance in Africa since UN estimates for 2006 indicated that almost 25 million Africans were HIV positive (UNAIDS 2006), and according to USAID there are more than 5,6 million people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa alone (USAID nd). With USAID’s integration into the AFRICOM structure the appearance of militarisation will lessen, which will help ease tension among South African officials over AFRICOM’s operating in South Africa.

The Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance Program (ACOTA), which is the African arm of the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), provides training in military operations, including light infantry and small unit tactics, and focuses on training African troops who can, in turn, train other African units, similar to the US military concept of ‘train the trainer’ (Henry L Stimson Center 2005). South Africa is one of fourteen countries in Africa to have received training from ACOTA (Congressional Research Service 2007:19). This training will enable South Africa to take the concept of ‘train the trainer’ into the rest of Africa, thereby lessening Africa’s dependence on the West. Medical assistance to military staff and their families through initiatives such as Project Phidisa must remain strong to ensure that military staff can receive the training they need to train others in Africa.

The programmes described above illustrate US involvement in promoting better healthcare and training for South Africans, providing development opportunities, and increasing military training through IMET, which will train more than 200 SANDF personnel in 2008.³ Indirectly, these programmes will also help address South Africa’s unemployment woes. Some will provide jobs for government workers, others will provide jobs for military staff, while yet others will provide jobs in the corporate sector – all as a result of US involvement. Training in resources and management will improve the skill sets of government workers in South Africa, which will, in turn, provide improved oversight of programmes and open up new avenues for the South African government to
care for its people. The programmes directed at the military, such as Project Phidisa, will provide health care for military staff and their families, which will enable South Africa to build a more robust and dependable military. As programmes in the government and military sectors begin to yield positive results, the economy will continue to improve thereby enabling South Africa to be in an even better position to assume a leadership role in crises that affect the continent.

South Africa is, in fact, taking steps towards uniting countries in Africa, as evidenced by a summit meeting on 17 August 2007 where SADC heads of state launched a peacekeeping brigade as part of the planned ASF. This indicates that African nations themselves are continuing to try to find African solutions to African problems. The SADC brigade will be a component of the existing AU standby force to ensure that it has an organised, multiskilled force on standby to respond expeditiously to all conflict situations on the continent (South Africa 2007). South Africa is taking significant steps to promote peace and security on the continent, and continued US assistance can expedite the process.

**Conclusion: The way forward**

South Africa, the leader on the continent, sets the example for other African countries and will continue to do so. Countries outside Africa will also continue looking to South Africa to take the lead in promoting peace and prosperity in Africa.

In promoting peace and prosperity within South Africa, the country will need to develop amicable relations with AFRICOM as this command will possess resources that can contribute towards solving many of South Africa’s problems. Many programmes currently in place have the potential to alleviate many of South Africa’s woes, but the challenges in working with South Africa have prevented US efforts from being as effective as they could be.

The history of US involvement in South Africa has left a legacy of contempt among some South Africans towards the US, particularly among the ruling ANC who was fighting the apartheid regime in South Africa during the Cold War while the US was cooperating with the apartheid regime because of its strategic importance to the US.

In order to ensure that the introduction of AFRICOM to Africa is not perceived as an imperialist move, it is imperative that the US focus on the continent extend beyond area of threat to economic interests and natural resources. Currently, over 18 per cent of US crude oil imports come from Africa, compared to 17 per cent from the Persian Gulf (Cohen & Alasa 2007). US oil imports from West Africa are expected to grow to 25 per cent by 2015 (Global Trends 2015 2000). Looking at these figures, it is easy to see why the US allocates a great deal of resources to northern Africa. Yet, while working with nations in northern
Africa, the US should focus considerable attention on sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically on South Africa, to demonstrate its genuine concern for the continent as a whole.

As AFRICOM rises, the US will look to strengthen its relationships with all African countries. AFRICOM will work through the challenge of negotiating locations to position its personnel on the continent. Yet, by diplomatically engaging South Africa, providing humanitarian aid, training and assistance to the South African government, and using US military to improve training for the SANDF, the US will be able to strengthen relationships with other countries by allowing South Africa to act as the leader in negotiations while it acts in a coordinating capacity.

As South Africa moves away from its history of apartheid and enters an era of democratisation and good governance, it will surely be an asset to any nation that succeeds in developing and maintaining amicable relationships with it. So, while the US continues to improve its relations with South Africa, South Africa must continue to work on its internal organisation and effectiveness so that when assistance is offered, they are ready to receive it and use it to their benefit. Recent evidence fortunately shows that South Africa is moving in that direction.

Notes
1 Interview (e-mail) with Major Scott Morgan, US Embassy in South Africa, Office of the Defense Attaché, August 2007.
2 Interview (e-mail) with Lt Col Brian Smith, Chief, Office of Defense Cooperation, Pretoria, South Africa, 3 August 2007.

References


