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For African Affairs

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Moderator: Good morning, and welcome to this Defense Writers Group with Chidi Blyden, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs. I believe, ma'am, this is your first meeting with the Defense Writers Group so we are very honored by your presence here today.

Just a quick repetition of the ground rules that you all know. This discussion is on the record but there is no rebroadcast of audio or video. I'll ask the first question then go around the room for the rest of the hour, reserving a few minutes at the end for DASD Blyden. But a half dozen of you have already asked in advance to be on the questioner's list. If anybody else wants to ask a question, please drop me a note in the direct chat, not the group chatline there.

Again, Madame Secretary, thank you for joining us today.

The first question is sort of the background. The National Defense Strategy and the White House Sub-Saharan Africa Strategy outline a new approach to Africa. Can you describe a little bit what this new approach is all about, what is the US intent for adopting this new approach and hoping for a little news here, Madame Secretary. What goals does the US have for President Biden's convening of the African Leaders Summit next week? Over to you, ma'am.

DASD Blyden: Thom, thank you so much for having me join this illustrious group, and I appreciate the opportunity to share a little bit about the new approach, as well as the Africa Leaders Summit that will kick off early next week.

To maybe answer your question, our approach to Africa, both I think the interagencies in support of the new Sub-Saharan Strategy for Africa, working on a very 3D approach.

I think many of you have maybe heard us talk about defense, development and diplomacy, and so it is not new that our

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approach is resurging this effort, but I think where you'll see a difference in what maybe you've heard from the US government before is that we're trying our best to learn from past mistakes and work very closely together with African partners to form genuine partnerships based on mutual respect, trust, values and interests.

To be clear, the US has always supported the three D's and has always thought about things in a very symbiotic fashion. I think the emphasis this time around is going to be that we are going to do this in collaboration, conjunction, coordination with African partners.

Many of you may remember that the premise of which AFRICOM was founded was on a 3D. The structure of the Africa Command has leadership that is both from the Defense Department, from the development department, and has a diplomatic arm.

I think what we're doing now is combining and merging these efforts rather than doing them separately, while working in close collaboration with other parts of the government as well, to include the private sector to create a more whole of government and whole of society approach as well.

I think our new approach will also harness the ingenuity of both the African Diaspora and the African population, leveraging the expertise of our partners and incorporating both I think the dynamism of both US and African private sectors, as I mentioned before. This approach I think will also help address some of the most pressing challenges that are not just one dimensional.

I think with these efforts we will recognize and strengthen the unique link that exists between security, governance and development, and we are confident that it will yield I think dividends that we haven't seen in the past.

For the Department of Defense, we will do our best to try and focus on civilian-led defense institutions, reinvigorating our commitment to supporting institutional capacity building, building and strengthening relationships with the African security sector, and exchanging knowledge through our engagement, exercises, and training that we do.

For the question that you asked on sort of US intentions, I think our intent is to try and reevaluate the past and see what

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they can teach us and we're obviously trying to adapt our approach to show that we have learned from it. We're looking to adopt creative solutions to help turn Africa's potential into reality. We've seen that they have some tremendous promise and that they want our support and partnership to do so.

I think many of us who are on this call know the statistics and the potential that Africa holds, so there's no need for me to go into all of those, but I think we are focused on how to take those statistics and develop policy that supports African countries' quest to create a better future for themselves.

I honestly believe, and I think my colleagues who also work in this space believe as well, that we are the best partner for African nations on a number of issues because we share so many strategic and mutual objectives with African countries such as climate change, mitigation, pandemic relief and support, economic recovery post COVID-19 and obviously countering maligned influence from outside actors who don't have African interests in mind.

I think we have come to look at this approach in a way that really gets to why we believe that Africa is important, and I think we all know, at least those of us who work this portfolio, are very focused on making sure that we continue to have those partnerships so that we have not just the access and influence with African partners, but because we genuinely believe that politically, culturally, economically for us to achieve US strategic objectives we need to be able to work with African partners, support their efforts in supporting their burgeoning youth population, and all of the security objectives and other objectives that I mentioned before. Because Africa's at the crossroads of global trade and is positioned I think to be the next big market for both not just the United States but I think also the world.

I think the opportunities in Africa are limitless for us as the United States and we want to ensure that African governments we partner with are engaging with the United States just as much as we are in trying to engage with them.

So to your question on the Africa Leaders Summit, this is the main reason that the US is having the Africa Leaders Summit, is to focus on engagement and consultation with African partners. We want to continue to socialize our approach with African

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leaders to ensure that the approach continues to address the most pressing challenges and seizes upon Africa's opportunities as they evolve.

I'm confident that this approach and the efforts that we'll make through the Africa Leaders Summit will lead the dividends that we hope to achieve. We want leaders to leave here understanding that the breadth of opportunities to work with the United States are endless, they cross the development, the defense sector and diplomacy and governance. And I think we want them to also walk away knowing that the United States has reaffirmed its commitment to Africa, something that we know may have been in question recently, and as such that the United States is a partner that will continue to work towards mutual objectives as we go into what we see as being a very prosperous African future.

Moderator: Thank you.

The first question from the floor is Lita Baldor of AP.

DWG: Thanks, Thom. Good to see you again.

My question is on China. There's been a lot of discussion about China's efforts to build and develop military bases strictly along the Atlantic Coast of Africa. Can you tell us what if any progress you've seen in that regard, bring us up to date on where you see some developments with that. And then secondarily, more broadly, General Townsend when he left Africa Command made a lot of comments about his concerns about lack of resources and troops there. What is the latest DoD effort to either maintain or even expand US military in Africa? Thank you.

DASD Blyden: Thank you for the question.

I think on the China basing, we continue to see that the PRC is interested in engaging in Africa. This is not an area I think we can try and tell our African partners that they have to turn away from. They've told us very clearly that they have an intent to diversify their partnerships for the needs that they want and they may desire. So we're very respectful of that. I think we've heard Secretary Austin say in the past that our relationship with the PRC is competitive, but it's not contentious. I think this is something that we've learned in

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the Africa space. It's something that we are having to adapt our approach to make sure we understand and are respectful of African wishes.

So to the question on the basing, we don't have a desire to counter China when it comes to basing per se. What we are trying to do is encourage our African partners to make informed decisions about the partners that they work with and in the spaces that they work with them on. We understand that we have a particular type of security and military and defense relationship that we have with African partners and that could be jeopardized if they were to have Chinese basing in their region, just because of the type of exercises, the type of work, the type of collaboration and training that we do with them. So they are aware of this and we are very transparent, I think, in that front.

As far as with the PRC's desire to have a base on the Atlantic, that is something that I think is going to have to be something that we put into our calculus and how we work with our African partners. But again, our emphasis and our focus is really looking at where we can strengthen our partners' capabilities for the things that they need, and what we offer I think is very different from what China offers.

On your second question on some of General Townsend's comments, a great American who served AFRICOM very well, I think the United States Africa Command has always been challenged with a lack of resources in particular areas depending on what the security challenge or the approach has been at any given time.

I think to his outgoing comments, we have a desire to help as many African partners in different areas and I think our focus has been to enable and strengthen African partners to take the lead on addressing their security challenges. That is what AFRICOM has always been designed to do. So our initial intent or ask for more resources is to allow us to be able to do this better and across a greater breadth of partners. So there isn't a desire to have US troops in Africa. I think there are a number of capable African troops who are able to respond to security challenges and we've seen regional security challenges and we've seen regional security leaders pop up across every region of the continent but we continue to I think invest resources in those partners as the people who have been the first responders on the continent and have the capabilities to

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be able to respond to security challenges.

To the resources, it's maybe a lack of resources in certain areas where we would like to have more to bolster our African partners to do more than they're already doing on the continent.

Moderator: Next question is Tony Bertuca of Inside Defense.

I don't see him. While we're waiting we'll go on to Jim Garamone of DoD News.

DWG: Thanks for doing this, Thom. Madame Secretary, good to see you.

I'm just curious. You talked about the outreach that you're doing to listen to African leaders. One of the criticisms in the past has been that the United States didn't listen to African leaders. Are you, I guess you and General Langley going out to these leaders discussing things with them? And what are they actually asking for from the Department of Defense specifically, but more broadly from the American people or the American departments? Thanks.

DASD Blyden: Great question. And Jim, it's great to see you again. Thank you for coming out.

I think as far as the US changing its approach and doing more and listening with African partners, this has been the forefront of what I think the Biden administration has really focused on doing and I think what I'm doing and what General Langley now and the Chair at AFRICOM is doing, is making sure that we are going out to talk to African partners about what it is that they are concerned about and what it is that they are hoping to gain from a partnership with the United States.

I have already taken several trips to the continent and have had the fortunate experience to talk at the highest levels both in their ministries of defense and also at the president or head of state level about what their security challenges are. They are very focused on mutual security objectives such as the violent extremist threat in the [inaudible], in East Africa, as well as I think exacerbated challenges that have come from economic challenges, COVID-19, climate change. We have come to find through these conversations when we listen, that there are so many things that we already have in common.

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I think what they're asking for is to understand one, a little bit of know-how in how the US tackles some of these issues. They want to work very closely with us, shoulder-to-shoulder, to figure out how it is that we address some of these challenges. That's something that we are willing to share and are looking for opportunities to work with them to share that knowledge and expertise.

I think the other thing that they're also looking for is a greater partnership with the United States across multiple sectors. I think there has largely been diplomatic outreach to the African partners in the past. We have some defense relationships. But I think what we're hearing is that we have an entire private sector which is part of our government as well, part of our society as well, that they want to tap into as well. As we keep talking about the statistics of Africa rising and all of the opportunities there are for markets, they want to know how they can share in those markets, they can exchange and trade with those markets, and that's one of the biggest things that we heard.

AS such, the Africa Leader Summit will place a lot of emphasis on a business forum that will take the time to bring together a number of private sector investors who can exchange with African partners exactly what they are able to collaborate on in the different sectors of business that we have here in the United States.

That's what I've heard the most, at least in my travels, and at least what we have fashioned the Africa Leader Summit around, in a way to respond to what we've heard as a very clear ask, for more partnership with African countries and the US, as well as diversifying the sectors with which we work with Africa.

DWG: Madame Secretary, General Townsend and I think General Langley spoke about the number of exercises on the continent and the partnership with the various militaries. At one point that was cut. Are those exercises back now? How is this looking in fiscal 2023?

DASD Blyden: That's a great question. That is one of my biggest assets I think we have as a Department of Defense is our exercises which provides an opportunity for us to have regular and thematic engagement with our African partners.

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We also keep having our fingers crossed that the NDAA will pass soon, so we're looking to our congressional partners to hopefully get that over. But I know there has been an ask at least for there to be an increase in that area so that we can bring back some of the regularity of the number of exercises on a number of different issues that we've had in the past.

But as you know, Morocco hosts the African Lion Exercise which is one of the biggest exercises that we host with Europe and Africa, as well as other partners. So we want to see more things like that happen on the African continent. It helps our readiness and it helps our interoperability with global security partners to be able to address global security threats.

Moderator: Next question is from Demetri Sevastopulo of Financial Times.

DWG: Thank you. Good morning.

I've got two questions about China and Africa. One is following from Lita's question.

Can you talk a little bit more broadly about some of the other things that China's doing in Africa beyond the basing issue, that are concerning from a security perspective, what more the US can do to counter those activities bearing in mind the sensitivities of the African countries wanting to diversify.

Secondly, you just said a couple of minutes ago that the US offers something different from China, but in many countries around the world China offers things without any strings attached which can be appealing for countries. So how does the US counter that, given that you have higher standards you have to live up to?

DASD Blyden: Thank you for that. Other security challenges I think we have with China are in the telecommunications space. While basing may be one part of it, where we have challenges with I think China's Huawei network which is very robust across the continent, it makes it hard for us to be able to work with African partners who may adopt some of these systems, and our ability to be able to communicate on clear and secure channels just makes that challenging.

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I think the other thing we're concerned about is something you alluded to and that is offers with no strings attached. We have all heard about China's offers for providing loans and providing funding and resourcing with no strings attached, and while that's their prerogative to do so, what we have talked to our African partners about is just the risk that comes with that and what that means for their resources and their ability to provide services to their people if this is something that is bartered, if you will, as an exchange.

As I said sort of at the onset, we've heard very clearly from our African partners that they don't want to have to choose, but it is not something that we offer. So the idea that the US would hand out loans or we have higher standards for the types of loans and the monies that we do provide, it comes with a certain long-term investment that is less transactional. We offer support when it comes to giving loans, to understand how to do good governance and manage finances as well as providing other support that could help some of the greater challenges that are linked to I think economic stability. That is why I think we've encouraged African partners to be very prudent in how they accept loans or if they accept other things from China because the strings that may not be attached that aren't so apparent in the forefront definitely do have some long-term implications.

The other preference I think that African partners have shared with us is something that I've already mentioned, and that is the longevity. We're a long-term partner. We don't always like what we have to offer and we don't always like the strings that are attached to it, but that is what we offer as a government. We have, as you said, standards that are different I think from other countries and that's something that as much as it may bother African partners, they've also told us they appreciate it. They know we're not a one-time transaction. They know that we will be there to help them develop for the long-run, and that is something that is part of our plan as the US government, and I think that's something that we continue to uphold whether it's our democratic principles or our governance structures or the way we choose to invest economically and with development. That's what makes us different from China.

Moderator: Next is Amy Mackinnon of Foreign Policy.

DWG: Thank you for doing this. Again, if I can follow up on

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the first question about Chinese basing in Africa. One of the countries that General Townsend did mention in the spring was Equatorial Guinea. I'm wondering if you're able to share an update on how the country's conversations with China are going on this. I take your point that it's not in the US' position to kind of tell partners what they can and cannot do, but I presume there are some carrots being leveraged somewhere in your conversations with Equatorial Guinea. So can you give us a sense of kind of the conversations you're having with your partners there. If not to tell them, then maybe to perhaps persuade them away from a Chinese base.

Then secondarily, can you give us an update on the status of Russia's Wagner Group in Africa? There was some reporting earlier in the war in Ukraine that some of their units there had been rotated out into Ukraine, but I understand that they still have a pretty robust presence in Mali. There was some kind of confused reporting that the Wagner Group was looking at Burkina Faso as a potential next country to move into. Have you seen anything along those lines? Thank you.

DASD Blyden: Thank you.

As far as the question on Equatorial Guinea, we haven't had I think robust conversations with Equatorial Guinea outside of our typical diplomatic channels and engaging with them as a partner on a number of things. We understand that the desires that Equatorial Guinea has for its own development and for building its security sector.

So from where I sit and where I've worked with my colleagues across the interagency, we're focused on making sure that we are meeting what Equatorial Guinea asks of us. I think we have expressed our concern about what it might mean for them to have a basing and what that would mean for our relationship similar to what we have told other countries about areas where it would be hard for us to continue to work together. But I'm not tracking very closely what China is trying to do.

I'm more focused on what we are really trying to build with Equatorial Guinea. And we have had a number of conversations with them about their desire to build, as I said, to have greater development or private sector engagement as well as looking at the future of what their security sector could look like. I think those are things that we are taking under

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consideration and we're hoping to have an opportunity to continue those conversations and hopefully sign agreements in the future that will meet both the desire of what we're looking for in a partnership with Equatorial Guinea as well as what the Equatorial Guineans are looking for in working with the United States.

To your question on Russia's Wagner Group in Africa, I think we've watched their presence sort of take root in a couple of different countries on the continent and I would be remiss if I didn't tell how concerning it was to us because we have seen what their style of security is like when they are a security provider, and it doesn't lead to I think a resolution to whatever the security challenge is in the country. And I think that has been probably our biggest concern with seeing partners bring in Wagner as a solution to what we're seeing as one part of a greater security challenge.

Wagner is a private military company that has a reputation for not adhering to human rights abuses or collaborating with civilian populations to ensure that security is provided for all.

So as we're talking to our African partners about some of the risks of bringing in a group like Wagner, that is the focus of what we are trying to help them maybe work through.

I started at the top of this talking a little bit about our approach and why it is that we're adopting the 3D approach. I think it's because we've seen that there are greater issues in some of the areas where Wagner goes, like development issues, governance issues, and the ability to be able to focus on just the security threat of terrorist organizations is unfortunate.

I think what we're trying to at least express and provide to our partners is a more holistic look and to be able to support them in providing a more holistic approach in actually getting to the root causes of some of the issues. And what I would say is our concern when we see Wagner go in, Wagner doesn't go into places that are stable and are doing well, they go into places where they can help better draw out the already unstable environments which doesn't have a good outcome down the road.

I hope that answers your question on where we're seeing Wagner and why we're seeing Wagner in those places.

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I haven't heard specifically that Wagner was going into Burkina Faso. While we're watching some of the challenges that the Burkina government is working through, we do continue to engage and talk with them about options for trying to stabilize. I think our flag or our concern to them would obviously be that Wagner has not had the kind of success in other areas where it's gone, that they should expect to see if that is something that they were looking into.

Moderator: Next question is Rachel Oswald of CQ Roll Call.

DWG: Thank you for doing this.

My question is about the US government's assessment of why so many Sub-Saharan African countries have abstained through votes criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine or related votes dealing with the war.

Do you believe this is because of generalized frustration with Western policy toward the African continent for so many decades? Maybe feelings that the West cares more about wars in Europe than famine and war in Africa? Is this lingering bond of fraternity with Russia because of the support the Soviet Union gave to many different liberation movements in Africa in the 20th century? I'm just interested in hearing about why you assess there seems to be this gap in support.

Then part two would be if you do assess this gap and you're concerned about it, how are you trying to persuade African countries to at least vote in the UN, if not supporting sanctions against Russia? Thank you.

DASD Blyden: Thank you. I think your question is very complex but I think you touched on a number of multifaceted angles that we've heard at least from our African partners about the votes that they've had in the UN.

What I personally believe is that it is not easy to join any one issue without looking at it from multiple parts and this is something that our African partners have told us time and time again when we've asked about their position on the Russia-Ukraine War.

Obviously you pointed out that they do have partnerships, either

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longstanding historical, they have trade partnerships. We've seen in the food and wheat exports and the fuel exports and trade industries as well. So it becomes a very complex thing, at least from what we've heard from African partners, to be able to just sort of do blanket votes. I think that's what we have seen in the number of votes at the different stages in African responses.

What I've heard from them and what I believe is that they obviously have to carefully calibrate their own national security interests as they're thinking about these things. There are some things that they are very strong on to include sovereignty and that is something that they've felt very strong about and I think the votes in the UN reflected that. And they had other challenges when it came to sanctions because of the impact it would have on their populations, on food security, on fuel security and so working through the different votes I think we saw a reflection of what their national security interests are.

But I think it has been very clear to us from our African partners that they are not in support of what they have seen Russia doing, and they are taking each issue individually to be able to calibrate their responses as such, and we respect them for that.

I think to your question on whether or not African partners have said that they have seen us pay more attention to wars in Europe, like in Ukraine, over that in Africa. I wouldn't agree that that is something that I have heard. I think there have been definitely questions about our support and what that means, but as I've told African partners and I've shared with them, the problems in Ukraine are very different from the complex problems that we see on the continent.

I started off talking about the areas where we have mutual objectives and where we see mutual security threats. Those things are not militarily solved, and that is why this holistic approach and the 3D approach is so critical to our engagement in Africa. If it was easy to sort of solve a governance or backsliding issue in the Sahel with a weapon system, I'm sure we would jump at the opportunity to support African partners. But it's not that simple.

I think the challenges that we've seen from climate, the

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challenges that we've seen from VEO threats, from governance challenges and the ability for African governments to be able to manage services to their populations, that coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, make it a much more complex and multi-faceted problem that needs a holistic and multi-faceted response.

So those are the conversations that we have with our partners and that is why some of the approaches that you're seeing us come back with are like the conversations we'll have with the Africa Leader Summit on the number of different sector responses has been our pitch to African partners.

Moderator: Next Jeff Seldin followed by Kimberly Underwood.

DWG: Thank you very much for doing this.

US officials keep talking about the balancing of priorities between being in a great power competition and the need to continue the fight against terrorist groups. So I'm wondering how is the great power competition with China and Russia changing the landscape for the terror groups in Africa, and are there other countries that while not great powers are also impacting that landscape?

A second question, which terror groups does the Pentagon see as the biggest threats in Africa right now? Both in Africa and to the US, and how much more dangerous are they than they were a year or two years ago? Thank you.

DASD Blyden: I think for the last question, I think the terrorist groups that we're most concerned with are those that are growing their capability and maybe have a desire to attack the homeland. Those are obviously at the forefront of what are our national security objectives and interests, but also their ability to hurt US interests, US partners and so the number one I would say probably that we're most concerned about is the threat of Al-Shabab in East Africa. We have partnered with the Somalis to ensure that we are trying to degrade their capability to hurt the partners in the region as well as their intents or capability to be able to have attacks outside of their current location.

I think we're also looking at the challenges of VEOs that are growing in the Sahel. ISIS obviously continues to be a threat in not just Africa but in other parts of the world, so

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continuing to keep an eye on where those might impact African partners as well as US interests around the world continues to be another Violent Extremist Organization that is of concern to us as well.

I think when it gets down to the NDS priority that we have which is to obviously counter VEOs in the Sahel and elsewhere on the continent, there's a conglomeration of Violent Extremist Organizations that are in the Sahel that are also of concern to us. Obviously their impact on populations in the Sahel and surrounding coastal West African countries is something that we are working with our partners to try and understand more about and figure out how we can work together to make sure that we can disrupt the attempts that they have on terrorizing populations in this region and their desire to maybe go beyond just Africa as well.

So those would be the Violent Extremist Organizations that we are most focused on on working with our African partners to try and contain.

I think on the question on US officials balancing priorities, that coupled with the fight against terrorism. There are a number of competing priorities that are happening right now. I think one of the things that we've learned about the challenge with Russia and Ukraine is that multilateralism is back and it has dividends that are much more exponential than when we work alone. So similar to what we're seeing happen in the Europe context, we have a number of partners that we partner with in Africa who are part of the security architecture and part of the security and development and diplomacy response to addressing not just the terrorist threat but I think other security challenges that are on the continent.

So the strength of working with strong African partners who have high capabilities on the continent has been a real plus as well as European partners and other international partners in other regions who have lent resources, expertise, training, and support to trying to address these while we do have other priorities that we are having to balance in other parts of the world simultaneously.

DWG: Getting back to part of my original question, to what extent are the actions of Russia and China making it more likely or less likely that whatever the terrorist landscape is now with

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all these groups and the capabilities that they have and the growth that you're seeing, are Russia and China actively making it worse in terms of what these terrorist groups can do? Do you see any signs that Russia and China are aiding and abetting them in any way because that makes it worse for the US?

DASD Blyden: That's a good question. I haven't seen signs that they are aiding and abetting them in any particular way. I think what we kind of discussed on the Russia/Wagner question, I think the destabilizing effects of sometimes having Wagner in countries that are already struggling with core security challenges as well as governance challenges, it doesn't help but I can sum it up as a very specific drawback or a very specific correlation to Russian and Chinese activities exacerbating the security challenges or responses on the continent. If that helps answer your question.

DWG: Thank you, yes.

Moderator: Kimberly Underwood, Signal Magazine.

DWG: Thanks, Madame Secretary, for your time this morning.

We once talked about USAFRICOM and are you seeing any [inaudible] coming from that and General Langley? Any considerations from the combatant command that went into your strategy or plans or efforts that the command is looking for in terms of support for their activities?

DASD Blyden: That's a great question. I'm looking forward to welcoming General Langley here next week. He'll be part of the Africa Leader's Summit and we'll have an opportunity to regroup and just kind of talk about what he has seen in his first 90-100 plus days on the job. But I think we've gotten a good sense from his team and my counterparts that I work with that there is a general understanding that the national defense priorities that we have laid out for Africa still are important to us, and that is countering Violent Extremist Organizations on the continent, strengthening allies and partners, and then countering maligned influence that could have ramifications for our African partners from China and Russia.

So I think as we go forward and we put forth guidance with AFRICOM to address this with our African partners, we will be looking to continue to refine I think what we think are the few

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priorities that will allow us to gain dividends from working with African partners, but also will allow us to meet US national security objectives in a way that is mutually beneficial for both us and African partners.

So that is the work that we still have to do. A large part of that is having the Africa Leaders Summit and having a group of them be here and sitting down and listening to them. We will be taking copious notes. We are very lucky that we'll be cohosting a peace and security governance forum with the leadership from both the Department of State and with the USAID, Administrator Powers, where we will talk about the nexus of all of these issues. We'll talk about the challenges of security, economic development, as well as some physical security challenges with a number of host nations who have experience and they will share lessons learned on this.

Not to answer exactly what we're working on right now. I think it's a good thing that's probably in draft format, but that's because we are missing a large part of the pie, and that is the African voice and hearing what they want us to help focus on.

Moderator: Next question is Zamone Perez of Military Times.

DWG: Thank you, Madame Secretary, for doing this.

I was just curious in solutions you're finding military-to-military or like defense department to defense ministry about preventing coups and [ensuring] good governance procedures within countries and making sure that the government's the government and the military is the military, and having a strong civilian oversight of militaries across the continent.

DASD Blyden: That's a really great prompt for one of the things that I love to talk about and that is really leading with civilian-led defense institutions. One of the joys of working in this position I think is that you are privy to a really strong institution that has oversight and has processes and has a network of civilian-led programs and directorates that are important for us to do our work both in this building and I think in the operational theater.

We are trying to shift a little bit of our attention to focus more on these areas of engagement when it comes to us working with ministries of defense and when it comes to our mil-to-mil

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engagement. We have a number of civilian-led defense institutions like the Africa Center for Strategic Studies who put on a number of programs on security sector governance, parliamentary focus, managing security resources, countering violent extremist organization financing. A lot of things that deal at the ministry level to understanding what happens and the way that we can help African partners strengthen what happens at the operational level as well.

We also have other institutions through Defense Security Cooperation Agency like the Institute for Security Governance who do a number of programs within ministries to help them understand how to have better functioning ministries that can support operational advances that their militaries are working on.

So I think what you'll see in the Sub-Saharan Strategy for Africa in the defense tool section is that we are really leaning in on some of these areas I think where we have been a little shy in the past. And these areas will complement, or these efforts will complement what we have seen the Department of State do on governance efforts and what we are seeing USAID do in their governance and development spheres. I think alongside with maybe some of the training programs that we do with the advise and assist, the exercises, bringing up the balance of building the institutional capability and capacity will help us have a more holistic approach to our mil-to-mil engagement with Ministries of Defense and with troops on the ground with African partners.

Moderator: In the few minutes left we'll go to the bonus round.

Demetri of the FT, the floor is yours.

DWG: I'm curious what kind of activity you're seeing at China's base in Djibouti, and in particular, how frequent are port calls by Navy ships and what kind of vessels are you seeing going through there?

DASD Blyden: That one I would probably have to take back. I haven't observed a frequency, anything abnormal than what they would have, but I'm sure my colleagues at CLDJ could probably give me more information on that. So if I can take that.

We obviously know the Chinese have a base there and so they're

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going to use it actively as they've designed it to do. I don't know if I have a gauge on what would be normal or more normal activity as they're getting that space stood up.

Moderator: Last question, Jim Garamone of DoD News.

DWG: Madame Secretary, just another bite at the apple here.

You mentioned that the United States was cooperating with African nations on the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm just wondering, was that a net positive, a net negative for the United States? How African leaders regard that effort?

DASD Blyden: I think they've regarded it quite favorably. One of the biggest things that came out of the COVID-19 pandemic was a need and an understanding for more African-led research institutions on medical supporters and facilities to have a bigger role in sort of global response to issues like COVID-19 that we've seen.

I can't speak to the specifics of it only because I'm not well versed in it, but I know that my colleagues here in the Department have worked very closely with the White House on a better pandemic response program and that's working with the African CDC, through the African Union, to build up the facilities and the infrastructure to be able to have vaccine production as well as distribution opportunities for Africans to as I said, take a lead and play a leading role in helping in sort of the global responses to pandemics and other things that we may see come our way.

I think it maybe revealed a shortage in our ability to be able to respond as quickly as we would have liked to, but the net positive that came out of it was this entire surge effort that the US is doing to stand behind African partners to beef up, if you will, and increase their ability and infrastructure and logistical support for their medical facilities on the continent and their production capabilities and capacity on the continent as well. So that's for me a huge win that we're partnering with Africans to create their own vaccines and be able to distribute them so that they don't have to necessarily wait for other countries to do that. That to me is an ultimate partnership.

Moderator: With no other questions in the queue, Madame Secretary, I'd invite any closing comments you might have,

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although I must say it's been a very thorough and thought-provoking conversation.

DASD Blyden: Thank you for the opportunity. I'm happy to answer whatever questions are left in the chat rather than maybe droning on in a closing statement. But I'll leave that to you.

Moderator: There are no other questioners. So any closing comments? Then we'll let everyone get on with their day, and thank you for your valuable time.

DASD Blyden: Fantastic. Thank you all for the opportunity to share a little bit of information.

I can't tell you how excited we are about the Africa Leader Summit. AS some of you may know, the last one that occurred was eight years ago, and it is a great opportunity for us to have over a thousand African officials at the head of state level, at the ministerial level here in Washington. So as you see them around town, know that they are getting very serious business done, but even their coming to this summit shows that we still have what I consider to be our strongest asset and that is our ability to be a strong partner.

They are coming here I think with a desire to understand where the US is with our partnerships with Africa, and we are committed to ensuring that we show them that we are very serious about our partnership with Africa. It has a different look to it, and a different approach, and we welcome them to Washington to have the very tough and hard conversations that will move us forward as a partner to the continent as well as see them achieve the things that they want to achieve for the prosperity of the African continent. So even having you all here to talk about these issues and to understand and promote this through your avenues is a great asset to what we're trying to do as a government to promote the US-Africa relationship. So thank you for your time as well.

Moderator: It's a very important topic, Madame Secretary. Thank you for your time. We thank your staff, your support and all the correspondents on the line. Thanks so much. If I don't see you soon, I wish everyone a happy and healthy holiday season. Thanks again.

DASD Blyden: Thank you all. Appreciate it.