

# DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE INSTITUUT VAN INTERNASIONALE AANGELEENTHEDE THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Jan Smuts House/-Huis  
1 Jan Smuts Avenue/Laan 1  
Braamfontein, Johannesburg  
Tel: 39-2021/22/23



P.O. Box/Posbus 31596  
2017 Braamfontein  
South Africa/Suid-Afrika  
T.A. 'Insintaff' Johannesburg

Restricted - Not for Publication

Telephone (011) 39-2021

Brief Report No. 16

## THE SPY-PLANE CONTROVERSY

### AND THE "NEW" FOREIGN POLICY

Internationally, the American spy-plane affair has proved to be one of the biggest non-events of recent times. It was apparently only a one-day major news story in the United States, where people are more accustomed to reports of this type of activity which is widely regarded as justified in the national interest, no matter in what country it may take place - even if not strictly legitimate. (A cynical view is, of course, that the only mistake is to get caught.) Likewise in Europe the incident has not aroused wide public interest.

What little comment there has been internationally has focussed more on the reasons for the South African Government's dramatic and highly publicised disclosure of the American operation. In this regard there is the view, apparently widely held in Western official circles, that the Government used this incident to draw attention away from the information scandal and to justify its expressed suspicion of the American role in the Namibian negotiations. The Government's legitimate objections to the infringement of South African sovereignty by this operation have thus been largely overlooked, while attention has been concentrated on the way the affair was handled publicly on both sides.

However, even if this affair has not had the international impact which may have been expected in South Africa, it has provided a dramatic illustration of the country's worsening relations with the United States. The Prime Minister's dramatic disclosure on 12 April that an American aircraft (which the US Embassy was authorised to maintain in South Africa) had been engaged in systematically photographing "sensitive" South African installations cannot be viewed in isolation, nor only in relation to the information scandal and/or the Namibian negotiations. The consequent decision to expel three military attachés of the US Embassy, who were involved in the operation of the aircraft, as well as the retaliatory action of the American Government in expelling two South African military attachés of the Embassy in Washington, must rather be seen in the context of the mistrust and suspicion which has been building up on both sides of the South African/United States relationship over the past few years. If this relationship had been reasonably good and if the South African Government had wanted to maintain good communications with the United States, it would have played this incident very differently and much less publicly.

The controversy does therefore have serious implications for the development of South Africa's relations with the United States and with the West generally, mainly because it reinforces a trend already clearly present in South African attitudes and Government statements. The US Administration was already being regarded by the Government as "an enemy", as implied in recent statements by the Foreign Minister and others (especially in the criticism of the Leader of the Opposition for his telephone conversation with Mr Donald McHenry). Previously there were, for instance, former Prime Minister Vorster's references to the US wanting to destroy South Africa by slow strangulation, compared to the Russian efforts to do the same thing quickly.

A prime underlying cause of this attitude of mistrust, as reflected in many statements of Mr P.W. Botha before and since becoming Prime Minister, has been the South African perception of the West as weak and as refusing to treat South Africa as a valuable ally in the world struggle against Communism. But there have been specific events in the past, which the South African Government has interpreted as indicating American unreliability and even hostility, including the Angola war episode, Vice-President Walter Mondale's

May 1977 statement implying that the American aim was a "one man, one vote" system in South Africa; the American refusal to supply South Africa with nuclear fuel (enriched uranium), in spite of contractual obligations, together with the issue made by the US in 1977 over allegations that South Africa was planning to test nuclear weapons in the Kalahari; the more recent American "duplicity" in the Namibian negotiations, in order (as perceived in South Africa) to give SWAPO an advantage; and the perceived American bias in favour of the Patriotic Front in the Rhodesian conflict. In general, too, statements by American politicians and officials have offended Whites and have caused a natural upsurge of resentment, which the Government has exploited on the basis of national pride.

Then came the spy-plane incident which has provided the South African Government with more concrete and clearly demonstrated evidence for its accusations of American hostility, than it has had in any of the other developments. Against the background of mounting suspicion and a worsening relationship, it is not surprising that the Government should use this latest incident to the fullest effect to prove its case and to muster domestic support -- even if the actual results of the American attempt at aerial photography do not appear to have been all that serious as a threat to South African security (although the evidence in the photographs themselves has not been made public).

In fact, this photo-spying may have had only one aim, namely to discover the degree of South African nuclear development. This probability is strengthened by at least one American statement that the United States had the "right" to carry out photographic surveillance, because of the threat that South Africa was producing a nuclear weapon, and there is no doubt that the present US Administration is suspicious of all countries which have developed a nuclear capability, but have not signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty -- and South Africa is in that category. Attempts have been made to exert pressure on other countries, too, in this regard. In South Africa's case the Government's frequent denials that it plans to produce nuclear weapons, are apparently not accepted by all concerned in the U.S. Government.

The efforts to discover South African nuclear "secrets" may not have been authorised at a very high level, e.g. by the Secretary of State, Mr Cyrus Vance, whose Department appears not even to have known about them. But in any case these efforts can only be regarded as having been extremely unwise, whoever was responsible, given the obvious political implications if they were discovered, and they indicate a considerable naiveté and even amateurishness in the gross under-estimation of South African counter-intelligence capability. This incident perhaps reflects a wider and dangerous tendency on the part of the U.S. to under-estimate South African capabilities, and in particular to miscalculate in estimating South African reactions, e.g. in the Namibian negotiations.

Further implications of South African mistrust of the West and, in particular, of the worsening relations with the United States (of which the spy-plane controversy has been a dramatic example) are now becoming clearer:

- The ability of the United States to influence the direction of policies in South Africa, as well as developments in Namibia and Rhodesia, has been very greatly reduced. In fact, the potential for influencing Southern African developments of the present U.S. Administration may be almost eliminated -- unless some unusual steps are taken to restore a degree of trust in the relationship.
- This drastic reduction of potential American and wider Western influence is directly related to the new direction emerging in South African foreign policy, and the latest incident has served to push the South African Government further along this road. Foreign Minister Pik Botha's statement in Zurich on 7 March 1979 and subsequent Government statements have indicated (without much substantive detail) that the Government intends to change its

posture of political alignment with the West and adopt a more neutral posture, while strengthening its links with countries in Southern Africa. However, the region envisaged for the "constellation of states" is south of the Kunene-Zambezi line, which is a more restricted grouping than the one usually envisaged in the past to constitute the Southern African region. This concept, therefore, implies the establishment of a defensive perimeter (instead of the earlier outward-looking regional concept associated with the former Prime Minister, Mr. Vorster) and the creation of a "power bloc" within a South African sphere of influence, including South West Africa/Namibia and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe as the other two main elements. Although negotiations with outside powers are not excluded, the views of other governments, notably those of the West, on the political development of the countries of this region will now tend to be disregarded more than in the past.

- The more immediate effects will presumably be felt in Namibia and Rhodesia. In the former it is already clear that the Western-sponsored UN plan is no longer being seriously considered and that the Territory is now pursuing a course towards self-government under the DTA, or a coalition of internal parties, and eventual independence under unilateral South African sponsorship. In the case of Rhodesia, the recent elections will no doubt lead to formal South African recognition of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and increased support for the new government. The possibility of direct military assistance, if the war escalates with greater outside intervention, cannot be excluded. Internal settlements are thus being supported, with much less emphasis on the need for international acceptability at the outset. The previous efforts to achieve international agreements are now increasingly regarded as having been a delaying factor and also as having allowed the externally based movements (SWAPO and the Patriotic Front) to gain strength, because of a perceived Western bias towards them. Without Western support, at least in the short term, Namibia and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe will thus remain under a South African security umbrella and also rely on South African economic support.
- Domestically, the South African Government can be expected to pursue its multi-national policy, involving constitutional reform (for Whites, Coloureds and Asians) and a greater participating role for Homeland leadership, together with accelerated moves to improve the situation in urban black areas (mainly in the economic and social spheres, as well as local self-government). But this will not necessarily involve the sort of political change demanded by many black leaders, particularly in the urban areas, or that which official Western statements indicate as being required for international acceptance. Thus internally, too, less attention will be paid to Western views.

This disassociation from the West and disregard of Western views and pressures may well not be a long term one. The anti-Western posture, together with an emphasis on African links, is, after all, not a new one; it has occurred at times before, usually when special problems have arisen in relations with the West. (See in this regard "The Neutral Option and Sub-Continental Solidarity" by Deon Geldenhuys, published by the Institute as an Occasional Paper in March 1979.) Moreover, the current posture is very much the product of a reaction to the policies of present governments in the major Western countries, particularly those of the United States and Britain, and there are indications that the "new" thinking is based on expectations that changes will take place in the West. In Britain the Labour Government may be replaced soon by the Conservatives whose approach towards Southern African issues, especially Rhodesia, is expected to be more sympathetic. In the United States changes in attitude in the Congress, again especially towards Rhodesia, have been noted, and a change of Administration in 1980 is considered not unlikely. In these circumstances a policy of "going it alone" for the time being may not be considered too risky. If the new regimes in Namibia and Rhodesia prove viable, and if changes away from discrimination are seen to be taking place within South Africa itself, then acceptability in the West may, according to this South African view, only be delayed for a few years at most. In the meantime,

efforts will continue to be made to convince Western opinion - over the heads of the respective governments as it were - that Southern Africa is on the right political course.

On the other hand, comparisons with previous occasions when an anti-Western attitude was evident in official thinking, but only for a limited time, may be misleading. Circumstances in Southern Africa have changed, events are moving at a faster rate and both the Rhodesian and Namibian issues have become critical. The Government will soon have to take decisions on these issues, which will have far-reaching consequences and which will give real substance, as well as more permanence, to the new policy direction. If independence is granted unilaterally to Namibia and if Rhodesian independence is formally recognised, without any international recognition, then commitments will have been made, which will limit the Government's options and greatly restrict its political flexibility in responding to possible changes of approach in the West or even Africa. A course will then have been set, which will not easily be reversed.

The question is, therefore, whether the new foreign policy posture is a more or less temporary one, in reaction to current Western policies, or whether a new and longer term policy direction is being set, as a result not only of anti-Western reaction, but also of the pressure of events in Southern Africa.

In this very preliminary consideration of current foreign policy trends, other questions must at least be briefly mentioned as being among those which are being asked and which need serious attention:

- Is neutrality or non-alignment a viable option for South Africa in today's inter-dependent world? How do vital economic relations with the industrialised countries, mainly Western, fit into this concept?
- Are South African perceptions of Western attitudes and policies accurate? How will the West respond to new developments in Rhodesia and Namibia, and to South Africa's tough stand?
- Is the envisaged Southern African "constellation" of states a meaningful one? If the BLS states exclude themselves (which seems inevitable), does the new policy envisage simply the inclusion of the internationally unrecognised states? Is this then a "fortress" concept, designed mainly to resist external pressures?
- Is the wider view of Southern Africa as an economic region, extending far beyond the Kunene-Zambezi line, being given up? Are the aims of the "outward" policy towards Africa no longer considered to be achievable?
- What is envisaged for future relations with neighbouring countries outside the "constellation", including the BLS states and especially Mozambique and Zambia, with which there is currently practical co-operation in economic and technical fields? Is there not a danger of creating deeper divisions between politically differing groups within the region?
- Will the new Rhodesian and Namibian Governments be stable, and how far will the S.A. Government go in commitments to maintain them? Is there a change in strategic thinking away from the reluctance to become too involved beyond the national borders?
- Have the possible implications for South Africa's internal development been assessed, if there is to be a greater involvement in neighbouring conflicts, at a stage when time and more regional stability are needed for resolving domestic problems?
- Are the chances of international recognition of the new Rhodesia/Zimbabwe improved by an alignment with South Africa? Will the new black leadership not

seek to distance itself from the South African Government, if it sees opportunities of acceptance elsewhere in Africa and in the West?

Simple answers to these questions are not possible, but they cannot be overlooked in any attempt to assess objectively the prospects of a "new" foreign policy. Although the Government has so far done little more than state an intention of following a new direction, with a more independent policy based primarily on Southern African interests, some official statements and supportive media comments have given rise to these disturbing questions and to an impression that they are being overlooked. While the interests of the peoples of Southern Africa are often claimed to be paramount, it is the correct interpretation of those interests and, above all, the calm calculation of South Africa's own national interests, which are crucial. Otherwise policy can too easily be determined by emotional considerations of national pride, rather than by true national interest.

JOHN BARRATT  
Director: SAIIA

1 May, 1979