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THE UNITED STATES AND AFRICA - A REAPPRAISAL OF POLICY?

United States' Secretary of State, George Shultz's recent visit to Africa highlighted the growing importance of Africa to the United States. Washington/Pretoria relations have seen some subtle changes, while those with black Africa have been rekindled. This paper sets out current US policy towards the continent.

AFRICA - THE REGIONAL DIMENSION:

United States/Africa policy is not based on a longstanding relationship, nor does it rest on a broad domestic consensus. A national consensus is undermined by the following: Africa holds limited intrinsic strategic interest for the United States; Africa is not a single cohesive international actor and the prevailing definition of American interests in Africa are being shaped by its changing domestic scene and role in the international system.

Clearly, the United States has both regional and global interests in Africa. One approach that proves useful in understanding these interests and the policies that flow from them is to analyse US/Africa relations in terms of four regional distinctions. These are: North Africa; black Africa, which can be subdivided into East, West and Central Africa; the Frontline States and South Africa.

North Africa in particular has become a theatre of superpower involvement. In a more general sense, Africa has been elevated as a foreign policy issue largely on account of the growing political influence of the black constituency in the United States (human and historic ties between black America and black Africa), media attention (notably on South Africa), and the personal interest of Chester Crocker, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, in the policy of Constructive Engagement.

The primacy of bilateral relations, as opposed to multilateral relations, becomes clear when the regional dimensions of US/Africa relations are examined.

WHAT ARE THE INTERESTS?:

The determination of the United States' interests in Africa hinges on two factors. These are: first, the US espouses a capitalist ethic - which by and large has prospered under the post-World War II international order it helped establish. Translated into policy, this means that the United States desires long-term stability so as to create an environment conducive to its long-term economic and commercial interests. Secondly, Africa is still peripheral to the main focus of American international and regional responsibilities.

Current US security concerns in Africa relate to the protection of important sea lanes, especially those around the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Key US military facilities on the continent, such as those at Mombasa (Kenya), Berbera (Somalia) and at Diego Garcia (in the Western Indian Ocean) fit into this broader strategic calculation.

Official US military policy towards Africa is essentially a hands-off one. In terms of superpower relations, that means largely allowing the Soviet Union to dig its own grave in Africa rather than confronting its expansion on the continent - covert military aid to UNITA in Angola and military action against Libya notwithstanding.

The overriding US domestic interests are that Africa should not become a divisive factor in US domestic politics, and that the US should have access to key minerals on the African continent - notably oil, manganese, platinum and chromium.

US/AFRICA TRADE:

Total US economic assistance to Africa - economic, food and developmental - topped US\$ 1 750 million in fiscal year 1985.

Total US direct corporate and governmental investment in Africa amounts to some US\$ 3,9 billion. In fiscal year 1985, the US derived an income of US\$ 1 911 million from direct investment in Africa.

The value of US exports to Egypt amounted to US\$ 149,8 million in 1986. In contrast, US exports to South Africa during the same period amounted to US\$ 131,0 million.

The value of US imports from Sub-Saharan Africa in 1984 amounted to US\$ 10,5 billion while US exports to the same region totalled US\$ 4,4 billion. Military aid totalled US\$ 156 million.

In contrast to exports, the US imported substantially more from South Africa in 1985 than from Egypt. The respective figures were: South Africa - US\$ 2 070 million; Egypt - US\$ 169,5 million.

The private sector in the United States plays an increasingly important economic role in Africa. The US government wants to balance its trade more effectively with countries with which it has large trade deficits - such as Nigeria, Angola and Cameroon - countries from which the US imports substantially, especially oil. Nigeria, Algeria and Angola supply 35% of US oil imports as against 22% from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The balance of oil imports comes from Latin America, notably from Venezuela.

NORTH AFRICA:

The United States has a special relationship with Egypt. No other Arab state ever has received the attention and aid which the United States has given Egypt. Yet, although Cairo and Washington share some common strategic interests, there are growing differences between them about the best strategy for advancing the Middle East peace process.

Both the US and Egypt are disappointed with the bilateral benefits of the relationship. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak complained about the perceived inadequacies of US military and economic aid and called for more sustained US diplomatic pressure on Israel. Washington is disappointed with the pace of Egyptian economic recovery and reform. Egyptian foreign debt has reached US\$ 38,6 billion, which puts it in the same league as Venezuela and Indonesia. Since 1974 the US has provided US\$ 15 billion worth of aid to Egypt. This investment has produced substantial foreign policy and strategic dividends. Cairo has broken with Moscow, worked to reduce Soviet influence and that of the more radical Arab states (notably Libya) in the Middle East and acted as a stabilising force in the region.

Sudan, Africa's largest state in area, has most of Africa's political and economic problems in extreme - civil war, famine, debt, a restive army, weak civilian institutions and Libyan subversion. However, despite recurring instability and conflict, Sudan has been an ally of the United States and of crucial importance in broader Middle East strategy.

Wedge between Ethiopia and Libya, Sudan forms a pro-Western buffer for Egypt. The outlook for US policy turned unpredictable in 1985 when Jafar Nimeiri, a long-standing US ally, was toppled by a civilian-backed military coup. The new government of General Abdul Rahman Sewart El Dahab reappraised ties with Washington, while warming to Libya. Nevertheless, the US has retained military and economic assistance to Sudan which amounted to US\$ 154 million. This figure was increased to US\$ 223 million in fiscal year 1986. The US is reluctant to let Sudan move closer to the other anti-Western states in the region, namely Libya, Ethiopia and South Yemen, which would undermine US influence and interests.

The United States' historic ties with Morocco's King Hassan II, were not weakened by Morocco's 1984 treaty of unity with Libya. Morocco receives considerable bilateral aid from the United States and serves as a useful conduit for military aid and technical assistance elsewhere on the continent. Algeria is also important to the US; despite Algerian President Chadli Benjedid's dependence on the Soviet Union for military hardware, the United States is still Algeria's third biggest trading partner after France and Italy.

US/Libyan relations are arguably the most acrimonious. Not only did the US impose a trade embargo on Libya in 1981, followed by sanctions in January 1986, but more recently undertook military action against Tripoli and Benghazi. While African reaction was generally mild, the immediate benefits have been mostly domestic - i.e. something was being done about terrorism. US concern with Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi may well undermine legitimate long-term concerns of US foreign policy. Significantly, the US could not enlist the support of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to commit his forces in a joint US/Egyptian operation, because of threatened Arab reaction.

Although the US has no military facilities in Tunisia, a Joint Military Commission exists to discuss defence modernisation programmes. Technical and economic assistance from the United States usually constitutes one-third of total foreign assistance to Tunisia.

EAST, WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA:

US policy towards these areas is guided by containment. The major concern is to prevent instability.

In West Africa primary US goals are the curtailment of Libyan expansion and the creation of stability by means of economic aid.

Traditional bonds between the US and Liberia and the US communications facilities there, make the US the largest donor of foreign aid. Considered the 'closest ally in Africa', it is not difficult to see that the US wishes to maintain links with a territory independent since 1847.

Nigeria, as a stable supplier of oil, is obviously of major importance to the United States. It further attracts considerable investments by large US corporations and is the most influential partner of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

As is the case in West Africa, US strategic concerns are paramount in East Africa. Generally, economic and military assistance are employed to this end.

The geopolitical significance of the Horn and the Soviet presence in Ethiopia underscore US strategic concerns.

Somalia is a recipient of US economic support which is one strategy by the US to promote internal stability. Security assistance is also rendered to the Somali government for defensive purposes only.

A quasi-mixed economy, as well as its pro-Western stance generally, port facilities capable of supplying US naval vessels, and its fairly close proximity to Diego Garcia, underpin US interests in Kenya. Its apparent stability, in contrast to its neighbours, makes Kenya central to US objectives in the region.

Djibouti, being in close proximity to both the Middle East, in particular the Persian Gulf, and the strategic countries of the Horn of Africa, is an obvious candidate for US involvement. In this regard US interest may be measured by the US\$ 200 million allocated to defuse the problem of 1,2 million Ethiopian refugees.

In Central Africa the US desires political stability, the bolstering of governments against external aggression, and the provision of aid to strategic countries. US economic interests relate to development and emergency aid to emphasise the link between economic and political stability.

In the wake of Libyan military expansion, Chad has become a major recipient of US military aid. US interests in the region are aimed at maintaining both an economic and military infrastructure. In this light the US Administration has continued to provide aid in response to Libyan-sponsored attacks.

US Administrations have showed a consistent interest in and commitment to President Mobutu Sese Seko. Recently, Zaire and US interests have converged in that Chadian forces are being trained in Zaire, and Zaire is reportedly acting as a conduit for supplies to UNITA. Due to its proximity to Southern Africa, the US takes cognisance of the geopolitical importance of Zaire.

SOUTHERN AFRICA:

Secretary of State George Shultz's proposed late-1986 visit to South Africa and Africa was cancelled, to be replaced by a visit to East and West Africa in January 1987. The trip was designed in part to sound out African countries in these regions on the various proposed changes in US/African policy, especially towards South Africa and black Southern Africa. The rethink had started in earnest in mid-1986, just prior to Congress overturning President Reagan's veto on sanctions legislation. This was in no small measure due to the South African government's harsh rhetoric and negative reactions to external intervention in its domestic affairs. The sanctions threshold had been reached; beyond the threat of sanctions, little effective pressure could be exerted upon Pretoria. A significant reappraisal of constructive engagement had to take cognisance of a declining American corporate involvement in South Africa and the exigencies of a 'laager' mentality prevailing in Pretoria - especially the imposition of the State of Emergency. Shultz's original visit to Southern Africa was replaced by a lengthy trip to the region by Under-Secretary of State (Political Affairs) Mike Armacost, which was similarly designed to sound out black Southern African leaders on the proposed changes to the Administration's Southern Africa policy.

The major changes to United States-Southern African policy rest on encouraging closer relations with extra-parliamentary groups and non-racial anti-government organisations in South Africa, and to move closer to the majority-ruled states. At the same time, contacts with the South African government and other white individuals and groups were to be maintained wherever possible, to enable the US to act as an 'honest broker' of sorts in the negotiating process when this was in place.

A renunciation of violence by all sides was the basic precondition. The Administration, although still being firmly against sanctions as a policy, wished to supplement its obligations in this regard with a beefed-up, yet slightly changed, diplomatic involvement.

The United States government has decided to identify those groups and states which will be affected by current sanctions and South Africa's retributive measures, to see what supportive measures they could offer these states and groups. The shift to black South Africa has been long in coming, although indications of such a move may be seen in the disbursement of financial assistance to a host of non-racial research, community, relief and other South African groups, black students and labour unions in recent years. Similarly, the official technical and financial assistance to the Frontline States is intended to be stepped up, especially via the SADCC grouping, although the United States government still seeks to retain some leverage over recipients by emphasising a bilateral rather than a multilateral approach. Although bilateral relations between these states and the United States are decreasingly linked to their ideological positions domestically and internationally, they cannot be totally divorced from the ideological stances of recipients. An example of such a change is the determination to get relations back on line with Zimbabwe, after a lengthy distancing following Zimbabwe's anti-American rhetoric and actions in international fora and other actions. The US has stated that it will not resume unrestricted assistance to Zimbabwe immediately, as it wishes to see how durable the new-found Zimbabwean acceptance of the United States will prove to be. Constructive engagement is altered in style and not in substance, as incentives and relations are geared to black South and Southern Africa, and not so much to white South Africa, to facilitate the same end - a stable, democratic and free market-oriented region.

The anti-Americanism now characterising the white population and the government is both a predictable reaction to what has been legislated against South Africa in Congress and elsewhere, as well as the highly publicised withdrawal of key and less significant United States-based multinationals from South Africa. Much political capital is currently being made of these actions, which can only increase as the elections draw closer. It would be naïve not to see the obvious convenience of being anti-American, and we need only look back to the same state of affairs during the 1977 elections.

United States corporate withdrawal from South Africa will increase, which is having and will continue to have, a severe negative effect on affirmative action and other social programmes instituted in the past by these companies. Indeed, the Administration has always stressed the desirability of a United States corporate presence, as a demonstration of the colourblindness of the free enterprise system and its benefits accruing to all. With a scaling down of private initiatives as the withdrawal increases, the Administration will endeavour to take over some of these programmes indirectly. In fact, the disenchantment of United States corporations with the utility and reception of their social responsibility programmes has led to a major rethink in this regard.

The official sanctions instituted by Congress will be incremental, with moves to cut all trade ties and especially to concentrate on exposing those United States corporations which have attempted to withdraw less than absolutely. This will affect licensing agreements, buy-back options and the like. Scrupulous monitoring of existing sanctions will be a growth industry in itself.

There are indications that tolerance of some United States intervention in South Africa's domestic and regional affairs will be forthcoming more openly after the election rhetoric has died down. The links are too numerous and too longstanding. Even South Africa's black population has many.

The basic aim of the United States, both the Administration and Congress, is to see a non-racial, democratic, free market-oriented South Africa. These are to be accompanied by an independent judiciary and a bill of rights with certain minority safeguards.

The key role of the US private sector in South Africa and the region has been vastly undermined by official and unofficial disinvestment and sanctions measures adopted in the last eighteen months. With these being incremental over time, a positive role for the US private sector in overall American foreign policy towards South Africa will be virtually excluded.

However, the recent proposed investment package by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for Southern Africa (although substantially reduced since last year) over the next five years, might hold some promise, in that it might encourage private US investors to relocate in black Southern Africa. But this assumes that the package will be passed by Congress, which seems questionable on three counts. The prevailing feeling on the Hill is against anything that might further worsen the budget deficit. There is the added problem that current legislation prevents financial disbursement to marxist-oriented states (which brings into question the status of Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe). Already USAID has placed preconditions on the disbursement of funds to SADCC member-states. Finally, the preference remains for assistance to be conducted on a multilateral rather than on a bilateral level.

The recent visit to Washington by ANC President Oliver Tambo was the highest level contact thus far between the banned organisation and the US government. It was a tangible expression of closer relations with all parties in South Africa. It is hoped by both sides that this is merely one in a series of future contacts. Three basic conditions ground US policy vis-a-vis the ANC: that the organisation renounces violence as a policy option; that its links with the Soviet Union and the South African Communist Party be tempered; and that it spell out more fully its commitment to a multi-party democratic future for South Africa. This first meeting did not achieve success on any of these, save to communicate US concerns and set the stage for future contacts where these might be more fully addressed. Contacts with the Pan Africanist Congress will be similarly conducted by the US.

Finally, the US government has expressed its desire to co-ordinate its strategies and policies in the Southern African region with other Western industrialised countries. It believes that by promoting common Western values, the West's economic, political and strategic interests are best served as a whole, especially if these are closely co-ordinated.

(The Report of the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on policy towards South Africa, which is currently receiving considerable attention in the local media, will be analysed in a separate Brief Report. It is important to note, however, that the Advisory Committee's recommendations still have to be considered by the US Administration, and it is doubtful whether they will all be accepted.)

CONCLUSION:

Regional conflict zones still receive the bulk of US attention in Africa, which demonstrates that wider global East/West concerns affect much of Washington's bilateral and regional relations with African states. Preventing or minimising instability is the best means to assure containment of Eastern bloc intrusions on the continent.

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