

US-SA Relations after Mandela

US-SA relations are at an important juncture. Will the engagement of the United States to South Africa's transition survive the conclusion of the Mandela presidency? Is there a future for the US-SA Binational Commission (BNC)? Will the BNC exist without both of its two principals, Deputy President Thabo Mbeki and Vice-President Al Gore?

According to the official US government position, sub-Saharan Africa matters for four reasons:

First, national security. Since 1991, US forces have conducted over 25 contingency operations in sub-Saharan Africa. It is also seen as an area in which transnational threats (drugs, small arms) are increasing.

Second, politics. Here there is a perceived need to encourage democracy and political freedom in a region whose countries represent around 26% of the UN's voting members. This imperative to engage is strengthened by the 23 million Americans of African descent.

Third, the economy. The US is Africa's largest trade partner, and the region is seen as offering 'a virtually untapped market of 700 million consumers'. Over 20% of the US' oil supply comes from Africa.

Fourth, health. In terms of this reasoning, there is a need to counter the resurgent, preventable diseases that threaten the region, where Africa accounts for more than two-thirds of the world's HIV-AIDS cases as a result of which its average life expectancy is projected to drop from 60-40 years in the next ten years.

Yet the popular perception of the United States' role in the world is one of an impotency born out of parochialism, isolation and, more recently, Presidential mendacity and (im)morality. Its commitment to a multifaceted and multi-conflict world, critics argue, can be seen in the extent of its resources dedicated to foreign affairs. The budget of US\$21.3 billion, just one percent of the total budget, represents a 50% cut from the 1985 allocation, and amounts to only 25% of the increase in military spending sought by President Bill Clinton for 2000-2005.

This tendency is unsurprising where 60% of the US Congress do not possess a passport — which apparently most regard as a badge of honour. This attitude may have been interpreted as *isolationist* in a previous era, but in a globalised world of increasingly common concerns and interdependence, it is arguably both short-sighted and what has been termed *arrogantist*.

On the Debit Side of the Ledger...

It is perhaps not surprising that Africa is not visible on most American policy-pundits radars, save for the usual CNN fare of crises and humanitarian desperation. For a while things did, however, look a little more optimistic after the success of South Africa's election in 1994, Clinton's subsequent Africa safari in March 1998 and the simultaneous promulgation of the US 'Africa Growth and Opportunity Bill'. However, the outbreak of conflict in the Congo/Great Lakes, Sierra Leone and Angola has, in the words of one analyst, "moved Africa from the front to the backburner once more". One senior intelligence analyst was more explicit: "Africa has fallen right off the map".

With South Africa, the US is undoubtedly concerned about what will happen after Mandela goes. The departure of Clinton in 2000 is seen, in this regard, as a *double-whammy* given that he has been the first president since Jimmy Carter to visit Africa, and make it a policy-priority. As the US President said in his speech at the Entebbe Summit for Peace and Prosperity in Uganda on 25 March 1998: "We share a commitment to strengthen our co-operation, to build a partnership for the 21st century that will benefit all our people".

To many Americans, Mbeki remains an enigmatic personality confronted by vast challenges made more difficult by impossibly high expectations. Although South Africa still derives some public attention and sympathy, many question whether the Republic will, in their words, "hang together" after 1999. The celebratory moment of the end of apartheid and Nelson Mandela's presidency is a distant memory.

...To the Credit

But there is cause for optimism. Not only Africa has slipped from the media centre-stage. Virtually all news has played second-fiddle to the impeachment drama, while foreign reportage has been dominated by events in Central Europe and the emerging markets financial slide. The policy/intelligence community is focused especially on US relations with China (beset as they have been with the spilling of nuclear secrets from the Los Alamos laboratory and allegations of campaign funding impropriety), and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially biological weaponry.

There are also some encouraging signs of increased American engagement with the African continent.

From 16-18 March the US government hosted a 'US-Africa Ministerial' summit, involving some 200 officials from 46 African countries. The SA delegation included Agriculture Minister Derek Hanekom and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aziz Pahad (though there was concern expressed that this delegation was a little lightweight by comparison to others). The summit was designed "to further the partnership" between the US and Africa, "by identifying shared interests in the areas of trade, economic reform and political and social development". To complement this promising initiative, the first US-SADC forum takes place in Botswana this April.

The visit by the US Undersecretary of State (Political Affairs) **Thomas Pickering** to the region in February in an effort to find a solution to the Congo war also reflects ongoing US commitment. Less positively, it illustrates growing US concern and frustration with the failure of the SADC-led 'African solutions for African problems' diplomatic merry-go-round to deliver on the Congo.

As one senior State Department official put it, "If we don't keep engaged with Africa, then America will suffer the downside". This, he argued, is as true for the Republicans as it is for the Democrats. This 'downside' is viewed almost exclusively in terms of the dangers posed to US trade and investment.

Interestingly, the return on US investments world-wide in 1996 was highest in sub-Saharan Africa at 31%, compared to its figure on global returns of 13%, the Asia-Pacific region also at 13%, the Middle East at 17%, and Latin America and Europe both on 12%. Also US exports to sub-Saharan Africa grew 8.4% in 1998. Though this still accounts for under 1% of total US exports, the trade figure is 45% greater than its exports to all the newly-independent states of the former Soviet Union. Critically, today the US imports more crude oil from sub-Saharan Africa than from the Persian Gulf (which explains Washington's reluctance to in the past consider seriously sanctions against Nigeria or Angola which each supply around 8% of US oil imports). As one African diplomat has noted, "US policy towards Africa can now be summed up by one word — oil".

Currently US exports to Africa go to: SA (49%); Nigeria (13%); Angola (5%), Ghana (5%), Kenya (4%), and all others (25%). The sources of US imports are: Nigeria (39%), Angola (17%); SA (15%); Gabon (13%); all others (16%).

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Encouragingly, too, there is more interest shown in African studies at a number of key universities. This coincides with the attendance of the offspring of recent, often professional African immigrants. In the

experience of some academics, Africa is not viewed by them in the same (often romantic and sometimes prescriptive) manner as it is by the wider African-American community, but given recent experience from a more critical, yet knowledgeable and engaging standpoint.

...And back to the Debts?

Two American initiatives suggesting greater involvement are struggling forward. First, the African Growth and Opportunity Bill which did not make it through Congress (as hoped for) in 1998, is still on the table. The Bill is designed to support Africa's reforming states by: creating greater US market access for African exports through lower tariffs, providing more technical assistance for African supporters, expanding private investment in Africa. But supporters of the Bill in the administration only give it a "50-50" chance of making it, while others are less hopeful.

Second, there has been slow progress with the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) which is intended to provide logistical and training assistance to bolster the peacekeeping capacity of African states. Eight countries (Uganda, Ethiopia, Mali, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Benin, Malawi and Senegal) have each had at least a battalion (approximately 600 men) trained up under this scheme.

The problems with these initially promising initiatives may reflect perceived difficulties with a number of the key

personnel involved in Africa in the current administration. There are mixed feelings about the performance of Secretary of State **Madeleine Albright's** dynamic, young African-American Assistant Secretary of State, **Susan Rice**. In some quarters she is seen as too young and brash to make inroads in a continent which is noted for its gender and ageist insensitivities. Similar sentiments are expressed about Rice's Senior Director for Africa in the National Security Council, former journalist **Gayle Smith**.

Both Smith and Rice have been involved with trying to bring about a peace in the Great Lakes with little success. More recently, the US has increased its diplomatic activity with Angola in an attempt to deepen its relationship. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa **Witney Schneidman** visited Luanda for three days in February ahead of the US-SA Binational Commission meeting in Cape Town. There has been some speculation that this improvement of ties could see the sale of non-lethal US military equipment (such as C-130 transport aircraft and an air-defence system) to the Angolan government. Contrary to UNITA's hopes to restart afresh the negotiation process with Luanda, Washington currently sees only the suspended Lusaka peace process as offering the best avenue for dialogue.

A Future for the BNC?

In 1998, the US was SA's second-largest trading partner with over US\$6.6 billion's worth of two-way business. Trade ties have trebled since 1994. It has also been the largest investor in SA since 1994, with an estimated stake of US\$2.7 billion.

South Africa has placed much store in the biannual 'Gore-Mbeki' US-SA Binational Commission as a means to take this important bilateral relationship forward.

There are two points of view about the future of the BNC. One argument is that having performed its role in normalising relations, it should be dismantled and its functions carried out instead by the relevant government departments. The other, more pervasive view is that the BNC will have a life after the Mandela presidency given that it has become an essential forum, as SA's engaging new Ambassador to Washington **Sheila Sisulu** has argued, for "healthy interaction".

Yet much would appear to rest on the personalities involved. According to this strategy, given that Gore and Mbeki are the men most likely to succeed their bosses, the obviously warm and fuzzy personal relationship the two enjoy will benefit wider relations. But this presumes that Al Gore will, first, obtain the Democratic Party nomination and, second, win the Presidential election in 2000. He has many challengers to beat off, and his job has undoubtedly been made more difficult by Clinton's

impeachment. It also presumes that Thabo Mbeki will not only be elected (as is likely) but remain as South Africa's President.

Indeed, while Clinton may have escaped removal from office, the price of his adventures may be paid by Gore. There is thus a need for Pretoria to de-emphasise the personal aspect of the BNC. It will also have to lobby other likely Presidential contenders, and not just from among the Democrats where the ANC probably feels more at home. The likely characters range from the more obvious (**Elizabeth Dole**, **George Bush Jr.** and **Dan Quayle**) to the more obscure (**John McCain**, **Robert Smith**, **Patrick Buchanan**, **Gary Bauer**, **Lamar Alexander** and **John Kasich**).

Interestingly, many Republican pundits see a Bush-Dole ticket as the one most likely to offer them success, though they are less sanguine about their hopes in retaining control of the House and Senate in 2000. Bush has recently appointed **Conde Rice** as his foreign policy adviser. She served previously in the National Security Council under Bush's father. Her African-American origins give some hope for continued engagement with the continent should the Texas governor make it all the way to the White House.

Of course any strategy to create links with other contenders risks upsetting Gore. But this is an inevitable consequence of placing the BNC in the Executive rather than in the appropriate line-function government departments and personalising its construction. It is a daunting task for the SA embassy in Washington which has halved its number of diplomats since 1994, yet who have to cover the wide terrain of congressional as well as administrative activities, plus trade, investment and multilateral concerns.

The role of the 25 line-function Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) officials stationed in 1994 is being carried out by just 12. The number of military attachés has also been reduced from eight to three; seconded Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) personnel from three to one; while there is only one intelligence officer currently. Moreover, the embassy no longer makes use of lobbyists — an important tool in the Washington environment.

Other outstanding US-SA issues

As apartheid and the warm afterglow of the Mandela presidency fades from American memory, US relations with South Africa will be characterised by normal sets of concerns, principally the bottom-line. "The fact", one SA official has noted, "that the US is prepared to start the banana wars with the European Union, their closest military and political allies, has lessons for us". The closer SA ties become with the US, the more likely are trade contradictions and difficulties. This can be seen in the ongoing debate around intellectual property issues and

concern over the US position on steel imports. As President Clinton noted in his speech to the SA parliament on 26 March 1998, "Like all partners, we cannot agree on everything. Sometimes our interests and our views diverge, but that is true even in family partnerships". Here the BNC is seen to offer a useful framework to find a solution to these problems.

The Armscor disbarment saga is nearly over with the compliance programme having come into operation. However, the generally excellent nature of military-to-military relations is not mirrored in the defence industrial sector, where there apparently remains US suspicion (particularly in the State Department) over SA intentions with weapons sales (a fear presumably compounded by the Syria episode in 1997); and SA tension over US attitudes regarding the Armscor case and perceived American reluctance to be involved with SA weapon procurement programmes.

However, SA is recognised by the US Department of Defence (DoD) as "the key partner state in defence issues in Southern Africa". What it wants from SA is: the "successful conclusion of the transformation process, creating a stable partner in the region; a country that is comfortable with playing a stabilising leadership role in the region and beyond"; and, "a relationship based on trust, rather than suspicion". The Defence Committee of the BNC which was set up in July 1997 after the conclusion of the Armscor case is complemented by improving ties elsewhere in the defence sector: the largest (US\$850,000) International Military Education and Training (IMET) budget for Africa, the first Joint Combined Exchange and Training (JCET) mission due to take place in 1999, a Memorandum of Understanding on environmental security, and US airlift support for the SA-hosted *Blue Crane* regional peacekeeping exercise. The US DoD sees the need for the creation of "institutional roots through personal relationships". In the Pentagon, these ties are likely to be boosted by the recent appointment of **Bear McConnell** replacing **Vince Kern** as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for African Affairs. McConnell was the US Air Attaché expelled from South Africa in the late 1970s accused of photographing sensitive South African installations from the air. The Director of the Office of African Affairs remains the knowledgeable Dr **Nancy Walker** who has been in the post since 1996.

Conclusion

Two clear stages in post-apartheid South Africa's diplomatic strategy towards the US are discernible: in 1994, led by the previous Ambassador **Franklin Sonn**, the ANC tried to "become friends with the Democrats" and deal through the Executive and its administration. Today there is a clearer realisation that given Republican control of the Congress and given a lack of interest in Africa generally, there is a need to follow and lobby the legislative arm of the government as well as maintain close ties with the Executive.

There is also a sobering realisation that emotional ties with Africa do not cut much ice. "Africa", one diplomat noted, "does not resonate well with domestic constituencies in an environment where politics is about votes". Hence there are attempts now to keep closer relations with players on both sides of the floor: with key Republicans such as Senator **Bill Frist** of Tennessee, the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Africa Sub-Committee; and **Ed Royce** (R-Calif.), the Chair of the House International Relations Africa Sub-Committee.

South Africa has thus three challenges in its relations with the US: first, to deal with those issues, particularly around trade and investment matters, which will increasingly dominate a normalising relationship. Second, in a post-Mandela, post-Clinton and, possibly, post-Gore world, to de-personalise bilateral ties and the BNC, and to balance its relations between the Executive and Congress. Finally, to try to place African issues on the front-rather than back-burner, and to engage the US on a range of issues (such as peacekeeping) beyond oil.

One SA diplomat has argued that SA-US relations are "a little like sparring with Mike Tyson. You regard it as a great honour, but you don't want to get too close in case he loses his temper". All this poses a difficult challenge for Sheila Sisulu who is acutely aware of the importance of "projecting SA's image for the purposes of wealth creation" and of "keeping the level of interest of Americans high without responding to the need for soundbytes". This job, she notes, is all the more difficult coming from Africa.