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SOUTH AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES: A NEW POLICY AGENDA FOR AFRICA?

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American foreign policy is said to be something like a tangerine: it comes in many parts, some sweet and some bitter, and is at times fruity and colourful. However, there are signs that a period of uncertain and ambivalent American policy towards Africa may be ending, ushering in an era of greater engagement.

South African and American efforts to broker a peaceful cease-fire to the conflict in Zaire signal an important shift in attitude by both powers towards the continent. For Pretoria, President Mandela's diplomatic intervention has broken the mould of an apologetic foreign regional policy, sensitive to South Africa's relative giantism in Africa and to Pretoria's past regional military forays. Though the diplomacy over Zaire only achieved limited success by bringing Laurent Kabila to a negotiating forum, it has set an important precedent by engaging Pretoria's policy-makers with African problems and connecting South Africa and America in a bilateral diplomatic initiative.

Washington's engagement - through, principally, the efforts of its Ambassador to the UN, Bill Richardson - with what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC) also reflects a changing policy position towards a continent for long stereotypically characterised as a basket-case paralysed in the face of conflict. This US policy shift is underpinned currently by two initiatives: first, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA); and second, by the revitalised African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI).

The Background

It should be noted from the outset that there is a fundamental divergence in perception by Americans and Africans of their standing in South and Southern Africa. This stems from the perceived past role of various US administrations - particularly that of President Ronald

Reagan (1980-88) - in propping up the apartheid system and perpetuating South Africa's destabilisation of Southern Africa. On the other hand, many Americans believe that through the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (CAAA) of 1986 as well as the arms embargoes, their government played a significant role in bringing about the demise of racial oppression in the Republic.¹ Whatever the rights or wrongs of these points of view, they do give many Americans an increased stake in what happens in South Africa.

A similar dichotomy would appear to be apparent in the views of Americans towards Africa today: from those with an impression of a hopeless continent, marginalised from the international mainstream, to the more ardent engagement enthusiasts, of whom there are (fortunately) a number in the current administration and Congress.

The sentiments of the former group are exemplified by the writings of Robert Kaplan, the journalist who sprung to prominence with his article about endemic deprivation and corruption in West Africa entitled 'The Coming Anarchy' which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1994. In his most recent book, *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* which covers disintegrating state structures 'from Togo to Turkmenistan and from Iran to Cambodia', Kaplan underscores his argument about Africa with a quote from a US diplomat: 'The greatest threat to our value system comes from Africa. Can we continue to believe in universal principles as Africa declines to levels better described by Dante than by development economists?' Referring to the nineteenth-century shipwreck whose survivors were ravaged by starvation, he contended, 'Our domestic attitudes on race and ethnicity suffer as Africa becomes a continent-wide "Wreck of the Medusa"'. Or as Kaplan puts it later in his book, 'Africa is falling off the world economic map'.²

New US Foreign Policy Directions and Challenges

Compared to domestic matters, foreign policy concerns are generally not high on the personal agendas of Americans and, thus, the agenda of their government. Indeed, the United States is remarkably introverted when it comes to spending on foreign policy issues. At the major planning session for the Clinton administration's second term on 11 January 1997, the new Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, noted that her entire budget for foreign aid, for diplomacy and the United Nations and all other international organisations amounted to barely one percent (US\$19.6 billion) of the federal budget. (US spending on foreign assistance and diplomacy has fallen by over 15% since the 1980s.) But this money would 'be used to write 50% of the history and legacy of our times'.³

There is a new, 'extraordinary vision' in the current administration's foreign policy, which is particularly unusual for a second-term US President. As Albright argued at her Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearings, 'we must be more than an audience, more even than actors, we must be the authors of the history of our age'. According to Martin Walker, there are 'six main international ambitions':

- First, in the words of National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, 'to build an undivided, peaceful and democratic Europe'. This is centred around NATO enlargement and devising new ways to draw Russia and the Mediterranean states in closer to the West.
- Second, to engage China and cement the US role in a stable and integrated Asia-Pacific region.
- Third, to continue to build 'an open regional economy in the Western hemisphere', with America as its dynamic hub.
- Fourth, to achieve a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement, the focus of Albright's predecessor, Warren Christopher.
- Fifth, to address the 'new basket of transnational concerns' such as: environmental issues, drug trafficking and money laundering, international terrorism, and international disarmament measures.
- Sixth, to resolve the United States' relations with the United Nations.

There are, it should be said, significant hurdles to realising these goals. The first, and probably most formidable of these is the need for Clinton and Albright to appease a Republican-controlled (and isolationist minded) Congress, and achieve consensus at home, probably through cutting their losses on some issues and

pursuing others vigorously. In the same way, attitudes will also have to take into account the needs of American business at the expense, for example, of human rights concerns over China and, closer to home, Nigeria. Put simply, while there is no lack of grand vision for a new US role, this will have to be balanced against a neo-isolationist streak in certain quarters.

But if there is one issue that does today receive bipartisan political support, it is Africa. Although the continent is not a foreign relations priority of the administration, there is an optimistic strand of thought growing in policy circles. As one black US Congressman put it: 'There is a new sense that there could be some new partnerships. Until now, African countries looked to their former colonial powers, but now they are finding the US more acceptable. Given the low starting base, there is much potential in Africa for investments in communications, infrastructure and so on. And as the United States enters that market more aggressively, then the European powers will have to follow suit. Perhaps this will shame the French into doing something positive'.

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act

On 22 May 1997, the Africa Subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee of the US Congress approved the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act which aims at increasing economic development and US investment in sub-Saharan Africa. This bill 'declares the support of the Congress for the economic self-reliance of sub-Saharan African countries committed to economic and political reform, market incentives and private sector growth, eradication of poverty, and the importance of women to economic growth and development'. It captures the spirit of engagement articulated by the late commerce secretary, Ron Brown, and reflects growing business interest in Africa. Although US exports to Africa amount to just 0.9% of total US exports, America already maintains a larger trade volume with Africa than it does with Russia and Eastern Europe combined (US\$18 billion versus US\$13 billion in 1995). Two-way trade between the US and sub-Saharan Africa grew by some 18% in 1996, outpacing the growth of US global trade.⁴

Described by one sceptical analyst as a 'piece of motherhood and apple-pie legislation', the bipartisan bill would permanently extend a free trade area by the year 2020 to those African countries committed to economic and political reform. It also directs the US government's Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) to support the development of a US\$150 million private equity fund to invest in commercial African projects and a US\$500 million infrastructure fund. Known colloquially as the 'McDermott Bill' after its co-sponsor, Democratic Congressman Jim McDermott, this

bill will now have to go before the full House International Relations Committee and then will have to be approved by both chambers of Congress before it may be signed into law by President Clinton.

The fact that this bill is bipartisan illustrates an encouraging consensus on African issues. Senator Bob Dole's running-mate in the 1996 Presidential Election, Jack Kemp, has noted that there is an 'emerging policy consensus that Africa would make a great trading partner'. In a speech before the Committee on Ways and Means (Subcommittee on Trade) on 29 April 1997, Kemp noted that 'With its material riches, and more importantly its vast human capital, Africa has an opportunity to become a place not just to help, but also in which to invest and to profit. ... To even open the prospect of American trade and access to American markets, to conceive of a direct relationship with Africa's new tigers is an audacious proposal, one that could focus and catalyse and energise the people and producers in Africa to new heights. In the spirit of that courage, I want to raise you one. I support what you are attempting to do and will work to do all I can to further your efforts'. His remarks may be all the more important if he chooses to stand as a Presidential candidate in 2000. The AGOA bill has 44 co-sponsors, and is supported by the House Speaker Newt Gingrich as well as the Clinton Administration. On 2 June, Senator Richard Lugar, a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, introduced parallel legislation in the Senate also known as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act.

The administration has, in response, launched its own 'White House' initiative, dubbed the 'Partnership for Economic Growth and Opportunity in Africa' to support and reward trade and investment liberalisation, investment in human resources, and improved policy management and governance in Africa. Through this partnership, the administration proposes that the United States 'offer the opportunity to take part in an assistance program allowing for participation at three different levels' to support accelerated growth and development in Africa:

- Level One: includes enhanced market access through Generalised System of Preferences; investment support; up to US\$25 million to support regional integration in Southern Africa through USAID's Initiative for Southern Africa (ISA); up to US\$1 million to support for African-American business relations; and the designation of an Assistant US Trade representative for Africa.
- Level Two: includes further enhanced market access; debt reduction involving support for an approach that leads to the 'extinction of concessional bilateral debt for poorest

countries'; the establishment of a cabinet/minister-level US-Africa Economic Cooperation Forum to meet annually; bilateral technical assistance to promote reforms; up to US\$15 million annually to support agricultural market liberalisation; trade promotion through increasing the number of reverse trade missions focusing on growth oriented countries; reprogramming commodity assistance to encourage more spending on human resource development and agricultural policy reform; and up to US\$10 million annually from USAID to support economic policy reform.

- Level Three: involves the establishment of free-trade agreements with 'strong-performing, growth-oriented' sub-Saharan African countries.

The critical difference between the two proposals is: the AGOA would allow quota-free imports of up to US\$1.2 billion annually (three percent of the US market) in African textiles and apparel. Clinton, apparently unwilling to take on domestic textile producers, has left the provision out of his plan.

Peacekeeping and the African Crisis Response Initiative

If the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act and the parallel White House initiative together form one strategic leg of America's 'New Africa' policy, the African Crisis Response Initiative is the other. Designed to enhance African conflict resolution capabilities, the ACRI is put forward as a means of helping to resolve ongoing continental security issues. For a continent beset by nearly forty years of post-colonial civil conflict, this is a worthwhile goal, though from the standpoint of some observers, it is not clear whether it is either practical or just a cynical way of absolving the US from at least part of its global peacekeeping responsibilities.

The Initiative has now taken on a different form since it was first announced as an African Crisis Response Force (ACRF) by former Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, during his Africa trip in October 1996. Rather than a separate military force focusing on humanitarian assistance operations, the ACRI is now proposed as a 'capabilities enhancement programme' which will parallel other international peacekeeping initiatives for Africa. The US government now has allocated the bureaucrats and money (US\$15 million in 1997 and US\$20 million in 1998) to the task for which Ethiopia, Uganda, Mali, Malawi, Senegal and Ghana have signed up, while Tunisia is expected shortly to follow suit.

Washington is, however, increasingly frustrated by the lack of response from South Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to its ACRI proposals, and officials argue that 'there is now a need for SADC to get its act together and for South Africa to play a pivotal role in this'. Their confusion cannot be helped by Malawi's support for the initiative in the absence of an official SADC line on this.

The ACRI is one of two major US defence/security initiatives in Africa. The other is the support of the so-called Frontline States (Uganda and Ethiopia in particular) over the war in Sudan. Additional military support programmes also continue, including the assistance given under 'Foreign Military Sales' (FMS) and 'Foreign Military Funds' (FMF) as well aid under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme. In FY1998, US\$10 billion of FMF for Africa has been requested, and US\$8 billion of IMET.

On a point of information, it should be noted that the total flow of US aid to Africa (FY1996) is estimated at US\$1.974 billion. This is made up of:

Bilateral	1162.9
Peacekeeping Operations	9.0
African Development Foundation	11.5
Refugees	175.4
Emergency Refugees and Migration Assistance	0
Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance	116.0 (1995)
International Development Association	432.0
African Development Fund	0
UN Children's Fund	48.0 (1995)
UN Development Programme	20.0 (1994)
TOTAL	1974.8

Source: Copson R, 'Africa: US Foreign Assistance Issues', CRS Issue Brief, 9 May 1997, p.8

Under the Development Fund for Africa (which is the chief form of bilateral assistance), leading African DFA recipients are:

	FY1996	FY1997 (est.)	FY1998 (request)
South Africa	122.4	89.7	70.0
Mozambique	51.3	31.0	39.2
Ethiopia	39.8	38.3	48.3
Uganda	39.6	41.4	49.5
Ghana	39.3	41.5	38.4
Malawi	33.8	36.1	37.4
Mali	30.3	32.0	36.0
Senegal	25.0	23.3	27.1
Kenya	24.3	20.2	20.0
Tanzania	23.3	18.7	20.0
Zimbabwe	23.3	18.1	15.3
Zambia	20.8	17.1	17.6
Madagascar	20.1	18.3	18.5
Benin	16.5	13.9	16.2
Angola	15.9	11.5	12.8

Source: Copson R, *op.cit.*, p.15.

Problems and Prospects

The change in policy towards Africa away from marginalisation reflects a recognition that the continent represents an area in transition - what South Africa's Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, has called an 'African renaissance'. The greatest challenge yet to this new mood of optimism will undoubtedly come in the shape of Nigeria where its military's intransigence will resurface to the international agenda at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Edinburgh later this year.

The need to encourage a process of democratic reforms has to be viewed against General Sani Abacha's brazen attempts to remain in power and the Nigerian military's role, paradoxically, in providing some measure of stability. This complicates any foreign policy response. Without action, however, Nigeria's problems are likely to remain unresolved, despite Abacha's attempts at changing his external image, such as through his intervention 'to support democracy' this May in the aftermath of the coup in Sierra Leone.

It is commonly held that when the new US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs is confirmed later this year, that a complete review of policy options for bringing about change in Nigeria, to which 'there is no simple or direct answer', will be undertaken.⁵ Here South Africa's contribution could be immense in both encouraging and forcing the West African state's recalcitrant military leadership towards democracy.⁶

There are a number of simple options with regard to US (and South African) policy towards Nigeria:

- First, do nothing and hope that the situation resolves itself. However, General Abacha seems insistent on swapping his uniform for a suit and managing the transition rather than permitting a truly democratic process to ensue.
- Second, allow other actors, such as the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), to take the lead. CMAG will, in the view of one policy-maker, 'achieve nothing at all' although it will provide some moral lead. It is also more likely now to receive stronger backing from the Labour Government in Britain which is expected to take a stronger line of human rights violations than its predecessor.
- Third, attempt to 'constructively engage' with Abacha and his regime in the hope that this will steer them on the right path. However, despite this approach having been attempted before (notably by Thabo Mbeki) there is no sign of the junta been influenced towards reform.

- Fourth, impose sanctions against Nigeria in the absence of reforms and a better human rights record. The only thing that would really hurt the Nigerians, however, are oil sanctions, and US and other companies are unlikely to agree to this route.
- Finally, engage constructively, but with teeth: utilise both carrots and sticks in alternatively encouraging and pressurising Abuja towards reform. This would seem to be the only serious option at present, though the question is how?

In the latter regard, the carrots could include a multilateral relief programme for Nigeria's US\$32 billions worth of foreign debt tied to democratic reforms. The sticks could involve a co-opting of America's oil companies in placing sanctions against Nigerian oil exports, and a tightening up on the travel movements and foreign bank accounts of General Abacha and his junta.

The difficulty of coming up with solutions to Nigeria reflects the manner in which the US administration is often forced to conduct its foreign policy with one hand tied behind its back: in this case, its options are limited by the clout of the oil industry. In the spirit of Lord Salisbury, foreign policy issues come a distant second to domestic political and economic concerns in the United States.

Some Conclusions

If there are weaknesses in the current US policy agenda towards Africa, these would also lie in the dearth of knowledge and understanding of African issues outside of a small bevy of journalists, advisers and academic specialists. Indeed, one can now count the respected Southern Africanists in the academic community on one hand, a list which includes: Jeffrey Herbst at Princeton, Stephen Stedman of Stanford, Tony Marx at Columbia, Witney Schneidman of Samuels International, Ray Copson at the Congressional Research Service, and Dale Lautenbach, along with Susan Rice and Shawn McCormick at the National Security Council (NSC), and the Pentagon's Nancy Walker. The list is not much longer for those specialising in the remainder of the continent, reflecting the departure of a generation of Africanists from academia who have not been replaced.

But in the words of one Congressman on the Africa Subcommittee, 'the Congo has started the ball rolling in the right direction for US relations with Africa'. With the end of the era of the African big-man and clear-cut commitment to market reforms, the 'underbrush has been cleared out' and senior US policy-makers see the continent today 'as an area of opportunity'. As the

Binational Commission (BNC) enters its second year of operation, in this, these policy-makers also foresee 'much synergy' in Washington's relationship with Pretoria. Nigeria may be the first real test of this new partnership. Whatever the outcome, however, it is clear that a new era dawns for US-African relations in which South Africa is expected to play a pivotal role.

President Bill Clinton may well be 'good at feeling everybody's pain'. With Africa it does appear that he has a unique, bipartisan opportunity to go beyond the rhetoric of policy pronouncements to making a substantial impact on his country's relationship with Africa. To do so, however, he will have to give content and resources to his administration's initiatives.

Endnotes

Many of the interviews conducted in the course of gathering information and viewpoints for this article were given on the condition of anonymity. These involved consultations with over 40 academics, military officials and policy-makers.

1. For an excellent summary of US-South African relations, see Higgs R, 'The United States and Sub-Saharan Africa', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. XLIX, No. 1, Winter 1996.
2. Kaplan RD, *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy*. New York: Random House, 1996, p.4.
3. See Walker M, 'Present at the Solution: Madeleine Albright's Ambitious Foreign Policy' *World Policy Journal* 1997 at <<http://worldpolicy.org/walker2.html>>. See also 'Global Minefield: The Foreign Policy Issues that Bill Clinton Cannot Avoid', *The Brookings Review*, Spring 1997.
4. For a concise summary, go to *Summary: The African Growth and Opportunity Act, May 23, 1997* at <http://www.africanews.org/usafrica/19970523_feat1.html>. The Act may also be found at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi_bin/query>.
5. The announcement of the nomination of the current National Security Council adviser for Africa, Susan Rice, for the position was made on 28 May. The shortlist for Susan Rice's replacement at the NSC is already down to a few: Mark Bellamy, David Gordon, Rosa Whittaker and Charles Snyder have all been mentioned as possibilities.
6. See Schneidman W, 'US Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa: Looking Toward the 21st Century', *CSIS Africa Notes*, 184, 1996. See also his article on 'The New Deal with Sub-Saharan Africa' in *Southern African Analysis and Advice*, May 1997.