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U. S. Foreign Policy Agenda 2005-2009: Why West Africa Barely Features

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Abstract

This paper examines how West Africa is positioned within the contemporary discourse of U.S. foreign policy. It is suggested that as a locus of U.S. foreign policy concern, West Africa is primarily conceptualized as: a resource supplier, a potential terrorist base, and an area in which grave abuses of basic rights are widespread. However, the writer argues that these areas do not independently merit significant normative importance in U.S. foreign policy terms. It is suggested that the U.S. approach accurately reflects its foreign policy agenda which is primarily geared towards protecting Middle Eastern oil supplies, combating anti-American aggressive failed states and fighting fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. What little U.S. foreign policy interest there is in West Africa is thus "terrorcentric," that is, it is presented in the context of combating fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. This paucity of foreign policy interest is likely to remain the case throughout the Bush administration in the probable absence of any "external shock" clearly linked to the region.

Introduction

In this paper, the writer examines the positioning of West Africa within the contemporary discourse of U.S. foreign policy. As part of its post-September 11, 2001 disposition, the Bush administration has largely defined itself through its foreign policy. This foreign policy evokes and affirms key elements of the Bush governmental doctrine. These are national security, the ideological value of (selective) democratization, moral certitude and the enduring iconography of the gun-slinging Texan wildcatter challenging all comers on his own terms.

A lot of the criticism of the first Bush administration was of its foreign policy in general, and the Iraq War and occupation in particular. Critics argued that the political goodwill created by the 2001 terrorist attacks had been squandered on military adventurism which had at best a tangential connection to any Islamic fundamentalist threat. This call was resonant in West Africa as elsewhere. But for a variety of reasons the Iraq War has not mobilized the same popular expression of dissatisfaction in most of Africa as it did in Europe and parts of the Middle East.

In this paper, the writer considers what this foreign policy means for West Africa. It is argued that as a locus of foreign policy concern to the U.S., West Africa is primarily conceptualized in three ways. It is seen as a resource supplier, a potential terrorist base, and an area in which grave abuses of basic rights are widespread. Of these, the first two are the dominant themes in formal foreign policy discourse. They have the ability to be the source of external shocks to the U.S. The accusation of widespread basic rights abuses in West Africa is generally less important in formal discourse other than as a short-term opportunistic policy tool. However, it is more important in the wider U.S. civil society discourse. But the external shock here is in reverse: human rights protection in West Africa can be dependent upon U.S. or other countries' policy. But the human rights discourse in West Africa has little real impact in the U.S.

West Africa in U. S. Foreign Policy Discourse: A Look at the Conceptual Framework

Rothchild characterizes large parts of postwar U.S. African policy as consisting of "minimal engagement" (Rothchild 2001, 180). Even in more active eras, such as the final stages of the Cold War, Rothchild's analysis reflects a policy rooted firmly in a Sovietcentric approach: Africa was of interest largely in as much as it was an ideological battleground in the Cold War.

The multifarious competing demands of foreign policy mean that foreign policy machines tend to conceptualize countries in over-simplified ways. A regime can muster only limited political capital and operational capacity. The complex web of international relations is therefore often reduced to a small number of priorities which are then portrayed in a fairly inflexible manner. This classification is then largely adhered to unless a compelling reason appears for a change, in the form of an external shock such as a war, act of aggression or catastrophe. In line with this analysis, the writer suggests that the U.S. tends to conceptualize West Africa in foreign policy terms in three ways.

First, in economic terms it sees it as a resource supplier, most crucially of oil. A clear, consistent example of this is the enduring close relationship between the U.S. and Nigeria. Nigeria is the main regional oil producer and a significant producer of a form of sweet crude which is fairly uncommon. The U.S. and Nigeria enjoy a joint security relationship which is in large part traceable to the growing U.S. reliance on Nigerian oil. The U.S. part of this relationship involves support for the Nigerian government and armed forces, and this has been demonstrated by the use of a U.S. aircraft carrier to patrol the West African coast. The Nigerian

side of the relationship is a straightforward exertion of influence. Nigeria prides itself on its importance as a supplier to the U.S. and the financial benefits which it derives from that relationship. At the same time Nigeria puffs itself up regionally as the economic and political hegemonic power.

Secondly, the U.S. conceptualizes West Africa as a place which hosts possible terrorists (Ruane 2004). This conceptualization reflects a number of elements. Foremost are supposed links to Islamic terrorists, possibly including the al-Qaeda network. For the most part, these concerns have been based on rumor rather than hard fact. For example, mostly circumstantial evidence has linked ethnically Lebanese diamond traders in Sierra Leone to al-Qaeda (Gberie 2002 and 2003; Farah 2004). There have also been some better grounded concerns regarding specific regional threats, such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria and other nearby countries. However, this increased focus on the region as a possible base for terrorists has brought a heightened interest and some transparency of non-terrorist criminal activity in West Africa. Examples include drug trafficking, oil bunkering off Nigeria, and the sort of crime on foreigners epitomized by the infamous "419s." Such serious organized crime does not directly threaten U.S. interests in the region. But it is still of some curiosity to Washington and accordingly merits a watching brief. This is often reflected in the changing priorities being given to local alliances on the ground.

In this, the writer suggests that post-9/11 policy worldwide has been "Terrorcentric." Rhetorically at least, regional involvement in Africa and elsewhere has hinged on a polarizing analysis which classifies countries by their commitment to and relevance in the global War on Terror. A secondary polarizing analysis has been democratization. For the first time since the Cold War ended, the U.S. has hit upon a fundamental ideological clash which allows a sharp distinction to be drawn between allies and everybody else: the acceptance of the democratic ideal. But the U.S. attachment to the democracy remains a tactical one. Just as it remains happy to ally itself closely to undemocratic regimes such as the House of Saud, it also seems largely unconcerned by the absence or even decline of effective democracy in many West African states. This is why West African policy has been focused on terrorcentricity rather than the democratic element of current policy priorities.

Third, West Africa forms part of the American concern overall with Africa as a locus of human rights abuse and social problems. Both the United States and Western Europe continue to display an uncomfortably mixed message when it comes to dealing with African governance. Rhetorically, they emphasize the importance of African solutions to African problems. Western countries thereby largely externalize responsibility for regional security or human rights issues. Concurrently, they take a

dim view of much African governance. The U.S. and many European chancelleries often demonstrate a barely-concealed suspicion that Africa is a primitive place where modern policy discourse has limited utility. This may be seen in a comparison of U.S. attitudes towards the spread of democracy in the Middle East with those towards the non-development or even retreat of democracy in some African countries. The human rights discourse is in any case often subsumed to perceived U.S. security interests, illustrated by the continued democracy assistance supplied to hardline regimes (Rothchild 2001). This ambiguous position results in what can seem like a reflexive, incoherent set of tactical policies. It leads to over-optimistic expectations: a local confusion as to what foreign involvement can be expected in any given situation. It also creates a form of policy doublethink, whereby human rights abuses are cited in some cases as a justification for action, while in other situations the sheer scale of Africa's many human rights catastrophes is used as a justification for non-intervention. Nonetheless, this latter point is slowly gathering momentum. It is fuel to the engine of the Congressional Black Caucus and African America activists across the United States.

West Africa and a Broader U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda

To understand the place West Africa occupies within the U.S. foreign policy approach, it is first necessary to understand that approach. At the present time, the War on Terror and U.S. foreign policy seem to be intertwined to an extent that raises the question of what U.S. foreign policy is beyond the Global War on Terror?¹ To understand this, let us first examine the War on Terror.

The strategic goals of the so-called global "War on Terror" were summarized in 2004 by President Bush as follows:²

- + dismantling, disrupting, and destroying terrorists and their organizations;
- + denying terrorists places of sanctuary or support;
- + denying terrorists chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons; and
- + working for freedom and reform in the broader Middle East.

These then are the stated aims. We may contrast them to what seem to be the actual aims. This is subject to the caveat that the war on terror is a rhetorical construct under the guise of which we see a number of activities which may or may not reward classification. Far and away the most important and indeed highest impact of these aims is the last one, of working for freedom and reform what is elastically termed the "broader" Middle East. This in fact appears to be a selective aim – reform in Saudi Arabia, for example, seems to be much further down the U.S. list than reform in Syria or even Iran. Denying terrorists chemical, biological, radiological,

and nuclear (CBRN) weapons is only part of the aim, which might more accurately be characterized as denying CBRN capability to all actors (at both the non-state and the state level) who currently lack such a capacity and do not meet the American conception of ally. Reinforcing the hegemonic American position as the world's only military superpower has a political potency at a time when its autonomy and majesty are threatened by emergent military powers such as China, a world legal order keen to assert its authority, and on a collision course with Washington over issues from its Middle East policy to international criminal jurisdiction.

What remains of foreign policy beyond the global war on terror? At the security level, it is difficult to discern much that has not now been swept up. Some alliances continue independently of the global war on terror with states whose commitment to the war is at best ambivalent, for example South Korea. But for the most part, the global war on terror dominates the short-term foreign policy outlook of the present administration and arguably of the whole government and military machine.

If we play the crude foreign policy game of condensing these wide-ranging aims into just a few words, we might say that U.S. foreign policy as it stands is about selectively opening, enabling, and protecting markets, forcibly opening certain foreign non-democratic states which otherwise threaten the U.S. and staking a lead position in an emerging global cultural war. It is unclear that West Africa is of much appeal to policymakers on any of these grounds. In terms of the American-West African market, there is no clear U.S. incentive to change the current situation. West Africa offers a very limited export opportunity for the U.S. With respect to African exports to the U.S., there are probably no interests so compelling that they command any form of meaningful military interest on the part of the U.S. The one possible exception is oil and to date even this has only attracted limited military aid to Nigeria in the form of occasional training or marine operations in the Gulf of Guinea by the U.S. Navy. In respect of intervention in foreign states, the U.S. clearly has no appetite for such action in West Africa. Even a relatively straightforward military operation in a friendly environment has been ruled as greater than the U.S. interest merits. A key recent example was American unwillingness to deploy troops as Monrovia fell in August 2003, other than to protect and evacuate its nationals.

In terms of the cultural conflict, there is little in West Africa with which the U.S. seeks to conflict. But this is the one area in which U.S. foreign policy does increasingly seem to find a reason to cast its rule over West Africa. The U.S. remains a fundamentalist Christian nation and, especially under the present administration, this is on some levels a strong part of its foreign policy in Africa.

As has been seen elsewhere on the continent, most notably Sudan, the U.S. is keen tacitly to protect the interests of what domestic evangelical Christians perceive to be persecuted Christian blocs (although in fact the characterization of the SPLA as primarily Christian is an oversimplification which underplays the importance of animism in southern Sudan). In West Africa, there is increasing strife between the Christian south and Islamic north in a number of countries. To date this has played out primarily in the form of power or resource-based struggles which have not taken on a religious characterization. But in due course we may expect that some of the Christian groups in West Africa will form more powerful advocacy alliances with American Christians. Some pointers to this are already provided by the rapid growth in U.S.-style Pentecostalism in West Africa. This would likely increase the relevance of U.S. policy and influence in West Africa in the domestic context for the U.S. government.

West Africa and Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism

West Africa is gradually emerging as an area of considerable concern to the United States in respect of its connections to Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. There are a number of reasons for this. The writer will argue that there are "pull" reasons, which attract U.S. interest in their own right. There are also "push" reasons whereby domestic U.S. policy helps to dictate the level of foreign policy interest in this area. First on the "pull" side of the equation, there is a sizeable Islamic population in the region, parts of which understandably feel that non-Islamic elements in their national governments have treated them unfairly. Côte d'Ivoire provides a compelling example, where the largely Muslim north has been politically and financially marginalized by the Christian-dominated south. Because of the nature of the West African cartography, whereby the religious split follows a roughly horizontal line but country borders are mostly vertical, the same problem recurs from Nigeria right up to Sierra Leone. In these countries, the more prosperous coastal south is Christian-controlled, while the interior Muslim populations are economically worse off. This uneven spread is exacerbated by the tendency for the political elite in these countries to be comprised from within the southern Christian population.

Secondly, in some ways this Islamic population is ripe for radicalization. Scholars and policymakers disagree as to what the determinants of Islamic radicalization are. Too often a straightforward correlation is claimed in a way which is misleading. This does not mean that there is not an increased incidence of terrorist involvement, especially at the operational level, amongst those who are poor or uneducated. But there is no automatic connection. There is some evidence of radicalization by both Christian and Muslim charities in West Africa. An

Islamic example is the extensive provision of mosques and social infrastructure by Middle Eastern Islamic charities, some of which are known elsewhere to act as a conduit for terrorist funding. Much of this activity is directly traceable to connections in Saudi Arabia which are known supporters of fundamentalist terrorism. In addition, there is more localized evidence of the emergence of a radical Islamic terrorist footprint. The most obvious example of this to date is the successive local insurgencies of the self-styled "Taliban" (*Al Sunna wal Jamma*) in Yobe State of Nigeria.

Thirdly are the operational advantages which are available in West Africa. The geography is well-suited to groups seeking to avoid capture. This was shown by the fact that at least some elements of the GSPC were able to sweep across the desert from Algeria to Chad even while under United States military surveillance. There is also the perceived closeness to the Middle East, although this obscures the significant cultural and theological differences between Middle Eastern states such as Yemen and the Islamic peoples in West Africa. Finally, there are funding and arms flows in West Africa. For example, it is often claimed that ethnic Lebanese control of the diamond trade in Ivory Coast has allowed fundamentalist organizations to fund themselves through the trading of so-called conflict diamonds. The existence of what are effectively failed states may also be conducive to terrorist operations, although Menkhaus (2004, 71-75) disputes this. He argues that terrorist networks appear to function best where states are governed badly, rather than not at all. Even accepting this analysis, though, the point remains relevant, simply shifting from Liberia and arguably Sierra Leone to others such as Cote d'Ivoire.

These concerns all contain some legitimacy, although none of them is especially compelling in its own right. Operating with fixed resources and far greater immediate security challenges, most notably in the Middle East, it is also understandable that the United States has thus far seen Africa as a low priority in its War on Terror.

What would it take to change this? It is apparent that West Africa has already started to assume a higher importance than previously. This may be seen with the Trans Sahara Counter Terrorist Initiative and the deployment of U.S. military forces in the Gulf of Guinea. But such initiatives have echoes of what Walt (2000, 79) characterized in the Clinton era as "hegemony on the cheap." The relative position of West Africa is dependent on what happens elsewhere. There is a perceived centrality of the Middle East to U.S. homeland security, the ongoing U.S. dependence on Middle Eastern oil and the entrenchment of radical Islam in parts of the Middle East. It therefore seems very unlikely that the U.S. foreign

policy outlook would shift markedly from the Middle East to West Africa while the global War on Terror is in progress.

What of the "push" side reasons? The writer has suggested above that there is a likelihood of closer links between Christian communities in West Africa and the evangelical Christian movement in the United States. Given that this is so, there is the opportunity for the Christian element of the U.S. government to characterize Islamic radicalism as an attack on Christendom. To date, the rhetoric employed in the War on Terror has largely avoided this. Indeed, the administration has been at pains to stress that the War on Terror is not an attack on Islam. However, the War on Terror looks very much like an attack on organizations which spring from and find support in Islamic nations. Many millions of citizens in those countries perceive the War on Terror as little more than a rough proxy for a war on Islam. It should therefore be unsurprising if the U.S. takes the opportunity to attack Islamic fundamentalism with vigor, since arguably this is a defensive measure against what is perceived to be an Islamic attack on Christian values.

Marginal Elements of Foreign Policy

Where a region is not a key locus of foreign policy attention, marginal local benefits from more generally implemented foreign policy can take on increased significance. This likely amounts to an exertion of what Nye (1990) terms soft power, even if it is not presented or necessarily even intended in this way. In this sense, the Bush administration's action-led agenda on Africa has quietly delivered significant benefits to the region as a whole, including West Africa. Fifteen billion dollars of foreign aid over five years (including \$10 billion of new money) was earmarked in 2003 to fighting AIDS, mostly in Africa. A portion of this money was cut from other foreign aid medical initiatives and the money has also been slow to materialize in practice, as the international hubris over the Iraq invasion has subsided. But nonetheless this promise represents a significant policy shift, signaling that the AIDS issue is seen as a crucial one by Washington which is worthy of deep financial support. This is itself will only dent the problem, but it is still a significant step forward. Moreover, other donors seem to have been influenced by the need to show at least some parity with the U.S. For example, European Union AIDS funding rose sharply after Bush's announcement.

The Bush administration has also followed the Clinton administration in opening up American markets to more African imports, albeit in a limited and selective fashion. This has been seen primarily in extension of the liberalizing African Growth and Opportunity Act. This Act, originally signed in 2000 and renewed until 2015, offers a far more liberal U.S. market to most sub-Saharan

countries than before. It has recently been supplemented by the Millennium Challenge Account.

Conclusion

The implications of this analysis are both positive and normative. Positively, a thesis is presented which purports to explain the relative unimportance of West Africa in U.S. foreign policy discourse. Normatively, understanding and acting upon this thesis could catalyze a reprioritization of West Africa within US foreign policy discourse. Despite the growth in U.S. foreign policy interest in West Africa, it remains a low-interest and low-priority area. Nothing in the analysis suggests that this is likely to change significantly in the next several years.

West Africa could force its way more powerfully onto the 2005 – 2009 agenda in two ways. First would be to position itself more clearly within the purview of Washington's terrorcentric policy. This seems highly unlikely. Despite some fundamentalist terrorist activity there, there is little evidence that West Africa harbors a systemic terrorist threat to U.S. interests. Secondly, individual nations could seek to become beacons of democratization in a way which would encourage the U.S. to groom them as model nations. Given the recent democratic turbulence in the region, this seems very unlikely. If anything, 2005 – 2009 looks like more of the same in West Africa: ethnic conflict, economic hardship and significant violence, met from Washington with little more than a distant grimace.

Notes

¹ Since at least the 1970s, Antoino Gramsci (1891-1937) is being considered as one of the most important Marxist theorists since Marx. His ideas were written in Italian prisons in elliptical and allusive style so as to escape the censors. Thereafter, they were compiled and published under the title, *Prison Notebooks*.

² In this context, Gramsci meant the mechanisms of socialization such as the church, mass media, and the trade unions.

³ See Talcott Parsons, "Some Reflections on the Place of Force in Social Processes," in Harry Eckstein, ed. *Internal War* (New York, Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), pp.33-70.

⁴ See his preface to a *Critique of Political Economy*, 1859.

⁵ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engles Reader*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1972, p.3

⁶ Consciousness, it is said, is determined by one's place in the means of production. False consciousness is not an error of fact, but of reasoning and perception.

⁷ See the selections from the *Political Writings of Antonio Gramsci (1910-1920)*, ed. Quintin Hoare, International Publishers, New York, 1977, P. 3

⁸ Salamini Leonardo: Gramsci and the Marxist Sociology of Knowledge, *Sociological Quarterly*, 1984, 15(3): 359-380.

⁹ It is supposed to be an assault on cultural and ideological hegemony.

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¹² IBID, Salamini.

¹³ Scott, James, "Hegemony and the Peasantry," *Politics and Society*, 1977, 7 (3):267-296.

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²⁶ Robinson, David, MSU lecture series.

²⁷ Report of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, 36th Session, A/36/513, P.2

²⁸ See p.138

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