“Africa needs more investment and economic growth. It needs less theater and, certainly, no more pity.”

The US and Africa: Prisoners of a Paradigm?

GREG MILLS

When one is in Liberia, getting stuck at night on Tower Hill along the Robertsfield-to-Monrovia road is not advised. The area is dark and dangerous. Yet the rattling sound from a nearby generator offers some comfort. The scene indicates, too, how much and how quickly things can change for the better, and what challenges remain in turning Liberia from a failed state into a successful state.

Inside a Liberian hut that the small generator provides with electricity, the local community congregates watching television. Globalization is thus delivered into the dark Liberian night. The television, however, may also sow the seeds of future discontent—by raising expectations about what the outside world may promise, and how much the government of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf can deliver.

Three thousand miles away, on the Rue de la Revolution in the Rwandan capital of Kigali, a Chinese contractor in army fatigues, shovel in hand, works on the roof of the Chinese Embassy, a massive building under construction and under expansion. The image highlights not only the relationship between China's state and its businesses, but also the extent of China's recent penetration of Africa. Indeed, it has taken China to portray Africa in a different, more positive light, as a site of opportunity for investors (especially investors in commodities), and not just a place characterized by war, pestilence, and hopelessness.

China's trade with Africa has increased dramatically since 2000—from $11 billion in that year to $56 billion in 2006. China is now the continent's third-largest trading partner, and aims to establish $100 billion of annual trade with Africa by 2010. Chinese traders have also brought the benefit of cheap and durable goods to African consumers. Yet Chinese investors, because of their different governance standards and practices, pose a strategic threat to Western norms and interests—and this threat is growing. More than 800 state-owned Chinese enterprises are now active on the continent. Chinese firms have invested more than $6 billion in 900 African projects, notably in the oil sector. Indeed, Angola is now China's largest supplier of oil.

The United States, meanwhile, is still Africa's largest trading partner. Yet anti-American sentiment on the continent remains rife. In the months leading to the US-led invasion of Iraq, here is what various South African politicians had to say about the United States:

Former President Nelson Mandela, at an African National Congress (ANC) event in December 2002, said that America's approach to Iraq was arrogant and showed an alarming indifference to the United Nations. He argued that global peace could be achieved only if all nations, including the most powerful, adhered to the world body's founding principles. He later accused the United States of being racist and of having “a president who can't think properly.” He said George W. Bush wanted to plunge the world into a “holocaust.”

In January 2003, Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's current president, lambasted those who threatened Iraq with war but did nothing about Israel's nuclear weapons. “The matter,” he said, “has nothing to do with principle. . . . It turns solely on the question of power.”

In February 2003, Kgalema Motlanthe, then the ANC's secretary general and now its deputy president, told about 4,000 antiwar demonstrators outside the US Embassy in Pretoria that South Africa, with its rich mineral resources, could be the next target of US unilateralism. He was echoing Decem-

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ber 2002 statements by Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the health minister, who had said—in response to suggestions from a British newspaper that funding for antiretroviral drugs could come from money earmarked for submarines—that South Africa needed to deter aggressors. "Look at what Bush is doing," she had said. "He could invade."

These three vignettes—from Liberia, Rwanda, and South Africa—exemplify the kinds of foreign policy dilemmas that the next US administration will face in Africa. The question of how best to assist fragile states trying to promote development while managing volatile expectations; the rise of China's involvement on the continent; and Africans' persistent fears of Western domination: All these are parts of the political and policy jigsaw puzzle that next year will confront America's newly inaugurated president.

FRESH FOCUS ON THE CONTINENT

Africa and the United States share many interests, and an increasing amount is at stake between them. Although political rhetoric in key African states has been consistently hostile toward America, and more so during the Bush years, the Bush administration arguably has been the most generous ever in Washington, in terms of policy toward, trade with, and aid to Africa. On the diplomatic front, Bush has devoted more time to Africa than any of his predecessors, having made two trips to the continent during his presidency (in July 2003 and February 2008).

This fresh US focus on Africa as an area of foreign policy interest has been fueled, in part, by America's growing energy needs. An estimated 25 percent of US oil imports will come from Africa by 2015, up from 15 percent today. But US engagement in Africa has also been driven by Washington's "war on terror," China's growing role on the continent, Africa's nascent economic emergence, and US concerns about the need for development as a precursor to stability. Africa now merits a US military command of its own (AFRICOM, which was created in 2007), whereas previously it was split among three commands (CENTCOM, EUCOM, and PACOM). Incidentally, some African governments take this as a sign of sinister US intentions—though other countries have maneuvered to host the US bases that are likely to be an eventual part of the scheme.

The United States must be a key partner if Africa is to succeed in its ambitious development goals. American support for these goals is apparent in US programs such as a $15 billion AIDS initiative promoted by President Bush; the Millennium Challenge Account, a fund launched in 2004 that provides aid conditioned on improved governance; and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a measure, now in its third iteration, that offers trade benefits to eligible countries.

As with most aid initiatives, it is difficult to measure the impact of the AIDS effort and the Millennium Challenge Account apart from their success in identifying worthy recipients and allocating funds to them. Their impact in actually improving the lives of Africans depends on African governments' commitment to making good on promised governance improvements that got them funding in the first place. Still, their potential to make a difference is enormous.

As for AGOA, since its inception in 2000 it has helped to increase two-way trade between the United States and sub-Saharan Africa by over 140 percent. In 2006, total US exports to sub-Saharan Africa rose to $12.1 billion, and imports hit $59.2 billion. US imports from countries covered under AGOA totaled $44.2 billion in 2006, up 16 percent from 2005 (with much of the increase accounted for by oil). Non-oil trade with AGOA countries increased by 7 percent, to $3.2 billion.

The impact of AGOA cannot be measured by the flow of dollars and cents alone. In tiny Lesotho, which is completely surrounded by South Africa and has until now been dependent on the fortunes of that country's economy, AGOA has helped create some 50,000 jobs. Apparel factories today dominate the outskirts of Maseru, the capital.

Even more remarkably, US corporations have been the largest investors in South Africa since 1994, having staked more than $2.5 billion there. During the 1990s, US trade with South Africa grew by more than $2 billion; between 2000 and 2007 it increased from $6 billion to $13 billion. South Africa's economy accounts for 45 percent of total economic activity in sub-Saharan Africa.

Given South Africa's exemplary record of political reconciliation and stability, it is unsurprising that the country was cited in a September 2002 US document called *National Security Strategy* as one of four pivotal African states (the others being Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Kenya) with which Washington would work in the "war against terror." But three of the four countries have since suffered through electoral dramas, and South Africa's president faces a party-centered challenge to his leadership. These facts are an indication of the diplomatic difficulties inherent in America's search for strategic alliances in Africa.

DEMOCRATIC UPS AND DOWNS

Africa has made much progress since *The Economist* portrayed it as the "hopeless continent" at the start of this decade. The number of major wars in Africa fell from a peak of 12 in 1990 to 4 in 2005. Economic growth has averaged over 5 percent in sub-Saharan Africa since 2004, compared to just 1.7 percent during the 1980s and 2.8 percent in the following decade. Higher commodity prices, a peace dividend, and improved governance have buoyed African economies.

Yet the recent catastrophe in Kenya, where disputed December 2007 elections triggered the country's worst crisis since independence, raises questions that go to the heart of Africa's development challenge. Kenya, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and South Africa together account for more than one-third of sub-Saharan Africa's 750 million people and over half of its combined economic activity. These countries were regarded not only as encouraging examples of political reform and economic progress but also as states with the potential to transform their respective regions, and in so doing drive the continent forward. The fact that recent elections in each nation have not gone quite according to plan has cast doubt on the countries' paths, their impact on their regions, and the role that external actors might play in ensuring stability.

It has taken China to portray Africa as a site of opportunity.

In October 2006, enormously expensive first-time elections in the DRC produced a victory for President Joseph Kabila, who already held office on an unelected basis. This was followed by months of instability that have culminated in fierce fighting in the country's east. In Nigeria, the election of President Umaru Yar'Adua in April 2007 was flawed, as the government itself has conceded. In South Africa, Jacob Zuma's selection in December 2007 as leader of the ANC over President Mbeki has raised concerns about the future stability of Africa's model state. And problems with Kenya's December election resulted in violence of unprecedented fury. A country once known as a favorite surf-and-safari destination became just another African nation teetering on the brink of disaster—at least in the minds of those who believe in the caricature of the "hopeless continent."

These countries are very different, ranging from Africa's largest economy (South Africa) to its largest failed state (Congo), and from a key ally in the West's war on terror (Kenya) to a country with volatile sectarian fault lines (Nigeria). But out of these four disparate countries and their democratic experiences, we can discern five common lessons that the next US administration will need to heed in devising its Africa policies.

First, tribalism and sectarianism still matter. In Kenya, the race was between Mwai Kibaki, a member of the Kikuyu tribe, the largest in Kenya, and Raila Odinga, a Luo. Ethnic battle lines were drawn nationwide, and widespread vote rigging occurred according to these differences. In Congo, President Kabila, staring at electoral defeat in a presidential runoff, decided to bolster his support through deals with some of the more extreme but powerful elements in Congolese politics. His moves threatened the Tutsis and other minority tribes in areas where Tutsi general Laurent Nkunda has sought to protect his people against the remnants of the forces responsible for the 1994 Rwanda genocide. The result was intensified violence.

Nigerian politics remains divided between the oil-rich, largely Christian south and the populous, Islamic north from which the president draws much of his support (and where Islamic law has been imposed in several states). In the South African contest, too, an ethnic dimension was certainly at work. The populist Zuma did not triumph over the comparatively erudite Mbeki merely because of his populism; as a Zulu, he apparently gained from anti-Xhosa sentiment as well.

Second, corruption and incompetent management remain pervasive. When Kibaki came to power in 2002 he was regarded not primarily as a Kikuyu but as a reformer leading a coalition that promised clean government. Barely a year later, the man Kibaki had appointed to fight graft, John Githongo, fled to London after receiving death threats. The president and his cabinet, far from tackling sleaze, allegedly initiated new corrupt practices.

Corruption and patronage run deep in Africa; indeed, they make the system work to a degree (if only for the benefit of the privileged). Although Africa's vibrant media generally do an excellent job of highlighting malfeasance, they tend to focus the blame on a few individuals rather than the overall system of governance. International donors, meanwhile, have seldom used aid as a lever in the fight against corruption. In Kenya, truth be told, they never had the stomach for a fight. They did not believe it was in their ultimate interest to force a showdown with the barons of corruption. They did not want to upset what they saw as a regional "island of stability" and an ally in the "war on terror"—a place from which the UN, as well as hundreds of nongovernmental organizations, operates.

Third, unemployment is the critical destabilizer. To see the crises in these four countries only in terms of tribalism and corruption is to miss a vital element. Today, some four decades after independence, more than half of Kenyans, for example, subsist on a couple of dollars a day. Fewer than 10 percent of the 400,000 young Kenyans who leave school each year will find jobs. The picture is even worse in Nigeria and the DRC—so bad, in fact, that statistics are not available. And nearly a decade and a half after the advent of democracy in South Africa, a continuing unemployment rate of around 30 percent, along with the slow delivery of basic services, is one important reason why Zuma has ascended to the presidency of his party.

GROWTH IS NOT ENOUGH

Fourth, growth is imperative, but it is not enough. All four countries in question have recently experienced unprecedented economic growth—over 5 percent annually—largely because of high commodity prices and better macroeconomic management. But despite all the growth, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening. This partly explains the ANC election result and why the slums of Nairobi, for example, were so overwhelmingly in favor of Odinga.

For those frustrated by the economy and at the polls, there is little to lose in taking discontent and fury to the streets. The key challenge for all of Africa remains to find a way to create jobs—especially since the rise of Asia, and Africa's relative lack of labor competitiveness, make it unrealistic to count on growth led by exports in manufacturing.

Finally, democracy is not an event. A difficult election does not mean that progress and reform have to end. Democracy in Africa today is a far cry from the days when elections were single-party charades, if they were held at all. But politicians must not regard democracy and consensus building as activities that only need to be carried out on occasional, internationally scrutinized election days.

Whether a winner-scoops-all, executive-centric presidential system is best suited to Africa's political needs, or whether it encourages extreme electoral behavior in order to stay in power, is a moot question. In Kenya, as elsewhere, it has led to vote-rigging and then violence. But the system is like this in many African states because the presidents prefer that power be centered in their office, and that the legislative branch be kept marginalized and weak.

Outside observers, like Africans themselves, often view the continent in uniform, almost linear terms, trafficking in concepts such as renaissance, recovery, decline, and failure. The reality is that sub-Saharan Africa is very complex, and progress on the continent is vulnerable to continuous setbacks—as the recent events in key states remind us.

A FRUSTRATING RECORD

South Africa aside, the countries discussed here highlight external actors' poor records in exposing graft and inducing better governance. Such goals are often sacrificed to the apparent greater good of regime stability and maintaining donor-government relationships. But the best approach that the next US administration could take would be to remain honest in its deliberations about (and with) these countries, and not attempt to pick and back winners.

Such an approach is not easy. Often, external actors are torn between trying to do the right thing in Africa and reacting to humanitarian emergencies despite the politics that often spurs them. Nor does it help that—despite the close ties in trade, investment, and aid between Africa and the United States—the rhetoric surrounding US-African relationships is often tense. For example, Bush has in the past deferred to South Africa's Mbeki as a "point man" on Zimbabwe; yet Zuma, as the newly elected head of the ANC, said this year that US and European interference was hindering efforts to reconcile Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's government with that country's opposition.

"The [Americans] and Europeans tell us what we need to do and tell Mugabe [what to do]," Zuma told reporters at the World Economic Forum's annual summit at Davos in January 2008. "That undermines our efforts," he said, adding that the Western approach contained "an element of racism."

In August 2007, South African Defense Minister Mosiuoa Lekota—apparently reflecting many African governments' suspicion that the real purpose of AFRICOM is to facilitate the war on terror—declared that the US military should stay out of Africa. "The AFRICOM initiative has raised a lot of interest and a lot of attention," Lekota said, "because at some point there is a certain sense that Africa has to avoid the presence of foreign forces on its soil."

Such remarks seem to be based on latent suspicions that the United States harbors imperialistic intentions. These undercurrents have been aggravated by the Iraq War—against which most African countries voted silently by declining to provide assistance to the United States. Some, such as South Africa, raised rhetorical tensions to new heights on the subject of the war. And now many prominent people, ranging from moderates to African radicals (including Mugabe), believe that China offers the continent an alternative to development led and financed by the West. As Senegal's president, Abdoulaye Wade, put it in January 2008:

> If opening up more free markets is a goal that the West prizes—and extols as a path to progress—why is Europe fretting about China's growing economic role in Africa? The expansion of free markets has indeed been a boon to Africa. But as I tell my friends in the West, China is doing a much better job than Western capitalists of responding to market demands in Africa. The battle for influence in the world between the West and China is not Africa's problem. . . . China's approach to our needs is simply better adapted than the slow and sometimes patronizing post-colonial approach of European investors, donor organizations, and nongovernmental organizations. In fact, the Chinese model for stimulating rapid economic development has much to teach Africa.

The continuous bashing of the West, and of the United States in particular, along with African voting patterns in the UN, probably does more to tarnish the image of African countries than to upset Washington. But it may have a cost to African governments in discouraging Washington from acting in concert with African states in multilateral contexts such as the UN, the World Trade Organization, and elsewhere. And the failure to act multilaterally is the very stick with which Africans and others regularly beat Washington.

The Bush administration arguably has been the most generous ever in Washington, in terms of policy toward, trade with, and aid to Africa.

While the tone of US international engagement might change with a new administration in 2009, the content of America's foreign policy is unlikely to change very much. (Indeed, there should be concern in Africa that a Democratic administration might prove less favorable to African interests, given that party's parochial voting base and more isolationist trade policy.) To this extent, both Africa and the United States could remain, at great cost, prisoners of a paradigm of international engagement.

Under Bush, Washington's approach to provocative African rhetoric has generally been to give politicians a free pass. The United States has bigger dogs in other fights elsewhere, notably the Middle East and South Asia. But the Bush administration's response to African crises has, AFRICOM apart, been mainly disconnected, lackluster, and lacking in tools, priorities, and a clear strategy. For example, Washington's approach to the economic, social, and political crisis in Zimbabwe—the United States has taken its lead from Pretoria despite the latter's obvious partiality toward Mugabe's regime—has been disengaged at best. Such an approach is unlikely to win the US administration friends and respect among Africans. Nor will it ultimately help Washington in its pursuit of African stability, democracy, and prosperity.

Toward a New Paradigm

The vignettes at the start of this article highlight the need for the United States to define its interests in Africa around three key issues: the importance of well-considered peace-building and economic development strategies, particularly in post-conflict situations; the need to integrate Africa with global markets in a way that encourages openness and better governance; and the need to defuse some of the politically conflicted (and consistently hypocritical) views of Africans toward the United States.

A new paradigm of American engagement with Africa will not depend on providing more—nor on providing less—of the tried-and-true mix of aid, trade preferences, and military assistance that has been extended in the past. Much more can be done with resources than simply assisting Africa in dealing with crises.

The next US administration needs to set clear priorities that reflect the intersection of American and African interests. The strategic goal should be twofold: first, to help African markets become global economic players and stable domestic systems—ensuring that African countries grow their way to development; and second, in so doing, to strengthen multilateral institutions and cooperation, not only for the purpose of managing African crises but also to encourage further economic growth.

At the international level, a new American approach would demand greater formal inclusiveness. This could include, as part of a reorganization of the UN Security Council, offering Africa some sort of permanent presence on the council. The main purpose of this would be not to appease the national egos of nascent powers, but to make such nations part of the regime of collective responsibility—thereby reducing the incentive to engage in reckless, feckless behavior. The same principle applies at the regional level. After all, locals generally know better, so let them lead—this gives them a stake in stability. In any case, without regional support, there is no way a political solution can stick (just think of Zimbabwe).

At the level of African states themselves, there needs to be a new approach by Washington and others toward (re)building states. The focus should be on local empowerment, helping to establish local actors, moving quickly, learning quickly, delivering security, reinvigorating traditional economic sectors and growth drivers, and—more than anything—creating jobs. The international community has struggled to establish such virtuous cycles most of the time, which helps to explain why more than half of post-conflict countries slide back to war within five years. The battle to provide electricity, from Liberia's Tower Hill to Sierra Leone's Freetown, is testament to the difficulty of peace building and the inadequacy of international systems in this regard.

Pressing the levers

What are the levers that a new US administration could employ to ensure greater focus on such issues, as well as greater inclusiveness? Aid is one such lever. But it is an imperfect tool, given the limits of using humanitarian assistance as a stick against many regimes receiving it (from Sudan to Zimbabwe).

Support for free trade is another lever. Of all of the incentives that the United States has at its disposal, support for free trade is, politically and economically, perhaps the most powerful. Not all African countries will be affected equally by free trade, nor will they all be affected positively, but the overall impact will be very beneficial for African economies. Washington, together with liberals in Europe and further afield, should employ this tool against isolationists on behalf of 750 million Africans.

Another critically important lever has been consistently absent during presidential safaris to Africa. These trips are more theater than reality, the aim being to present the United States in a positive light through carefully scripted announcements of aid projects. They fail to address one of Africa's most serious deficits: global business investment.

Africa's problem is marginalization and lack of competitiveness. Addressing this problem will require more globalization, not less. So when the next US president roars into town, Africans should say: Sir or madam, please pack your plane not just with the White House press corps but with businesspeople who come to strike deals. And let these deals—not new aid initiatives—be the centerpiece of your speeches. Africa needs more investment and economic growth. It needs less theater and, certainly, no more pity. ■