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Why Africa Matters

by I. William Zartman

The notion that Africa's relevance to U.S. interests derives primarily from identification of the continent as an East-West chessboard has from the beginning ignored several basic realities. The first of these, as Soviet analysts and officials have increasingly acknowledged by word and deed in recent years, is that Marxist-Leninist worldviews are not attuned to the African condition. Despite periodic revisions in ways of dealing with "African socialist" or "presocialist" or "national bourgeois" phases of political evolution in various states of the continent, African nationalism remains the dominant ideology; it is an ideology alien to class conflict and proletarian revolt.

Africa is attractive to the West, on the other hand, in Western terms. It is an area of the globe where U.S. technology can be put to exemplary use to bring a better life and a wider range of choices to people whose basic values are akin to our own in more ways than we once thought. Africa should be, indeed is, attractive to Americans who come to know it because here the challenge of the frontier can be reenacted, both as a struggle to tame nature and as a struggle for human promotion at individual, community, national, and regional levels.

In looking at evolving Africa through this broader prism, U.S. interests in relation to the continent fall into three interrelated categories:

1. U.S. Geostrategic Interests

Terrain is valuable in Africa for two geostrategic reasons — when it is part of a large, centrally located country, and when it is on an ocean shore. Zaire, Sudan, Nigeria, Algeria, Morocco, Kenya, and Ethiopia are clear examples. But since any state borders on some other state, even a rather unimpressive piece of terrain such as Chad may take on value in the context of its neighborhood.

Seashores on the continent are either Indian, Atlantic, Mediterranean, or Red. Far shores in general have more direct value to a great power and near shores are more important to keep out of opponents' hands, since space does not have to be occupied militarily but at most protected. Thus, the United States and the Soviet Union have competitive interests in Mediterranean, Indian, and Red Sea countries, whereas in Atlantic African countries the United States is more interested in reducing Soviet ties than in increasing its own presence. The strategic importance of the littoral lends significance to naval

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access, facility, port, and visit rights, whether in practice or in potential. Similar considerations apply to overflight and air landing privileges elsewhere on the continent.

In addition to the strategic value of littoral states in general, some states have heightened importance because of their location on maritime choke points. Morocco, Egypt, Ethiopia-Djibouti-Somalia, even Tunisia are examples. South Africa, by the way, is not. The so-called strategic location of the Cape of Good Hope is a strain on credulity, a nineteenth-century play on a Mercator illusion, in which the southern extremities of the continents are swollen in size and placed like Gibraltar as gatekeepers to the edge of the world. Unlike the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and even the Sicilian Channel, the Cape is a point that chokes nothing, and any route that passes by can be choked more effectively and efficiently at several points up the road.

Africa's strategic importance to the United States lies also in its proximity to major trouble spots in the Middle East, where commitments and strategic materials dependency come into play. Yet Africa has been an important trouble spot in its own right, spawning conflicts that have evoked response even from the most disinterested administrations. Why? Because African conflicts send their participants scurrying to borrow power on the world market and therefore inherently contain the danger of great-power involvement and hence of a U.S. role (in a supportive or mediational capacity) even if the United States has no direct interest in the conflict.

While the United States has no commitment to African state preservation such as it has to Israel (or had to Lebanon), both Republican and Democratic administrations are inclined to pursue policies aimed at ensuring access and minimizing the temptations of participants to turn to Moscow or Havana for large quantities of arms. In Africa as in the Middle East, the greatest danger is perceived as a regional war that would get out of hand and turn into a bipolar conflict. Differences in intensity come from the Middle East's proximity to the Soviet Union, but not from other considerations more commonly assumed. Indeed, the United States imports as much petroleum from Africa as from the Middle East (around 10 percent of consumption in the late 1970s and about 5 percent in the early 1980s). It can be argued that it is logical for the Soviet Union to have a role in the Middle East because of propinquity, but this rationale does not apply to Africa, where neither nearness nor (except for Ethiopia) historic interests come into play.

How great, then, is the Soviet "threat" to Africa? The answer is that it is as great — but only as great — as the opportunities offered to it. This answer contains a number of implications. One is that the Soviet Union is unlikely to create opportunities, as it did in Afghanistan. While the chance of good relations may come from time to time through the evolution of domestic politics, as in Congo or Benin, real penetration into African countries has only occurred in the past decade under unusual circumstances that are unlikely to be repeated.

In Ethiopia, Moscow saw a recognizable revolution against a feudal monarchy long associated with the United States in an area of traditional Russian interest. There are no more such classical revolutionary situations in Africa. In Angola, a long-standing Marxist-Leninist party came to power through a long, violent national liberation struggle against a NATO colonizer. In both the Ethiopian and Angolan cases, the governments Moscow undertook to support were faced with invasions of their territory. Soviet intervention was not underhanded subversion but requested assistance justifiable under the terms of the Organization of African Unity charter as well as international law and practice.

Second, the USSR is unlikely to settle in for the long term in an African country as it did, for example, in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, but did not in Egypt, Sudan, Ghana, Guinea, or Somalia. The Soviet threat in any given place is only temporary, although the unpredictability of the stay may cause some uncomfortable moments for U.S. policymakers. If history tells us anything, it is that African states shop around for the needs and bargains of the moment, and they will find that the Soviet Union is incapable of meeting the basic needs of the continent for development. Soviet ties provide a short-term alternative, but it is strongly in the U.S. interest to follow the lead of Western Europe in keeping the door open for the inevitable time when the lure of the Soviet embrace palls. It is not merely that nationalism is stronger than communism; the USSR can provide the means of repression but not the means of development.

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This is not to say that the United States can ignore Africa because the threat of new Soviet openings is negligible, transitory, or (as in the case of South Africa) remotely possible. It is more expensive to provide fatted calves for returned prodigals than it is to help them develop as husbandmen of their resources.

2. Africa's Political Importance

Africa is of interest to the United States politically because of its unusually large voice in world forums and because of its domestic experiences on the road to democracy. Africa holds a sizable bloc of votes — 50, nearly a third of the current United Nations membership. These votes are not only exercised in the UN General Assembly but also in other bodies of Third World persuasion (the Nonaligned Movement, the Group of 77, UNCTAD) and in bodies where African states sit as regional representatives (the UN Security Council, the World Bank). The current U.S. administration has tried to pay as little attention as possible to such organizations, but they exist and they do have roles to play. They can mediate conflicts, influence agendas, recognize players, set up rules, distribute money, and generally make the practice of foreign policy easier or more difficult for larger states.

Africa may not be powerful enough to do what it wants in the world, even in its own world, but it can increase or reduce the cost and effort involved in Washington's doing what *it* wants. African votes in the UN have restricted U.S. action in some areas and forced action on the Namibian question and other matters. African governments circumscribed U.S. options by breaking diplomatic relations with Israel following the occupation of an African state's territory (the Sinai) in the 1970s and granting recognition to the Sahrawi government-in-exile in the Moroccan-occupied former Spanish Sahara in the 1980s. They facilitated U.S. policy by generally opposing the Soviet role in Afghanistan.

The United States also has an interest in encouraging any movement toward democracy in Africa and elsewhere. More African states have a stable government with some democratic features than is usually recognized, and even more are trying to move along a path toward greater participation and accountability, two main features of democracy.

The primary advantages that Africa has in building its own democratic experience are a historical social tradition of "town hall"-type participation and a strong commitment through the preindependence nationalist movements to universal values of self-government and human equality. Major impediments are, on the one hand, the problem of translating small-scale participation into effective practices of large-scale national representation, and, on the other, the overriding need to build the state before either nation, institutions, or economic incentives have been established.

Thus, there is an indigenous base to be built on and encouraged, and a series of current obstacles to be overcome. Since democracy is not a gift but a construction, it is important to both the United States and to African states to see democracy grow and be defended and to find ways of making its practice functional for both economic growth and political stability.

There are a number of active democratic experiences in Africa. A few multiparty systems exist, in Morocco, Senegal and Gambia, Botswana, Mauritius, Sudan, for the moment Uganda, and now newly in Tunisia; the multiparty tradition has been strong, even if currently discredited, in Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Liberia, and Kenya. An intermediate stage is provided by active single-party systems with choice, in which several candidates are nominated by the party for each elected seat and incumbents are frequently removed by the voters, as in Tanzania, Algeria, Kenya, and Côte d'Ivoire. Even in smaller and poorer countries such as Niger, Togo, and Guinea, military regimes seek to find appropriate institutions that involve local participation in constructive ways.

More broadly, a large and growing number of African countries have known smooth succession of leadership (often from the original George Washington figure), as in Morocco, Algeria, Senegal, Mozambique, Kenya, Angola, Sierra Leone, Botswana, Cameroon, Tunisia, Gabon, and (though later disrupted by military coup) Nigeria, Somalia, and Liberia. In total, there is more democratic practice in Africa than in Latin America, where much attention has been given to the subject in the context of U.S. policy and interests.

Absolute correlations between democracy and any other feature are hard to find, despite many attempts by analysts to do so. It is clear that democracy depends on an informed and involved public and that it thrives on social pluralism, although it may also become the victim when pluralistic conflict replaces pluralistic competition. Conflict is more likely to arise when the supply of economic rewards and incentives is fixed or shrinking and social pluralism and population numbers are growing. Thus, economic growth and development may not assure democracy, but democratic competition and political stability have a better chance in the presence of economic growth. Western friends of Africa cannot enforce democracy; they can only encourage it at particular moments of decision in African governments. The United States has an interest in assisting African countries to develop economically, not just for the sake of that development but because it is conducive as well to the political stability and evolution that is in the U.S. interest.

3. U.S. Economic Interests in Africa

Africa's economic importance to the United States extends beyond the present share of transactions. U.S. trade with Africa in 1986 was less than 3 percent of total U.S. trade (2.7 percent of U.S. imports and 2.8 percent of U.S. exports), and this figure was less than half of that for U.S.-African trade at the beginning of the

decade because of a major drop in import values. Investment numbers are elusive and contested, but most figures indicate that Africa accounted for less than 4 percent of U.S. direct investment abroad even before the recent wave of disinvestment from South Africa.

U.S. investment is overwhelmingly in the extractive sector (minerals and petroleum) and secondarily in manufacturing, and has been concentrated in a few countries — primarily South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Angola, Liberia, Sudan, Zambia, Gabon, Ghana. Investment is low because risk is high and returns, although higher than elsewhere in some cases, are not high enough to cover the risk. Furthermore, "America's Africa" in terms of long-standing economic ties and tropical products is Latin America, which has twice as much trade with the United States as does Africa. Although U.S. economic transactions with Africa are increasing, the general picture of U.S. economic interest in the continent is small, from whatever angle.

The exceptional aspect of this picture is usually considered to be the U.S. dependency on some specific mineral imports. Of the six most important minerals, there is an 80-100 percent import dependence on three (chromium, cobalt, and the platinum-group metals), of which South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zaire, and Zambia are the major sources. The United States also has an 80 percent import dependency on manganese ores, half of which come from Africa, mostly from Gabon and South Africa. The import dependency on bauxite is 90 percent, of which a quarter comes from Africa, mainly Guinea. The situation in regard to uranium is less clear, largely because of product sensitivity and market volatility in recent years. Uranium is found primarily in Namibia and South Africa and secondarily in central Africa (the Central African Republic, Gabon, Niger), but the United States is largely its own producer as of 1988. Beyond the import dependence, however, supply and demand elasticities often vary widely by product.

The first conclusion suggested by the foregoing is that Africa has a number of products that the United States needs badly and that form a substantial basis for trade interests. A related conclusion is that trade has at least as great an interest for the supplier as for the importer. Conditions of out-and-out political commodity wars are fine for adventure stories of the industrial age, but in reality they are farfetched and fanciful. It would take a very hard-line government in an African state under the absolute control of a similar government in the Soviet Union to withhold supply beyond the cushion afforded by stockpiling, either to cause strategic shortages or to run up prices.

Maintenance of supply and of the income it provides African countries is a strong common interest. Nowhere in the continent has the interruption of that supply ever been more than a potential problem. In fact, in the one case of supply interruption (petroleum in 1973-1974), it was Africa, notably Nigeria, that assured supply while the Middle East was applying a political embargo. This sequence was repeated when the Iranian supplier collapsed at the end of the decade. The lesson is not that there can never be a first time, but rather that the many types of situations that Africa has produced over the past quarter century of independence (and during the struggle for independence) have not resulted in the feared breach of access. Despite the absence of diplomatic relations between Washington and Luanda since independence in 1975, for example, the United States remains Angola's principal trading partner.

The three conclusions from an examination of the trade picture warrant underlining: (1) Africa does indeed supply the United States with important minerals as well as easily accessible oil, and there is a mutual interest in maintaining this trade, no matter who runs African governments. (2) The danger to this trade is therefore not in specific changes of government but rather chronic and prolonged instability (as was threatened by the invasions in 1977 and 1978 of Zaire's Shaba province by dissident exiles from Angola, or as Nigeria experienced during its 1967-1970 civil war). (3) The United States also has an interest in developing greater African purchasing power for U.S. goods. Rather than living up to the old image of a market for cheap industrial goods obtained in exchange for raw materials, Africa now sends cheap raw materials but is unable to buy expensive industrial goods.

The last two conclusions cited above point to an important underlying U.S. interest in seeing greater African development, in both the political and economic areas. Continued political underdevelopment — lack of participation and institutionalization — breeds instability. Continued economic underdevelopment — lack of sustained growth and redistribution — breeds small markets.

But what is there to distinguish U.S. interest in economic development in Africa from that in any other part of the Third World? The answer is made of many pieces. Part, as previously noted, comes from the importance of economic development for other interests — stability in the strategic context, basis for democratic evolution, growth of an export position. But part lies also in the extent of the problem in Africa. Countries of Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have their difficulties, but most are further into the process of economic development than is Africa. Africa's traditional economy is being destroyed, by both man and nature, without there yet being a robust modern economy to rely on. Until that transition is made, African economies cannot afford U.S. goods in quantities large enough to interest U.S. firms and they cannot take care of their own basic needs. As Secretary of State Shultz has put it, "The problem...is not so much a debt problem as an income-earning problem."

African states now consume U.S. dollars rather than U.S. goods. It is in the U.S. interest to help correct both sides of this imbalance. How this is done depends on a number of policy considerations; the emphasis here is on the importance of doing so from the point of view of U.S. interests. Africa is not yet heavily indebted in

comparison to the striking cases of Latin America. Only six states (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, South Africa, and Nigeria) had an eleven-figure (tens of billions of dollars) external debt at the end of 1987, and none but Egypt over $25 billion. But the debt is nonetheless a burden for African states and one that is rising very fast in many instances. Public debt servicing in 1986 took over 20 percent of exports in 16 OAU countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Niger, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Somalia, Togo, Tunisia, Kenya, Malawi, Algeria, and Morocco).

For the United States, the situation is more a challenge of measures than of magnitude, whereas for African states it is a matter of vital importance and a symptom of a difficult economic bind. One threat that has already been voiced from time to time is that of a debtors' moratorium. Although it is not likely to be applied (the best threats are those which need not be applied to be effective), such a moratorium would clearly arise from inability rather than unwillingness to pay and would have a good chance of starting a bandwagon effect. Like many of Africa's pressures in international affairs, the threat is one of coercive deficiency, the weight of the weak. It is in the U.S. interest to take measures to help Africa overcome the economic weaknesses that spawned the threat.

Part of the debt-and-production problem in Africa is a food problem. A continent that previously exported food now imports food in massive quantities. This is because there are now twice as many Africans to feed as there were in the last decade of colonial rule; four times as many are in the cities and away from their own food production; twice as large a proportion are in nonproductive (dependent) age categories; and a large proportion of the population eats more and has acquired a broader range of tastes. This demand increase has far outrun the much slower indigenous supply increase.

Famine elicits a deep humanitarian response from Americans. But the response will be hard to sustain over a long period of time. Famine is not a hurricane, and Africa is not Marshall Plan Europe. Hurricane relief rebuilds quickly, restoring life to the previously productive level from which it can go on, just as Marshall Plan aid reconstructed a highly developed but temporarily destroyed economy. Development in Africa needs to be put together, not put back together. Unless it is, Africa will be a growing burden on world — and thus U.S. — resources and attentions. If development — diversification and industrialization — is not begun, Africa's food deficiency will grow with its population and the ability to earn money with exports will lag and sag with the fluctuating terms of trade.

In sum, the United States has economic interests in Africa of both positive and negative dimensions — interests in goods to obtain and in burdens to avoid. For the most part, they are two sides of the same developmental equation, in which the more Africa develops, the less of a burden it becomes to the United States and other Western nations and the more it is able to offer tangible and intangible goods that the United States values. Thus, economic development is not merely a direct interest in itself (e.g., chromium supplies) but rather the central element in a whole nexus of interests.

Looking Ahead

It was once thought that independence would allow African societies to continue the progress begun under colonization, and that takeoff into development and democracy was merely a matter of time. It is clear now that, at best, the time involved is severely extended and that, at worst, the possibilities of economic growth, political participation, and social promotion are most uncertain. These developments change the terms of U.S. interest in Africa but they do not change its nature. The increasing challenges of the coming years mean that the United States will need to pay more attention to Africa for the United States' own good.

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