Some Thoughts on the U.S. Policy Process

by Helen Kitchen

In a book I wrote in 1983 entitled *U.S. Interests in Africa* (published by Praeger in the CSIS Washington Papers series), various aspects of our relations with the continent, as well as the instruments of policy-making, were assessed. With the Cold War at an end and Europe 1992 in the offing, the Washington foreign policy establishment is groping for new ways of dealing with the changing world beyond our shores, including Africa. As a contribution to this exploration, *CSIS Africa Notes* suggests that the following six points have lost none of their relevance since they first appeared as segments of *U.S. Interests in Africa* more than seven years ago:

1. The Role of Strategic Intelligence

In a political system such as ours, where changes in senior and even upper middle level policymaking positions are kaleidoscopic and the amount of substantive consultation that takes place with each new episode of musical chairs is often governed by such factors as personal style or partisan political considerations, the institutional memory of regional careerists is (or should be) a critical bridge.

As Sherman Kent, a Yale historian who played a major role in the Office of Strategic Services in World War II and subsequently returned to serve for 20 years as director of the CIA's Office of National Estimates, observed in a 1949 study of the relationship between strategic intelligence and U.S. foreign policy, the task of collecting and analyzing the many pieces of information that interact to define or affect U.S. interests throughout the world is "a specialty of the very highest order," quite different from line duty in either the diplomatic or military service. Intelligence, as defined by Kent, is "the kind of knowledge our state must possess regarding other states in order to assure itself that its cause will not suffer nor its undertakings fail because its statesmen and soldiers plan and act in ignorance." Although some of this knowledge may be acquired through clandestine means, "the bulk of it must be had through unromantic open-and-above-board observation and research."...

To find a unit resembling Kent’s "idealistic concept" in the postwar period, one must go back to the 1950s, when the R&A branch of the dismantled OSS had been spun off to the Department of State as a new Office of Intelligence Research (subsequently retitled the Bureau of Intelligence and Research—INR). The INR of that time left “current intelligence” and “morning briefings” to the operating bureaus and the executive secretariat. Its mandate, to which the unit’s early leadership and staff of analysts clung with something
approaching religiosity, was to lay out trends, to ascertain and describe basic forces and movements, and to define the possible long-term outcomes of alternative policy courses available to all those involved in a given situation. The INR of that era had (and wanted) no more than a token presence at the Secretary of State’s morning staff meetings and considered it a major tactical victory when senior decision makers were occasionally shaken by career analysts’ then-heretical counsel (such as, “Islam is not necessarily a barrier to communism,” “neutrality is the wave of the future,” “the French cannot win in Algeria,” “the Baghdad Pact is a loser,” or “you may be able to put the shah back on the throne in Iran, but there will be another Mossadeq, or worse.”)

The integrity of the contribution of such a service—wherever in the bureaucracy it is located—depends on a blend of respect for scholarship and nonpartisan Washington savvy in its leadership, relative isolation from the overheated atmosphere that surrounds the process of dealing with day-to-day policy questions, and staffing by men and women who expect to spend their lives, in or out of government, honing their understanding of a particular society or region. Although a good case can be made for the dangers of overidentification with one’s area of responsibility in the implementation of policy, the policymaking process is well served by some kibitzers with long memories and a commitment to understanding rather than judging human behavior.

2. The Policy Planning Function
Although the Department of State’s Policy Planning Staff has brought some creative minds to the higher echelons of government over the past 40 years and has added an important dimension to the policymaking process under some administrations, the co-option of this unit into day-to-day operations is the rule rather than the exception. We have to go back to the early postwar years to find a time when a secretary of state (George C. Marshall) and his director of policy planning (George Kennan) have been committed in both word and deed to the principle that the policy planning role should be future-oriented, nonoperational, and accorded critical importance.

Ideally, the director of policy planning should be a respected and seasoned authority on international affairs whose writings have been relatively nonpartisan (or at least nonpolemical). This is no job, however, for an academician of ivory tower bent. The effectiveness of the operation would be heavily dependent on the administrative and networking wizardry of both the director and his area officers in seeking out and drawing on the lodes of expertise regarding various geographical and functional areas that are tucked away in corners of the government bureaucracy, in academic institutions here and abroad, in other governments, and among the political risk analysts of corporations.

Such a policy planning staff would be a major customer, of course, for the institutional memory bank discussed earlier as a crucial need in the intelligence community. Unlike the envisaged intelligence unit, however, the policy planning unit proposed here would have to be sensitive to the complex interplay of the legislative and executive branches of the government, various power centers within these branches, personalities, interest groups, and domestic political issues in shaping U.S. foreign policy in the short and long run on any given issue. It would also have to accept as a fact of life the educational function in Dean Acheson’s reflection that “it is our sad destiny to put people in the presidency with no experience in foreign affairs.”

Ironically, Africa will only take on an identity of its own in the making of U.S. foreign policy when or if an institutionalized advisory group comes into being that has as its sole mandate the determination of how or whether the jumble of perceived U.S. interests and priorities around the globe will fit together a decade or two decades hence.

3. The Anomaly of Two Bureaus
[One of the elements] contributing to mixed signals on Africa is the bureaucratic anomaly that splits responsibility for one of the most volatile areas of the continent between two bureaus of the Department of State. When the Bureau of African Affairs was first established in 1958, its domain [was envisaged as including] all of Africa except Egypt. In 1974, during the Kissinger era, a decision was made to transfer Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia into the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. Under this rearrangement, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs has responsibility for policy with regard to Chad, the Western Sahara, Sudan, and an Organization of African Unity (OAU) polarized in the early 1980s over Saharan issues. But responsibility for dealing with some of the principals in these areas—Morocco’s King Hassan, Libya’s Mu’ammar Qaddafi, and Algeria’s Chadli Bendjedid—falls to a bureau focused on critical matters east of Suez that has little interest in or time for the infinite complexities of Saharan politics.

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The Reagan administration's very different styles of operation in northern and southern Africa [could] be viewed, in part at least, as a manifestation of both the substantive and bureaucratic dualities described above. In southern Africa, one may dispute the specifics but not the conceptual integrity of the policy of "constructive engagement" designed by Assistant Secretary [Chester] Crock. Nuanced diplomacy knowledgeably respectful of the domestic pressures on all of the governments and political personalities of the region [was] employed in a carefully orchestrated effort aimed at achieving two key objectives: a ceasefire and independence for Namibia that [would] be honored by all parties and governments and a peaceful withering away (subsequently hardened to "withdrawal of") the Cuban military forces and advisers in Angola. In northern and eastern Africa, in contrast, geostrategic considerations appear to have dictated policy actions... driven primarily by national security perceptions... The hardening of positions to which the United States [was] contributing in this region of various stalemated, incipient, and ongoing local wars [contrasted] sharply with the "honest broker" role the United States... elected to play in southern Africa.

4. How Many Embassies in Africa?
The demands put upon the U.S. diplomatic establishment by the proliferation of African states in the 1960s prompted Under Secretary of State George Ball to reply to an action alert from Assistant Secretary for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams at the time of the 1964 Zanzibar coup with the observation: "It is my impression that God watches every sparrow that may fall; I do not see why we should compete in that league." The implicit questions in the biblical paraphrase are ones that still hang in the air in the higher reaches of Washington officialdom: How much diplomatic manpower does Africa warrant and aren't there some crises we could leave to the former colonial powers to worry about? The answer, as in the case of any question about Africa, is complicated.

U.S. interests in Africa are indeed served by consultation on a regular basis with European allies whose roles on the continent complement, long antedate, and are often more important than our own. Although such consultation is essential to any serious effort to evolve a more coherent U.S. sense of purpose with regard to Africa, it is not a substitute for direct, informed, and candid relationships with each African state—regardless of size and ideological leanings...

The cost of maintaining half a hundred diplomatic missions on the continent and surrounding islands is high (and is higher when consulates are counted), but there are at least two practical reasons for giving serious attention to the style and substance of each bilateral link in Africa. The first is that Africa accounts for approximately one-third of the total membership of the United Nations. One of the characteristics of small governments is that they tend to place great store in international organizations such as the UN where, for example, a São Tomé or a Djibouti can, at least in the General Assembly, have a vote equal to that of either superpower. Even in the superpower-dominated Security Council there is usually at least one African seat [as of December 1990, there are three]. For all its imperfections, the UN remains a sounding board for the poor and the powerless—which, to a considerable degree, means Africa. A second reason for maintaining a credible diplomatic presence in each African country is that, as the mini-war over the Falklands demonstrated in 1982, size and intrinsic importance do not necessarily determine where the spotlight will move in the restructured world of the late twentieth century.

Professionally staffed U.S. diplomatic missions in all African countries, in touch with all elements of society, are the best insurance available to us against misreading and overreacting to local crises and also against facing a crisis or opportunity with no cards to play.

5. Is the VOA the Voice of America?
The image of U.S. values and interests projected to Africa is shaped not only by government-to-government policies and actions, but also by the content of Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts heard throughout the continent every day by those who own or have access to transistor radios. Controversy over the VOA's mission and content has persisted since its founding in the 1940s—a controversy that [has centered] on whether the Voice should be viewed primarily as a pro-Western [and, until recently, anti-Communist] propaganda vehicle, a journalistic venture following professional norms of unbiased world news and commentary, or a window on America, "warts and all." Concerns about the relevance of the Voice [have fallen] mainly into three groupings:

- As a source of news and commentary, the Voice cannot compete with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which is an aspect of the British Empire on which millions of faithful listeners around the world hope the sun will never set. The BBC's reputation for reliability and integrity is so unique that African officials even in the [most avowedly Marxist countries of the 1960s and 1970s] were likely to assume that visitors [would] want to join them in interrupting appointments when the BBC world news [was] due... Although the BBC's external services are an important underpinning of British foreign policy and are nominally and budgetarily under the Foreign Office, the corporation has always looked upon these services "as the flagship of British culture and fairmindedness which produces incidental benefits for the nation."... This reputation has been built on a scrupulous dedication to independent and even-handed reporting, even when (as in the Falklands crisis of 1982) this has embarrassed British governments...

- A significant portion of VOA's programming to Africa... consists of cultural and educational presentations. Books and other works on Africa are reviewed and excerpted at length, and much of the cultural content reflects a conscientious effort to appeal to specifically African or "ethnic" interests, and to educate. These programs are not without interest, but they are subject to credibility problems because they convey a much higher
and broader interest level about Africa than in fact exists in the United States. And sufficient account is perhaps not taken of the fact that African radio listeners, like radio listeners in Tennessee or Oregon or New York, have a limited tolerance for uplifting educational fare.

- VOA's return, in the early 1980s, to what USIA Director Charles Wick [described] as a more vigorous effort to counteract Soviet disinformation [did] not arouse the responses in Africa it may [have] in some other parts of the world, because "the Communist menace" [did] not connect with African realities. It is easy for us to forget that Africans' experience with oppressive externally based masters [was] entirely with West European colonial rule... Neither the Soviet Union nor Cuba... established a presence in an African country except by invitation and neither has yet declined to depart when asked to do so.

In a sense, the VOA is a microcosm of the unresolved ambiguities and discontinuities of the entire relationship between the United States and Africa. When Africans listen to BBC programs beamed to Africa, they know precisely what they are hearing—news and commentary calculated on whatever nationality or occupation who is living, visiting, or interested in Africa. They know that the BBC broadcasts in Britain itself, while the VOA is precluded by law from providing materials to U.S. radio networks and stations. When one turns to the BBC, there is a sense of listening not on the world that an African does not experience when he listens to VOA programs specifically crafted for African audiences.

6. Why the OAU Matters

Although some disputes in Africa that are basically unfinished business from the colonial era cannot be resolved without the help of outside negotiators—Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in the 1970s and South West Africa/Namibia continuing into the 1980s—there are many interstate African issues that are in the U.S. (indeed, in everybody's) interest to keep in African channels... It is in this context that the role of the Organization of African Unity warrants a more careful evaluation than it usually receives in U.S. policymaking circles.

For those of us who witnessed the contentious preliminaries to the OAU's founding in 1963, the fact that the organization has survived for [27] years is a remarkable achievement that few were prepared to predict at the outset or in some of the stormier years since. Volumes could be written (in fact, have been written) on the structural and functional weaknesses of the OAU, but both of these weaknesses were inherent in the compromises that had to be made at the founding conference in Addis Ababa between the differing conceptions of "unity" held at that time by the so-called Brazzaville-Monrovia and Casablanca groups. Given what the OAU is—an association with very limited power but possessing the collective moral clout to render certain specified kinds of conflict unacceptable—the organization's role is relevant to U.S. security interests on the continent.

When the boundaries of Africa's more than 50 political entities were devised at European bargaining tables in the nineteenth century, the shapes, sizes, and arrangements of the various colonial territories were not determined by geographic, ethnic, linguistic, or economic considerations related to any notion of their ever becoming self-governing states. Nevertheless, when decolonization of Africa began in the middle of the twentieth century, independent Africa's first generation of heads of state concluded that a Pandora's box would be opened up if any attempt were made to redraw the map inherited from the colonial era.

Thus, in Article III of the charter adopted at the founding conference and in various reaffirming actions taken since, the governments of independent Africa have maintained a high degree of consensus on two points:

First, borders of member states at the time of independence remain inviolable in any OAU consideration of territorial disputes. Second, the OAU cannot condone any activities that are aimed at subverting governments of member states or any form of interference by one state in the internal affairs of another. Deviations from these two principles have been dealt with by the OAU, sometimes explicitly and sometimes by indirection, as breaches of the charter. (Several instances were Somalia's 1977-1978 military campaign to establish sovereignty over the Somali-inhabited Ethiopian province of Ogaden; the Eritrean, Biafran, Falangyan, and southern Sudanese secessionist movements; Tanzania's 1979 military intervention in Uganda to assist in the overthrow of Idi Amin; and Israel's move into [the Egyptian Sinai in 1967].) The consistency of African consensus in this area, even in cases of misrule as flagrant as that of Uganda's Idi Amin, goes a long way toward explaining why no African state has lost territory to a neighbor's irredentism since 1963 and why no separatist movement has yet achieved its goal of establishing a new political entity. Moreover, no state—even one as shattered as Chad became in the course of its long civil war—has yet lost its "statehood" in the eyes of the OAU.

A clear differentiation must be made between the brake imposed by the OAU on irredentism and cross-border wars and the periodic flaring of disputes over borders imprecisely demarcated, especially when such border areas are found to contain potentially valuable minerals or oil. Also falling outside the OAU domain have been the responses by neighbors to requests from recognized governments for aid in quelling insurrections, such as Morocco to the aid of Zaire during Shaba I in 1977 and Shaba II in 1978, Senegal to Gambia in 1981, Guinée to Sierra Leone in 1971, or, by the OAU's implicit interpretation at its 1981 annual summit in Nairobi, Libya to Chad in 1980. Covert relationships between African governments and antigovernment forces in neighboring states inevitably remain another gray area.

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