African Foreign Policy in a changing geo-strategic environment

By Francis Kornegay and Iqbal Jhazbhay

This analysis attempts to map out some key geo-strategic – political and economic – challenges facing Africa’s foreign policy, taking into account developments around the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). Below, we trace the ten principal challenges to African foreign policy.


The American critic, Gore Vidal (relative of former US Vice-President Al Gore and the late Jackie Kennedy Onassis), who predicted an eventual ‘Soviet-American Condominium’, once characterised the US and Russia as the “two klutzes of the Northern Hemisphere”, since “neither one of us can make a car anybody wants to drive. We’re natural allies.”

How natural would only emerge once the Cold War was over. Even more perceptive in the post-Cold War period was former US National Security Adviser under President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who advocated “a trans-Eurasian security system” which “might involve an expanded NATO, linked by cooperative security agreements with Russia, China and Japan”.

Fast forward to 2003 and the new NATO-Russia Council complementing the US-Russian treaty to cut deployed nuclear warheads in “one of the most tangible pieces of evidence of the new relationship emerging between the former cold war enemies”.

What one might term ‘Northern Consolidation’ was a trend already well underway before the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. If anything, one of the consequences of 9/11 has been an acceleration of this trend amid several other developments within the G-8 (itself a reflection of this trend, bringing together the G-7 powers plus post-Soviet Russia) and within the developing world that threatens to reinforce the imbalance of power between North and South, though not without major contradictions within and among the northern industrial powers.

In fact, the escalating moves towards an American military offensive against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, coupled with the growing salience of the international politics of oil, are placing these trends in sharp relief. Taking these developments into account, this international move towards Northern consolidation and Southern disarray forms a global back-drop that should inform African foreign policy calculations.

2. The War on Terror: The New Organising Principle of Policy?

As the US/NATO-Russian alignment should indicate, many of the current trends in international relations, at the policy level have long been on the planning boards of Western foreign policy and strategic studies establishments. Pre-9/11, the foreign policy of George W Bush actually posed a threat to these calculations in their more mainstream liberal internationalist expression, as Bush Jr’s administration was headed in a strongly unilateralist direction with the backing of a Christian fundamentalist, neo-isolationist, and neo-conservative alliance within the Republican Party. Post-9/11 for a short time jerked Bush policy back towards the more multilateralist centre of gravity dominated by the traditional bipartisan foreign policy/national security establishment.

The ‘War Against Terror’ became the new organising principle in Bush Administration policy. This was expressed in an uneasy accommodation between the more mainstream liberal internationalists and the Christian fundamentalist/neo-conservative alliance. By extension, in terms of the way other world powers are relating to Washington, this principle emerged as the dominant motif, though not nearly to the extent of the Cold War ideological motif that polarised much of the world into rival geopolitical camps. However, the Bush administration’s determination to pursue a war to overthrow Saddam Hussein, linked to clear signs of its implementing a broader agenda relating to oil and trade, have introduced yet other considerations in need of analysis, starting with a more focused look at the domestic political dynamics animating the foreign policy of Bush Jr.

3. The Neo-Conservative Civilian Coup

In terms of US civil-military relations, the ‘war council’ represents a civilian coup of committed unilateralists over a military establishment leery of any Iraq adventure. Occupying a post-Saddam Iraq for 30 years is not an endearing prospect to America’s military brass.

The civilian warriors have been dubbed “Chicken Hawks” – public persons, “generally male, who (1) tend to advocate... military solutions to political problems, and who have personally (2) declined to take advantage of a significant opportunity to serve in uniform during wartime”. They are considered to...
forces and the industrialised North on engagement within Africa and the Global South and between Southern and Northern consolidation, there are other trends underway, especially within the European Union (EU), that bear close watching and that may have unpredictable consequences for NEPAD. This is the anti-immigrant shift to the ultra-right in EU politics.

Given the prospect that the G8 partnership with Africa on NEPAD is likely to hinge more on the EU than on the US, there will be a need to closely monitor and study this political trend to ascertain its possible policy impacts on Africa. On the one hand, anti-immigrant pressures would appear to justify greater EU trade, aid and investment in African economies as one response or at least as one of the incentives for EU delivery on NEPAD. On the other hand, given the right-wing ascendency in the US, under the Bush Administration, a rightward shift in the EU could make Africa less of a priority with more attention focused on southern and eastern Europe and/or the north African Mediterranean.

Essentially, this anti-immigrant rightward shift within several EU countries reflects a new European crisis of identity as the EU seeks enlargement, in the process diluting its Atlanticist, north-west European character. The most recent and inevitable point of tension here, which has the potential to undermine NATO, is the issue of Turkey. The inclusion of predominantly Islamic Turkey holds out the prospect of transforming the EU into less of a European and more of a Eurasian geo-political/economic and cultural bloc amid the shrinking demography of the EU’s European core.

Non-European Turkey becomes, demographically, the largest member of the EU, potentially reinforcing the identity crises feeding Europe xenophobic tendencies, though Europe’s population decline poses potential economic challenges running counter to the anti-immigrant feeling. Turkey’s Eurasian Islamic identity has generated an undertow of western European resistance to Turkey’s entry into the EU. The US, on the other hand, for clear geo-strategic reasons having to do with the Middle Eastern conflict and the ‘war on terror’, is pressing for Brussels to open negotiations on Turkey’s entry into the EU sooner rather than later.

While the issue of Turkey has the potential to undermine European unity, and thereby, threaten a counter-trend toward Northern consolidation, Turkey’s integration into Europe has wider geopolitical significance. This relates to Washington’s need to consolidate a pro-
greater impact in undermining Southern strategic realignment appears underway. Geo-strategically, this alignment takes all alliance, change’ in Iraq. Namely, in the area of the Red Sea where the US fundamental cleavages emerging from the conflict, simmers, has become isolated while Sudan is undertaking an uncertain peace process. Turkey is a potential factor in the geopolitical reconfiguration of Central Asia as an alternative to its joining Europe. Central Asia is an unstable area of heightened fluidity as a result of the ‘war on terror’, bringing with it expanded US influence and jockeying for the region’s petroleum reserves.

**7 Trade and Political Tensions: US, EU and Japan**

Furthermore, running against the grain of Northern consolidation are the trade tensions within the G8 between the US, on the one hand, and the EU and Japan. This could signal an instability that undermines multilateral trade gains in the Doha Round that Africa is looking for in terms of greater access to developed country markets. But trade tensions within the G8 are being reinforced by what appear to be increasingly more fundamental cleavages emerging from the ‘war on terror’ and the increasing focus of the Bush Administration on ‘regime change’ in Iraq. Namely, a polarisation between US unilateralism and EU multilateralism – although US Secretary of State Colin Powell has managed, thus far, to hold his own with the neo-conservative hawks by maneuvering US-Iraq policy into the constraints of the UN Security Council.

**8 Israel, the Indo-Pakistan Conflict and the Red Sea**

Meanwhile, the Middle East conflict has become ever more intractable. This is a function of the ‘new’ Bush policy which is seen as crystallising the US-Israeli alliance, compounded by the Indo-Pakistan confrontation over Kashmir. Indo-Pakistan tensions have a much greater impact in undermining Southern cohesion than is generally appreciated. But while this conflict simmers, a major strategic realignment appears underway in the area of the Red Sea where the US is incorporating a still unstable alignment of such states as Yemen and Djibouti as well as potentially Ethiopia, the Sudan and Eritrea, though the latter has become isolated while Sudan is undergoing an uncertain peace process. Geo-strategically, this alignment takes in east Africa as well, as reflected in the Al-Qaeda attack in Mombasa, highlighting the strategic role of Kenya.

Thus, within the new post-9/11 strategic environment enveloping Africa, the eastern side of the continent is being incorporated as a major staging area in the war on terror and forms a potential backdrop for a consolidated periphery undergirding an eventual Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The problem, however, is that Africa’s fragile stability can ill afford to accommodate a war on terror any more than it was able to accommodate the Cold War. This poses crucial policy challenges to the African Union in terms of refocusing on the notion of the Indian Ocean as a ‘zone of peace’ and expanding it into a broader doctrine defining Africa as a ‘continental zone of peace’ reinforced by an Afro-Arab dialogue on African security. However, this would have to be complemented by a revisiting of the ‘Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic’ to address the encroachment of the international politics of oil along the west African coast and US trade strategy in southern Africa and Latin America.

**9 China, India and Latin America’s Mercosur**

The current South African geo-economic strategy of forging free trade linkages with major southern powers and regional blocs could be greatly helped by the consolidation of the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) as a complement to progress with the Latin American Mercosur grouping towards an eventual South Atlantic Free Trade Area. However, this South-South consolidating is complicated by Argentina’s economic meltdown and a clear preference by the US to incorporate the Latin American ‘southern cone’ into a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), to which there is considerable resistance amid the emergence of a new democratically elected left-wing regime in Brazil. (Complementing the US-FTAA strategy is Washington’s focus in southern Africa aimed at drawing the Southern African Customs Union into a free trade area building on the African Growth and Opportunity Act to offset South Africa’s trade and development agreement with the EU.) Otherwise, in the case of the Indian Ocean, the Indo-Pakistan confrontation has long retarded the potential for Southern geo-economic consolidation complementing South Atlantic interregional trade possibilities at a time when China is contemplating a Sino-ASEAN mega-free trade zone linking with the Asia-Pacific Cooperation (APEC).

Meanwhile, the renewed Indo-Pakistan confrontation, as one consequence of 9/11 geopolitics, has sucked both India and Pakistan into an American sphere of influence without any offsetting South Asian and/or Indian Ocean sphere of regional cooperation to balance the growing US hegemony in Southwest and Central Asia. Ironically, these geopolitical gains for Washington came without it having to do what it was allegedly aiming to do prior to 9/11: dump Pakistan for India in an attempt to contain China as a potential rival to US influence in Asia.

China, in effect, was set to replace the former Soviet Union as the ‘Evil Empire’ prior to 9/11 and the Iraq-Iran-North Korean ‘Axis of Evil’. As it is, Sino-Indian relations have never fully recovered from China’s humiliation of India in the Himalayas, which consolidated Beijing’s control over Tibet. It is also possible that it contributed to the intractability of the Kashmir issue between India and China’s traditional ally, Pakistan, in Beijing’s own containment of New Delhi.

The result is a vacuum in terms of economic cooperation in the South Asian/Indian Ocean region which is a natural geo-economic point of linkage in Afro-Asian economic and trade relations. Plan B for (South) Africa is already unfolding now: the forging of separate bilateral FTZs with India and China in the absence of dynamism in the IOR-ARC, complemented by regional integration within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). These Asian contradictions also inhibit the consolidation of a ‘G8 of the South’ as a counter-alignment to Northern hegemony.

If the South is currently on the back foot, the long-term stakes are nevertheless compellingly in favour of a protracted strategy of engagement aimed at harmonising South-South political as well as economic relations. By mid-Century, Africa will be over the one billion mark in terms of population, joining India and...
China. All the more reason for a foreign policy focus on Africa’s consolidation to overcome its own fragmentation. This is what the AU is all about. But, in the post-9/11 era of the global anti-terrorism war and an incipient bid by some factions in Washington to turn the US into an awesomely imperially hegemonic, the challenge confronting the major African powers will be to safeguard, indeed enhance, Africa’s autonomy and non-alignment in the international system.

The international politics of oil and trade in the South Atlantic and the international politics of anti-terrorism in the Persian Gulf would tend to dictate the articulation of Africa’s security status as a Continental Zone of Peace as a corollary to the onset of the new AU/NEPAD era. This should be accompanied by the AU’s promotion of codes of conduct for foreign transnational companies investing in African mineral and energy resources.

A protracted African consolidation strategy revolving around the transition to the AU and the implementation of NEPAD would not only benefit Africa’s interests, but would contribute more broadly to a Southern consolidation of geopolitical and economic interest, bringing about an eventual North-South balance of power along the fulcrum of Sino-Indian-African axis.

But there is a major African weak link in this chain (not to mention all the other African peace and security challenges): Northeast Africa, where Egypt’s security concerns over the Nile Basin keep cropping up as a continuing factor of instability in and around Ethiopia, the Sudan, Somaliland and Somalia, with ramifications for the East African Community as well. Along with the Great Lakes conundrum, the geopolitics of the Nile is the next challenge in need of tackling by the AU.

Hence, the crucial importance of the Machakos peace process in the Sudan alongside the protracted inter-Congolese dialogue. Adding to the urgency of Sudan peace process is the fact that the Sudan’s surrounding northeast African sub-region is in urgent need of stabilisation as it confronts the possibility of being sucked into a new phase of a protracted Middle East conflict which could hold unpredictable consequences for Africa’s peace and security.

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Notes & references

1 This document is a revised edition of an analysis for the ANE’s Policy Conference held in Johannesburg, August 2002.
2 Interview on Good Morning America, 1 February 1990.
3 Foreign Affairs; September/October 1997.
5 See the New Hampshire Gazette, www.nhgazette.com

ECOMOG in West Africa: Lessons for future Peace Initiatives

By George Mboya


Guided by an old African song, “Africa’s shaped like a question mark; Africa’s got the answer!” President Thabo Mbeki set in motion the idea of an African Renaissance.

Due to Africa’s inaction the West has continued to paint a gloomy picture of Africa. Africa is now synonymous with bad news, and this thought is gradually being entrenched in our subconscious. Indeed, Africa is described as the centre of bedeviling civil wars, ethnic clashes and total failure by governments to bring about civil unity. As a result, it is only sober and necessary to ask whether anything good has come out of Africa.

The African Renaissance urges Africa to emerge from its slumber and to play a positive role in its own affairs. “Wake up, Africa!” presupposes that now is the opportune time to dispel the myth that Africa is a hopeless continent. Kwame Nkrumah echoes these sentiments when he opines that, “For too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voices of others.

Now, what I have called an African Personality in international affairs will have a chance of making its proper impact and will let the world know it through the voices of Africa’s own sons (and daughters),” Africa is therefore urged to develop on its own terms, hence creating an Africa for Africa and by Africa.

Adekeye Adebajo in this book has taken up the challenge and without dwelling on pessimism proceeds to show what Africa is doing to solve its own problems. The book has propagated a revival in African thinking. The West is now gradually being pushed behind as Africans take the reins to steer the continent out of this dull abyss. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the ECOMOG Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) are the mechanisms in focus in the book under review. The author in penning the book seeks to assess the role played by these two institutions in the highly volatile West African region. Three countries – Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau – are used as case studies to show the challenges posed by sub-regional intervention. The problems notwithstanding, ECOMOG serves as a benchmark on which other peace initiatives can be built by encouraging sub-regional security organisations.

The International Peace Academy (IPA), initiated in 1970, is working earnestly to enhance peace in Africa. The book under review is among their series of papers and it creates awareness on the part of the public of “peace-making, peacekeeping, and peace-building in Africa”. The IPA coor-