

ACAS Issue Working Group: Why Africa Has Fallen Off The Policy Map - And What To Do About It?

Recently, Africa watchers have been concerned about the downgrading of Africa as a major foreign policy concern. This can be explained by several factors:

1. Historically the US has been willing to follow the European lead on Africa.

Due to Europe's colonization of and ongoing economic interests in the continent the US has largely deferred to the Europeans on shaping international policy towards Africa. In many cases, this has led the US to funnel foreign aid to Africa via European missions in Africa. The best example is the support of European colonization while ignoring the winds of change that were blowing through Africa. During the post-WWII and African decolonization era, the US emerged as a superpower in a now bi-polar world. It then began to assume the identity of a superpower and initiated its own programs of support for the newly independent countries.

2. Disintegration of the former Soviet Union (including the loss of its Eastern European satellites).

The end of the Cold War, brought about by the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev and the subsequent disintegration of the former USSR, has been the primary catalyst for the downgrading of US concern for Africa. The former Soviet Union was our mortal and, by some appearances, our immortal enemy. This enemy shaped the US world view after the end of WWII. In the former Soviet Union's campaign to win converts, the US attempted to match, and/or 'deter' any support for the Soviet Union outside of its recognized 'sphere of influence'. This

policy sometimes led the US into African internal conflicts without considering the true nature of changes taking place. In many instances the Soviet Union was indeed attempting to expand its sphere of influence, however, in other instances, Africa was searching for legitimate political alternatives. During the Cold War the superpowers used African states as their chess pieces. After the Cold War, the chessboard crumbled, much like the Berlin Wall.

3. The US recession which has led to calls for cuts in foreign assistance programs and calls for a policy of isolationism or, as it is espoused today, "American First."

The US recession and the calls that harken the days of pre-World War II isolationism is leading many Americans to call for major cuts in US foreign assistance programs (both development & security). Although Africa has not been a target by those calling for cuts, it has been the policy of US administrations that when monies in the foreign aid program needed to be cut or used for other purposes, Africa has suffered the consequences.

In recent years, sub-saharan Africa's aid package has increased to \$1 billion. Further increases are possible, but those increases, or a cap in the present levels, should be re-directed towards legitimate development and security interests.

4. The release of Nelson Mandela.

The release of Nelson Mandela, although the major call of activists for years, has led to the belief that in Mandela's freedom Africa is now without need of

international attention. Indeed Mandela was released from 27 years of incarceration, but only with homeland citizenship, and no right to vote.

Because activists have for so long concentrated on one rallying cry, we are now in the position where we must re-group and begin to put our energies into putting all of Africa, not only on the US foreign policy map, but also within the minds of the American people.

5. Persian Gulf War/New World Order.

The war conducted in the Persian Gulf region has caused the 'lone superpower' to re-think its military strategy. Due to the loss of the former Soviet Union as an enemy, the United States is presently overhauling its military needs, and hence its military strategies. The new strategy, being referred to as "regional contingencies", would allow US forces to respond to regional threats "in whatever corner of the globe they may occur". It foresees the inevitable force reductions in the post-Cold War era, and the ability of the US to project its power within a moments' notice in the Third World. Concern has been expressed by the Third World because of the perception that US power will be unchecked in a uni-polar world.

6. Multiculturalism.

Educational institutions are being forced to review their traditional modes of teaching and the resources they rely on. Afrocentrism is a major movement within this call. This movement has led to new political and cultural interpretations being formed. Afrocentrism, under the rubric of

multiculturalism, is expanding beyond the school doors, and into other arenas. Many sectors of the US are looking for expert help in making educational decisions. Scholars who have historically circulated ideas within their own community can play an important role by acting as resources for those needing assistance on various levels.

7. The ever-present belief that Africa's problems are insurmountable.

The idea that Africa is overwhelmed by hyper-inflation, natural disasters, and one-party states and that this cannot be overcome is disingenuous of US foreign policy advisors. These phenomena occur in most countries and concerted efforts to overcome them have helped to ease and in many cases conquer those burdens.

Conclusion

We should realize that in this ignorance of Africa, activists, particularly scholars, can use the changes in the international arena to the advantage of the continent. When there are decisions that will be made concerning Africa, those in prominent policy positions have little-to-no experience on Africa or the events occurring on the continent. In most cases they rely on think-tanks who have increasingly expanded their programs to include Africa policy specialists. But the need for viewpoints from people who are genuinely concerned about the continent is missing.

For many years, foreign policy makers have settled on one policy option and blanketed the continent with its usage, not taking into account the immense diversity throughout Africa. As Africanists we can articulate a variety of policy

options for the US to consider. Riding on the wave of the disintegration of the former USSR, African states who have similarly thrown off the yoke of central control can vie for democratization and technical assistance with Eastern European and the former USSR. Support for some 'fledgling democracies' can lead to support for others. Democratization has been a foreign policy call of the US for many years. That call came with promises of technical and financial support.

Scholars are in the position (due in most cases to their research work in African countries) to help the executive and the legislative branches formulate the kinds of programs that will allow real growth and development.