

***The United States Presidential Elections:  
implications for Africa and South Africa***

by  
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**Introduction**

With the rapidly approaching national elections in the United States, the future of American foreign policy becomes a major consideration contingent on their outcome. What do they mean for Africa in general, South Africa specifically? American presidential elections and the attendant contests for seats US Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate, generally revolve around domestic issues. This was the case during the Cold War when foreign policy and 'national defence' held more salience. It is even more the case today when the US is faced with no major security threats. Russia has become a semi-ally; China a quasi-adversary.

**Foreign Policy as an Issue**

The American mood has become more self-centred and inward looking if not isolationist, reinforced by what has been a booming economy. This has transformed the American political terrain from a preoccupation with budget deficits to one of what to do with budget surpluses. Yet there has never been a strong constituency for foreign aid which, of course, is an issue that resonates with Africa generally though not as much for South Africa. However, because of the many military conflicts which currently plague Africa, peacekeeping and trends in US peacekeeping policy is a major issue for South Africa. And especially so because of the conflict resolution engagements that the West expects Pretoria to take the lead in. This is where the issue of wiping out US arrears to the United Nations becomes important. Part of the ineffectiveness of UN operations is that they have been forced into a mode of what some refer to as "peacekeeping on the cheap". African operations have suffered accordingly. This situation was exacerbated by the debacle of American troops killed during the peacekeeping operation in Somalia.

**Whither the US-SA Bi-National Commission?**

Closer to home for South Africa is the fate of the US-South Africa Binational Commission (BNC). Whereas the larger issue of Africa policy will hinge as much, if not more, on the outcome of House and Senate races, the fate of the BNC has more to do with the personal preferences translated into policy and actions by the President of the day. South African President Thabo Mbeki and the Democratic party candidate for US President, Al Gore already have a BNC track record of working closely together. The BNC took off under them and they are, it is to be assumed, committed to it. Not necessarily so with the Republicans and

the GOP ('Grand Ol'Party') candidate, George W. Bush, the Governor of Texas.

However, the recent trend toward bipartisanship on African issues (like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)) may be a harbinger for continuity of the BNC relationship between the US and South Africa should Bush win the election. For one thing, Bush has made a hallmark of his elections and governance in Texas in reaching out to minority constituencies, blacks and Hispanics. This "compassionate conservatism" has carried over into his campaign for the White House.

While his national security adviser Condelezza Rice is an African-American foreign affairs specialist who is not particularly focused on Africa, Bush's much anticipated Secretary of State – should he get elected – Gen. Colin Powell (former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Bush's father, George Herbert Walker, and Clinton) would be expected to favour a continued BNC relationship though his views on Africa generally and South Africa specifically are not known. A Bush decision to discontinue the BNC would tend to feed into a politics of racial and partisan division that would run against the grain of the image Bush has been trying to convey among black voters in particular.

### **Electoral Outcome Scenarios**

Should the Gore-Lieberman Democratic ticket carry the day on November 7<sup>th</sup> while the House, and particularly the Senate, remain under Republican/GOP control, look for a continuation in the status quo on foreign policy. What is decisive here is control of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It has been chaired by one of the Senate's most conservative and isolationist members, Jesse Helms of North Carolina. Thus far, although he has had some close contests, he has prevailed, and his seat would have to be considered safe. Thus, if the Republicans retain their majority in the Senate, Helms retains his chairmanship and will have to be placated by a President Gore on foreign policy matters. This will in particular affect US funding for the UN, and especially UN peacekeeping.

Should the Democrats have a windfall and take the Senate and/or both houses of Congress as well as the White House, Gore will have maximum leeway on foreign policy, including Africa. His expected Secretary of State is current UN supremo, Richard Holbrook of high profile 'Month of Africa' fame at the UN Security Council in January. But what remains to be seen is if Gore and Holbrook will seriously look at Africa in terms of the Marshall Plan that President Mbeki has been touting, or instead, try to push a more gimmicky HIVAids-focused Africa policy.

This is where a continued BNC relationship may stand South Africa and Mbeki in good stead as a vehicle through which to influence a more comprehensive Africa policy. What must be considered is a larger perspective on Mbeki's position on HIV/Aids and the need for the pandemic to be addressed within a broader policy context rather than as a single issue-driven campaign that could divert attention and energies from such issues as Africa's debt burden, resolving conflicts in Angola and the Congo and so forth. Here, Mbeki has a kindred spirit in Clinton's Chairman of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/Aids, former Congressman and sanctions campaigner, Ronald V. Dellums.

There is a strong possibility that Americans, known ticket-splitters, will vote in one party for the White House; another party for Congress based on the notion that 'divided government' is better than a de facto 'one-party state.' (Some could argue that the US is a one-party state ruled by the 'Neo-Liberal Party' with Democratic and Republican factions.) So what happens if Bush-Cheney win and the Democrats regain control of Congress or at least the Senate? Since Bush is a centrist conservative backed up by an internationalist team,

albeit of old Cold War realism vintage, this should not present a problem in terms of bipartisan foreign policy cooperation between executive and legislative branches. Moreover, Powell would have more than enough political capital and credibility with the Congressional Black Caucus and the Democrats in general as well as with Republicans. If push came to shove this could work to isolate extreme GOP conservatives. Powell, moreover, as he once candidly expressed when confronted with a question on military intervention in the Balkans, quipped 'we do deserts, not mountains' (referring to Bush Senior's Persian Gulf campaign). He is averse to deploying American troops overseas, so presumably might be a champion of a strengthened UN with a paid up US membership.

By the same token, if American voters return a Republican Bush-Cheney ticket to the White House and retain a GOP Congress, this might be preferable as far as Africa and South Africa are concerned to a Democratic White House and Republican Congress. A Bush Administration, after all, would be better positioned to deal with a recalcitrant Senate Foreign Relations Chairman, Jesse Helms, than would a Gore Administration.

### **The Global Dimension**

Ironically, although Democrats have generally been favoured as being more pro-African than Republicans, the long protracted legislative battle leading up to final enactment of the AGOA and the mobilization of American organized labour in the Seattle protests, suggest that international North-South tensions over globalization issues have blurred the old foreign affairs partisan polarities. Organized labour constituencies within the American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which have been a mainstay of the Democrats and were a key element in the anti-apartheid movement, are apt to find themselves on the opposite side of free trade issues that are crucial to African and other developing countries seeking access to the US market. And here there is little difference between Gore and Bush who both support free trade and oppose isolationism. But this works more in Bush's favour than Gore's since Gore needs labour to get its members to the poll on election day. But labour, which tends toward protectionism, is overwhelmed by the 'New Democrat' free trade agenda. Hence labour's strong opposition to AGOA which was one of a piece with their opposition to the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), to "Fast Track" (expediting authority for the President on pushing trade issues in Congress) and, most recently, the normalization of trade with China.

Otherwise, the old Cold War divide between the parties on issues like Russia and China has virtually vanished. There is a potential, however, for repolarization on defence-related foreign policy issues like erecting a national missile defence (NMD) shield or their theatre version which could include Taiwan. This is an issue that could destabilize US relations with Moscow and Beijing, threatening the deterrent structure enshrined in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty. It is an issue that could also resurface partisan polarization between 'soft-on defence' Democrats and Republican 'strong national defence' hardliners who may be spoiling for another Cold War.

Otherwise for Russia the concern with Washington is NATO expansion about which there is no clear partisan division. Both favour it. The same can be said for the issue of Taiwan. There is a consensus in support of 'One China' but this must occur peacefully. The issue of the preservation of Taiwanese democracy is likely to be the crunch-point. Which is where issues like NMD and their theatre rendition may become relevant for leveraging China's actions. Otherwise, the issue of Korean accommodation and reunification has the potential for raising fundamental questions about the US-East Asian military presence.

### **Conclusion**

Neither presidential candidate evokes sharp differences on Africa policy. Both would probably favour further enhancements of AGOA to increase US-African trade in competition with the European Union (EU)-South Africa Trade and Development Agreement. In the same vein, they would both be supportive of regional and sub-regional economic integration initiatives. On the other hand, without the mobilization of an active pro-Africa lobby and/or proactive diplomatic and political networking by Pretoria and other African states, Africa will remain a low priority on the US foreign policy agenda. This could adversely affect US-African security cooperation and peacekeeping as well as attentiveness to conflict resolution in Angola, Congo, Sudan and Sierra Leone.

### **Policy Considerations**

1. The centrepiece of the US-South African relationship is the BNC. The settling in of a new Administration in Washington should offer the opportunity of a joint review by Pretoria and Washington of the BNC and how it might be strengthened. *For South Africa this could mean seeing how the BNC can play a more active role in the African Renaissance on such crucial issues as implementation of the 'African Helsinki' process contained in the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation for Africa (CSSDCA) or co-funding initiatives involving Pretoria's African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund.* These are also relevant to enlisting US cooperation on President Mbeki's overriding priority of fashioning a comprehensive African Marshall Plan. *The BNC's terms of reference could also be made to encompass black economic empowerment, especially in terms of promoting more structured interaction and networking between South African and American black business communities. The BNC also offers a framework for sustained joint South African-American cooperation on combating HIV/Aids.* This relationship could be deepened further by a joint review that also considered establishing a Binational Institute for South African-American Relations. *In short, the BNC and its broader potential constituency requires its own think tank.*
2. South Africa has begun to develop a politico-diplomatic strategy of cooperatively engaging the West with Nigeria and Algeria that should be followed up and applied in its relations with Washington. While there are bilateral issues that properly fall within the framework of the BNC, there are Africa-wide issues of an urgent nature that may be more effectively addressed jointly with other African powers. Resolving the conflicts in Angola and Congo in particular fall in this category and are all the more urgent because they impinge on the political and economic health of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). *South Africa should join with Nigeria and Algeria in impressing upon Washington the urgency of its engagement in resolving African conflicts and in underwriting more effective security cooperation and peacekeeping.*
3. *On Angola, in particular, South Africa should undertake to persuade Washington of the need for a political settlement as opposed to backing the MPLA government in Luanda in its elusive quest for a military victory over UNITA.* But by now the situation in Angola has evolved beyond the MPLA and UNITA to include a civil society that is increasingly impatient to resume and consummate a peace process in Angola. They should be factored into an enhanced Lusaka peace process.
4. *Washington needs to develop and exercise more sensitivity in its relations with South Africa, mindful of Pretoria's concerns about South Africa being perceived by its SADC partners, in particular, of being a surrogate of the US.* Thus the establishment of the US-SADC Forum is a positive development that should be built upon as a complement to the BNC relationship. Further, this Forum may be a model for organizing US-African relations elsewhere on the continent instead of cultivating selected 'pivotal states' and 'regional influentials' that may be at the root of the debacle of US policy in the Great Lakes (via the defunct 'Entebbe Peace and Prosperity' sphere). US forums with the East African Community (and/or the Inter-Governmental Development Authority) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are suggestive of the type of path US-African relations might take based on the BNC/US-SADC Forum model.

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**Suggested reading:**

1. Francis Kornegay, "Beyond the OAU: African Union or Afro-Jamahiriya?" *Global Dialogue*, Vol. 5.2, September 2000.
2. Francis Kornegay, "Southern African-United States relations at the run of a new century: Retrospectively looking forward", *IGD Occasional Paper No 26*, October 2000.