A New Grand Strategy for a New World Order: US Disengagement from Sub-Saharan Africa

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/19/a-new-grand-strategy-for-a-new-world-order-us-disengagement-from-sub-saharan-africa/

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The grand strategy of the U.S. during the Cold War sought to defeat the Soviet Union and halt the global spread of communism. During this time, conflicts in the sub-Sahara were used as channels through which the two superpowers waged proxy conflicts.[1] The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union inevitably called for a revised grand strategy, which would also entail a new attitude towards the sub-Sahara. This essay argues that sub-Saharan Africa experienced a general American disengagement in the 1990s, as conflicts on the sub-continent and U.S. responses to them epitomised the grand strategic means of retrenchment, whilst also exposing the hierarchy amongst the pillars of grand strategy. The essay will begin by outlining American grand strategy in the aftermath of the Cold War, and will subsequently address disengagement with the sub-Sahara on a sub-continental level, as well as its use of proxies to limit resources spent on a sub-regional level. Thereafter, it will be demonstrated how such policies reveal Washington's willingness to compromise its democratic values, both by analysing its proxies and through a comparison with policy towards North Africa.

Grand strategy was largely consistent throughout the Bush Sr. (1989-1993) and Clinton (1993-2001) administrations. They envisioned a 'New World Order' led by the U.S. and based on protecting national security whilst promoting prosperity and democracy abroad.[2] The main dangers to national security in the new international arena were those perpetuated by rogue states and non-state actors, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and drug trafficking.[3] Nonetheless, the post-Cold War environment appeared "free from urgent threats and problems that could justify an expensive foreign policy."[4] It thus called for a certain degree of American retrenchment abroad, and resources were to be deployed far more selectively than they had been during the Cold War. Without dismissing the potential for unilateral action when critical to U.S. security, multilateral engagement was deemed the preferred way of advancing and protecting U.S. interests abroad.[5] In the sub-Sahara, however, American retrenchment would prove far more pronounced than a mere inclination for multilateralism.

Sub-Continental Disengagement

U.S. policy towards sub-Saharan Africa epitomised the grand strategic means of retrenchment on both sub-continental and regional levels. To reduce U.S. foreign 'burden', the New World Order was to be pursued with clear prioritisations in mind. Resources were therefore directed towards those regions where capitalist democracy appeared most achievable, and away from the sub-Sahara. These key regions included Eastern Europe – which likely appeared to have better democratic prospects following the anti-communist uprisings of the late 1980s -, traditional oil-rich nations of the Middle East, as well as those states with "dynamic, outward-oriented economies (like Korea, Singapore, Chile and Mexico)"[6] which could be integrated into the international capitalist economy more effectively.
The sub-Sahara, by contrast, did not attract much concern from the American public nor its policymaking establishment. Its Cold War strategic importance had disappeared, and indeed in January 2003 departing Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger wrote to his successor Warren Christopher that "few hard interests tug us toward sub-Saharan Africa. What we have instead is a series of humanitarian disasters which place strong demands on our national conscience and values."[7] Yet it would appear throughout the 1990s that such demands on U.S. national conscience and values were insufficient for the superpower to actively respond to the sub-continent's crises. The

media's portrayal of the continent was largely negative, emphasising not its human suffering but its corruption, authoritarianism, and mismanagement,[8] hence the negligible pressure on policymakers by the average voter to show much concern for it. Sub-Saharan matters remained very low within bureaucratic echelons, of concern mostly to the Bureau of Africa Affairs. [9] Conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in states such as Rwanda, Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, and the Republic of the Congo were dismissed, as Washington intervened instead in key region conflicts such as those in Kuwait and Yugoslavia.

Certain scholars argue that disengagement from sub-Saharan Africa resulted directly from the 1993 Black Hawk Down incident. It was a tragedy which saw 18 American soldiers killed during a raid on Mogadishu, undertaken as part of a United Nations humanitarian mission in Somalia. Letitia Lawson argues that the event marked the brutal end of a post-Cold War transitional phase in American policy towards the sub-Sahara, which had been characterised by a positive outlook on 'helping' Africa and proactive engagement with the continent.[10] She supports this by pointing to the publication of Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD-25) a few months after the incident, which outlined strict criteria to determine foreign intervention.[11] Such arguments are, however, an overstatement of Black Hawk Down's impact. Rather than being part of a series of proactive policies towards the sub-Sahara, intervention in Somalia was an outlier in the early 1990s and came as a response to intense, largely unprecedented media coverage of the human suffering taking place.[12] Furthermore, the contents of PDD-25 had been agreed upon prior to the tragedy. They had, for example, "already been used as guideline for US action in Rwanda in July 1993 … This was several months before Mogadishu and the formal release of the document."[13] The core impetus for non-intervention thus existed separately from Black Hawk Down, and the essay maintains that disengagement from the sub-continent was a coherent part of grand strategy's retrenchment rather than just a consequence of tragedy. This is not to say that the deaths in Mogadishu had no impact. The U.S. went to great lengths to avoid action in Rwanda, not only on its own behalf but also the UN's. It went beyond the justifications of PDD-25 and deliberately avoided the use of the term 'genocide' so as to avoid intervention under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[14] Black Hawk Down did not so much revert American policy towards the sub-Sahara as amplify a pre-existing reluctance to engage with the sub-continent's conflicts.

Regional Retrenchment

Beyond this general disengagement on a sub-continental level, there were certain regional interests which did attract Washington's attention to a select number of sub-Saharan conflicts. In line with the principle of retrenchment and American disinterest with the sub-Sahara specifically, Washington chose to address these through proxy actors.

The first channel through which this manifested itself was the proxy use of ex-colonial European powers. In those conflicts where both the U.S. and another such power had interests, Washington justified its own lack of action by arguing that these conflicts were the 'responsibility' of ex-colonial powers, which supposedly had a better understanding of the state dynamics at hand.[15] Djibouti, for instance, was of French and American interest due to its strategic position at the entrance to the Red Sea.[16] When civil war erupted in 1991 and France sent troops to the warzone,[17] the U.S. capitalised on this and opted to "defer to French initiatives in its former colony"[18] and see the region stabilised without having to devote any American resources. Even in Somalia, prior to its own humanitarian intervention Washington repeatedly sought to relegate 'responsibility' to former colonial powers Britain and Italy. This applied both to following their lead in not recognising the independence claims of the Somaliland Republic,[19] and, in the very beginnings of the Somali civil war, to insisting that the Italian government rather than Washington should pressure Siad Barre to leave office.[20] Following the lead of ex-colonial European powers was a subtle manner of avoiding American commitment to sub-Saharan conflicts, yet developments in Somalia which culminated in American intervention suggest that it was not always the most effective.

More often, Washington's proxies were regional peacekeeping groups. This involved working with pre-existing organisations, namely the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its military branch (ECOMOG), as well as establishing schemes such as the 1996 African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI). The latter mandated the U.S. to train and equip certain sub-Saharan armies, effectively creating a "pan-African rapid reaction force."[21] The use of regional peacekeeping groups as proxies served not only as a testament to U.S. aversion to intervention in the sub-Sahara, but it also revealed the different tiers of American retrenchment – which was not

homogenous across the sub-continent, but rather varied between regions in correlation with American interests.

In former Zaire, Washington provided covert logistical support to the Alliance of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) throughout the First Congo War to oust Mobutu.[22] The AFDL consisted of states that had participated in the ACRI such as Rwanda, Uganda, Eritrea, and Burundi, and allowed Washington to ensure its regional goal be met without having to sacrifice American personnel. In Sierra Leone, contrastingly, Washington not only provided financial and logistical support to regional peacekeeping force ECOMOG but it also helped UNAMSIL efforts.[23] Despite still not contributing any American troops, U.S. involvement in a UN mission incurred more responsibility and more resources as compared to the covert, indirect nature of its participation in the First Congo War. These disparities between levels of American engagement unveil where were situated those few sub-Saharan interests which the U.S. did hold.

In both conflicts, Washington sought to restore regional stability.[24] However, the significance which these regions held for the U.S. was evidently unequal. When Mobutu compromised Central Africa's stability by ordering that Tutsi refugees return to Rwanda,[25] Washington's main fear was a humanitarian disaster.[26] Yet its previous inaction in Rwanda and Burundi clearly displayed that, in the absence of media and public pressure, humanitarian catastrophe was not of enough interest to sacrifice significant resources to Central Africa. In Sierra Leone, civil war had also precipitated a humanitarian crisis and ruptured Western Africa's regional stability. The key difference when compared to Zaire lay in the fact that, unlike in Central Africa, a humanitarian crisis was not Washington's main source of concern. Rather, Sierra Leone's civil war was perceived to pose a threat to U.S. access to raw materials, namely those in Nigeria. Regional instability was proving particularly challenging for the Nigerian regime,[27] which was the fifth largest oil-exporter to the U.S.[28] Involvement in Sierra Leone thus sought primarily to protect Washington's material interests, evidently far more significant for American policymakers than any humanitarian concern.

Proxies such as those in Djibouti, Somalia, Zaire and Sierra Leone lead to two sub-conclusions. Firstly, they reinforce the sub-continent's embodiment of American grand strategic retrenchment – particularly if compared to Washington's more active engagement elsewhere in the 1990s (as aforementioned, key regions such as Yugoslavia in Eastern Europe and Kuwait in the Middle East). Secondly, U.S. use of proxies (regional peacekeeping groups specifically) also reveals various extents of retrenchment within the sub-Sahara itself, correlating with different levels of regional significance.

Hierarchical Grand Strategy

Having examined the effect of U.S. grand strategy on its policy towards the sub-Sahara, it is also worth noting what this policy itself uncovered about the larger grand strategy. It is argued that Washington's attitude towards sub-Saharan conflicts in the 1990s undermined democracy promotion, hence exposing de facto hierarchy amongst the pillars of American grand strategy. These pillars were the objectives of the New World Order that had been conceived by Bush Sr. and sustained under Clinton: protecting and promoting prosperity, democracy, and national security. Aid was to be conditioned upon democratisation, and previous allies such as Liberia were thus cut off from U.S. foreign assistance.[29] However, the proxies used by the U.S. as part of their means of retrenchment clearly undermined this declared objective of democratisation.

In relegating responsibility to ex-colonial powers, the U.S. was licensing undemocratic practices. Following France's lead in Djibouti, Washington "remained largely silent about continued French support for the Gouled regime in the aftermath of rigged legislative elections in December 1992."[30] Rather than devote the resources necessary to achieve both stability *and* democratisation, policymakers preferred to sacrifice their democratic objective so as to achieve strategic stability without bearing any significant responsibilities.

Similarly, the states which served as regional peacekeeping proxies were not the democratic regimes they were made out to be. In Central and Eastern Africa, Washington claimed that Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda were led by a 'new generation of leaders', who were pro-democracy and pro-U.S.,[31] thus justifying their participation in the ACRI. Yet underneath the superficial political rhetoric these were de facto one-party states,[32] and American

backing for them may have actually perpetuated certain conflicts. In supporting Museveni's regime in Uganda, for example, the U.S. was also allowing him to continue suppressing peaceful political dissent. Opponents therefore resorted to violent means, leading to heightened conflict with groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army.[33] Furthermore, in Western Africa, Nigeria's deployment of troops to Liberia and Sierra Leone as part of regional peacekeeping efforts had marked its status as "policeman of the west African regional subsystem."[34] Despite its human rights abuses and lack of real democratisation, Nigeria was not only strategically beneficial as a proxy but its oil was also too important to sacrifice the alliance for democratic values.[35]

This demonstrated a clear prioritisation amongst Washington's goals. The grand strategic objective of national security, which involves financial security and access to raw materials such as oil, as well as the incessant desire to cut back American resources deployed to the sub-continent, led to democratic values consistently being compromised throughout the 1990s. This has drawn accusations by scholars such as Okbazghi Yohannes and Daniel Volman of an inconsistent grand strategy, with policies towards the sub-Sahara and responses to its conflicts being determined on an ad hoc basis.[36] However, it appears that all sacrifices of democracy were made on the basis of protecting U.S. security and resources. This suggests that American grand strategy involved a strict prioritisation between its objectives. As this prioritisation was consistent throughout the decade, it is perhaps more accurate to say that policy was not determined ad hoc, rather it was part of a grand strategy which was not fully transparent. Far more value was placed on U.S. immediate economic and security interests, rather than the democratisation of foreign states – which may be seen as beneficial to American security, but on a less immediate level.

This hierarchisation of grand strategic objectives is equally apparent in a comparison between Washington's policy towards the sub-Sahara and that towards North Africa. The attention and resources which Washington dedicated to North African states were noticeably more pronounced than those towards sub-Saharan states. This was due to the difference in nature of America's interests in the respective regions. In North Africa, Washington's main preoccupation was the fight against terrorism and extremist ideology. Islamic fundamentalism was viewed as the biggest threat in Africa, yet it was perceived to be far more prevalent in the North and relatively insignificant in the sub-Sahara.[37] Hence, the Northern states received considerably more political attention than the rest of the continent. The active role which the U.S. played in subverting Algeria's democratically elected Islamist Salvation Front,[38] and its "increasingly strident rhetoric"[39] against Sudan both sharply contrasted with Washington's muted response to humanitarian rises such as those in Rwanda and Burundi, and the covert nature of its action against Mobutu through the AFDL. There was far more American engagement with security objectives such as counterterrorism than with democratic objectives, and a substantial neglect of democratic values within the pursuit of those security objectives.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the post-Cold War grand strategy of the U.S. appeared to make little space for sub-Saharan Africa. Having lost its 'utility' as a platform for East-West proxy conflicts, the sub-continent did not pose much interest to the Western superpower. In the context of a grand strategy that was committed to reducing its 'foreign burden,' the 1990s thus witnessed a general American aversion to sub-Saharan Africa altogether – with the exception of a select number of conflicts which either garnered intense media pressure (Somalia) or threatened American exploitation of raw materials (Sierra Leone). Furthermore, despite considerable political rhetoric about democratisation and a 'new generation' of African leaders, Washington consistently prioritised its national security interests such as counterterrorism, commodity access and geostrategy over democratic principles, thus exposing a de facto hierarchy within the core pillars of American grand strategy.

End Notes

[1] Flavia Gasbarri, "From the Sands of the Ogaden to Black Hawk Down: The End of the Cold War in the Horn of Africa," *Cold War* History 18, no. 1 (2018): 75.

[2] Hal Brands, "American grand strategy in the post-Cold War era," in *New Directions in Strategic Thinking 2.0*, ed.

Russell W. Glenn: (Acton: ACU Press, 2018): 134-135; James Boys,*Clinton's Grand Strategy: US Foreign Policy in a Post-Cold War World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 102-103.

[3] Okbazghi Yohannes, "The United States and Sub-Saharan Africa After the Cold War: Empty Promises and Retreat," *The Black Scholar* 32, no. 1 (2002): 24.

[4] Flavia Gasbarri, "Revisiting the Linkage: PDD 25, Genocide in Rwanda and the US Peacekeeping Experience of the 1990s," *The International History Review* 40, no. 4 (2018): 805.

[5] Boys, *Clinton's Grand* Strategy, 118-120.

[6] Eagleburger to Christopher, 5 January 1993, US Department of State Freedom FOIA, https://foia.state.gov/searchapp//DOCUMENTS/FOIA_Feb2017/F-2007-05534/DOC_0C05654828/C05654828.pdf

[7] Eagleburger to Christopher.

[8] Festus Ohaegbulam, "The United States and Africa After the Cold War," *Africa Today* 39, no. 4 (1992): 34.

[9] Peter Schraeder, "U.S. intervention in the Horn of Africa Amidst the End of the Cold War," *Africa Today* 40, no. 2 (2nd Quarter, 1993): 23.

[10] Letitia Lawson, "U.S. Africa Policy Since the Cold War," *Strategic Insights* 6, no. 1 (January 2007), accessed at https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36704615.pdf

[11] Lawson, "U.S. Africa Policy."

[12] Walter Kansteiner, "Africa in the 1990s," in *U.S. and Russian Policymaking With Respect to the Use of Force* , ed. Jeremy Azrael and Emil Payin (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996).

[13] Gasbarri, "Revisiting the Linkage," 793-794.

[14] Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 373.

[15] Schraeder, "U.S. Intervention," 17-18.

[16] Thomas Marks, "Djibouti: France's Strategic Toehold in Africa," *African Affairs* 73, no. 290 (January 1974): 95.

[17] "250 French Troops Sent to Djibouti War Zone," *Associated Press*, February 25, 1992. Accessed at https://apnews.com/d7b4b1b6a29a468f05130adad5ad7975

[18] Schraeder, "U.S. Intervention," 20.

[19] Peter Schraeder, "The End of the Cold War and U.S. Foreign Policy toward the Horn of Africa in the Immediate Post-Siyaad and Post-Mengistu Eras," *Northeast African Studies* 1, no. 1 (1994): 106-107.

[20] Daniel Volman, "Africa and the New World Order," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 31, no. 1 (March 1993): 6.

[21] Yohannes, "The United States," 31-32.

[22] Gerard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford University Press

[23] Christopher Cook, "A Question of Intervention: American Policymaking in Sierra Leone and the Power of Institutional Agenda Setting," *African Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 14-17.

[24] Cook, "A Question of Intervention," 12; Steven Metz, "Reform, Conflict, and Security in Zaire,"*Strategic Studies Institute* (June 1996): 5.

[25] Boaz Atzili, *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors: Border Fixity and International Conflict* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 188.

[26] Metz, "Reform," 5.

[27] Cook, "A Question of Intervention," 9.

[28] Yohannes, "The United States," 37.

[29] Lawson, "U.S. Africa Policy."

[30] Schraeder, "U.S. Intervention," 23.

[31] Yohannes, "The United States," 23.

[32] Yohannes, "The United States," 34.

[33] Sophia Boehm, "The Politics of American Aid and Conflict in Northern Uganda," *Insights* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 6.

[34] Yohannes, "The United States," 37.

[35] Yohannes, "The United States, 37.

[36] Schraeder, "U.S. Intervention," 26; Volman, "Africa and the New World Order," 3.

[37] "Islam on the Periphery," Bureau of Intelligence and Research, January 22, 1998, US Department of State Freedom of Information Act, accessed at https://foia.state.gov/Search/results.aspx?searchText=Ogaden&beginDate=19940301&endDate=&publishedBeginDate=&publishedEndDate=&caseNumber=

[38] Fouzi Slisli, "The Algerian Civil War: Washington's new counterinsurgency mode,"*The Journal of North African Studies* 14, no. 2 (2009): 145-154.

[39] Schraeder, "U.S. Intervention," 23.

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Written at: King’s College London

Written for: Maeve Ryan
Date written: April 2020