

# **The Tightening Grip of the Star-Strangled Banner: America's Political, Economic and Military Interests in Africa**

By Nynke Douma

President Jacques Chirac of France raised merry hell with an off-the-cuff remark to journalists when he said that he believed the US elections could not be left to Americans alone. “All of us – French, Chinese, Russian, English or African – need to choose who sleeps in the White House”, he said.<sup>1</sup>

Although this is an impracticable and preposterous idea, Chirac was raising an important issue: the increasing global dominance of US interests. Nowhere in the world is the US exercise of political, military and economic power more pronounced than in Africa. And what America does and fails to do has a great impact on the future prospects of a continent already struggling with the severe Aids epidemic, worrisome demographic figures and numerous civil conflicts.

According to UN figures, 34 of the world's 50 least developed countries are in Africa (2004). A recent World Bank report says that the UN Millennium Goal to reduce poverty by 50% by 2015 will not be met. In fact, the UN adds, in many African countries, annual income per person is falling. This can be attributed, amongst other things, to corrupt and dictatorial African regimes and Western engagement in African affairs: something which is not new.

---

<sup>1</sup> As the assignment for which this article was written dictated, the remark by Chirac is fictive.

In previous centuries European colonisers imposed their rules and regulations onto what they thought were ‘uncivilised’ Africans. Under the cloak of Christianisation countries like Britain, France and Belgium massively depleted human and natural resources with the slave trade and the mining of gold, silver and diamonds.

With de-colonisation from the late 1950s, the US began taking part in the economic and political scramble for Africa. Largely determined by its own interests, unequal terms of trade favoured American producers and undermined, amongst other things, Africa’s cotton, coffee, sugar and groundnut industries. Additionally, the governance vacuum in Africa, caused by patronising colonial policies, helped the US to step in and overthrow regimes that posed an anti-capitalist threat.

A key example of American political exertion in Africa is the murder of the first post-independence Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), then Zaire, in 1961. Only in 2001 did it become clear that Belgium, Britain and the US had plotted Lumumba’s assassination because he had African-nationalist ideas that blocked capitalist states from controlling Africa’s natural resources.

During the Cold War, Western countries were afraid of communism taking root in Africa. Therefore they supplied arms and billions of dollars to dictatorial, anti-communist and pro-Western regimes. Put in power by the Americans, President Joseph Sese Seko Mobutu of Zaire became America’s main Cold War ally. In the film *Mobutu: King of Zaire* by Thierry

Michel, former President George Bush Sr. called him “our most valued friend in Africa”.

Questions were hardly raised on the billions of US dollars Mobutu pocketed and the little of it he invested to develop his country. By the end of the Cold War, the strategic need to support African dictators and despots like Mobutu was gone. His 32 year reign ended when the US forced him to step down in 1997.

Mobutu was replaced by President Laurent Kabila who ruled the DRC for four years until he was shot dead in 2001. It is unclear who murdered Kabila and although not backed by Western diplomats, one of the scenarios involves US intelligence. That is because Kabila posed a political threat to the region and an economic threat to the US: he did not comply with the UN peace agreement for the DRC and its neighbouring countries signed in 1999, he refused to reduce debts and he revoked on mining deals with the US.

Another example is Operation Restore Hope (ORH) in Somalia. In 1992 George Bush Sr. sent US troops to the country to provide humanitarian relief. Poor political analyses resulted in an unforeseen clash with Somalian opposition leaving 18 US militaries dead. Increasing American resistance to ORH forced US troops to pull out in 1994. More recently the US has been among those countries that toppled Charles Taylor’s regime in Liberia.

After the September 11 attacks, US policies on Africa were reoriented. Quoted in the magazine *US News*, out-going Secretary of State Colin Powell said in 2003: “Africa has strategic value, providing allies in the war on terrorism and because African nations possess huge oil reserves”. America’s renewed interest in Africa is also reflected by a visit of

President George Bush to Senegal, South Africa, Botswana, Uganda and Nigeria in July 2003 – his first encounter with Africa since he took office in 2000. Bush committed himself to help the poorest nations in the world and promised \$15 billion to fight AIDS.

Globally, the US provides the largest amount of foreign aid in dollar terms, \$21 billion in 2004. However, as percentage of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP, national income) the US ranks last spending only 0.12% of its GDP out of 22 main donors. Its contribution falls way below the target for official development assistance set in 1970 by the UN at 0.7% of GDP for the world's most developed countries. Figures for 2002 show only five countries met the target: Denmark leading with 0.96% followed by Norway 0.91%, The Netherlands 0.82%, Luxembourg 0.78% and Sweden 0.74%.

Apart from being the least generous of the highly developed countries, American development assistance is also unequally divided. The Middle East for a long time received over half of all US assistance, while Africa was given only 14.6% (1994). In 2004, only 18.3% of the total budget of \$21 billion will go to Africa, a sharp contrast with an additional \$20 billion freed for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The US also occupies a prominent position in the World's leading multilateral institutions dealing with the global economy, trade and development: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Bank. The ways in which those institutions are structured make high income countries very powerful in imposing decisions on poorer nations such as those in Africa.

Of the 184 member states of the IMF, which seeks currency stability, the US has with 17.14% the largest proportion of votes in the decision-making process. This is calculated on the basis of its yearly contribution to the IMF and the relative size of its GDP. It is in sharp contrast with the 4.5% of the vote for all Sub Saharan countries together. In the World Bank, concerned with international development, US voting power ranges from 14% to 24%.

The WTO, dealing with international trade, is organised differently. Its 150 members have equal decision-making power based on consensus. Critics however argue that the WTO favours first-world states because they can veto proposals that go against their own interests. Countries like the US also agree on trade barriers and tariffs with their most favoured trading partners. The rules prescribe that all other nations trading with the US are subject to identical tariffs and barriers, which impairs developing economies. In order to overcome such unequal terms of trade, governments of several developing countries fiercely oppose to Western agricultural subsidies. As a result, cotton trade in particular has been at the top of the WTO agenda for the past two years.

In West African countries like Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali cotton provides an income for over ten million producers and is the main source of government revenue. But cotton production becomes increasingly less profitable. Over the last decade the price of cotton on the world market has decreased from \$0.90 a pound in 1995 to \$0.41 a pound in 2002. This downfall is partly caused by competition from synthetic fibres; China's decreasing demand for cotton and the entrance of new cotton producing areas into the

market. But, according to a recent Oxfam paper on 'the moral fibre', the slump in cotton prices is mainly caused by self-interested agricultural and trade policies of developed countries.

In 2003 US cotton production accounted for 41% of world exports. Because the costs of production are three times higher in the US than in West Africa, the 25.000 American cotton farmers are heavily subsidised in order to attain their leading market position. Oxfam says the US spends \$3.3 billion a year on subsidies, representing 68% of the total value of US cotton production. From an African perspective \$3.3 billion equals the total US aid budget for Africa (2004), it is almost a third of the GDPs of Chad, Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali all together and it is over 12 million times the average annual income per person in those countries.

As a result of US cotton subsidies, Oxfam estimates that Sub Saharan countries lose between \$100 and \$300 million a year in cotton export earnings and, ironically, this loss exceeds the value of US aid programs in those countries. Economists estimate that the price of cotton on the world market would increase by \$0.10 if American subsidies were to be abolished.

African farmers would then be able to sell cotton for \$0.51 per pound instead of \$0.41. When deducting the production costs of \$0.30 per pound, their income would be doubled. The US nonetheless says its subsidies are not in conflict with WTO guidelines. It also points the finger at, amongst others, the EU that represents only 2% of the world market share in cotton.

The effects of US military strategies are just as damaging. The US spent \$329 billion on defence in 2003, which is almost half of all military expenses in the world. Moreover, the US has stationed 350.000 soldiers in 702 military bases in over 130 countries. The bombing of US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1998 and the September 11 attacks in 2001 justified American military expansion in Africa. Serving the battle against terrorism, 1.600 troops were put in place in Djibouti after a visit in 2002 by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to the Horn of Africa. Strategically located near the Arabian Peninsula, Djibouti currently hosts America's largest military base on African territory.

In order to exercise greater control over the Sahel region, where some pockets of militant groups like Al Quada are believed to find shelter, US troops have begun to provide anti-terrorism training the armies of Mauritania, Chad, Mali and Niger under the \$125 million Pan-Sahel Initiative. Together with the EU, America has also approved a plan to train African Standby Forces (AFS) for peace keeping missions.

Although not officially stated by the US, these military measures seek to stabilise conflict prone areas in order to secure Africa's vast oil resources. According to the US National Intelligence Council (NIC), a think tank advising President Bush and senior policy makers, the US is currently drawing 15% of its oil imports from Africa. Given America's rising demand for oil, African imports are likely to increase to 25% by the year 2015, provided oil extraction facilities improve in countries like Sudan, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, and the tiny island of São Tomé and Príncipe off the West coast of Africa.

It is remarkable that the downsides of American economic, military and political self-interest in Africa are little exposed. Instead of resolving long running conflicts or benefiting development, US interventions are merely believed to increase political and social tension. Ever since oil had been discovered in São Tomé, petrol-wealth has plunged the country into a near dictatorship where revenues largely go to the president and multinational oil companies. Mounting local resistance to Western oil extraction in Nigeria's Niger delta is equally worrisome, as is the long running war in oil-rich Sudan.

Some analysts further argue that anti-terrorist training will actually evoke fundamentalism, especially in Muslim dominated areas in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region. It is also feared that African governments will use acquired military skills and equipment to sweep out political opponents.

America has demonstrated its capability of interfering in every corner of the world. Nevertheless, Africa's least developed countries have gained little from America's self-interested politics. Serious questions need to be asked as to why American interventions are hardly employed to benefit the 700 million Africans. With all the power and authority the US has there must be opportunities to promote structural development through disinterested aid and the exercise of fairer terms of trade. Though, it remains questionable if the second Bush administration will succeed in setting aside its own interests and start looking beyond America's borders.

*(Word count: 2.056, excluding the title.)*