



COMMENTARY

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN US PEACEKEEPING POLICY AND ASSISTANCE TO AFRICA

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Africa has not ranked particularly high on the agenda of the United States (US) in the past, but that is changing. A transformation in America's strategic concerns is the principal reason for this development. A desire to wean itself from relying too heavily on Middle Eastern oil suppliers and to exploit Africa's growing petroleum reserves is a major factor. So is the growing recognition that failed and failing states provide safe havens and possible recruiting grounds for international terrorists. US policy toward Africa had begun to shift before the November 2000 US presidential elections, but the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 quickened the pace and deepened the commitment. As a result, the US has supported United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations in Africa with renewed vigour, and has expanded its assistance to augment the ability of African militaries to undertake peace operations.

After an unprecedented growth in the number of UN peacekeeping operations in the wake of the Cold War, the US commitment to UN missions waned. It increasingly supported those interventions undertaken by regional organizations and coalitions of the willing. This had a profound effect in Africa. Whereas there were more than 30,000 UN Blue Helmets serving in Africa for much of 1993 and 1994, the numbers had dwindled to fewer

than 2,000 at one point in 1999. During this time operations headed by Africans were deployed in no fewer than eight conflict zones throughout the continent.

Before 1996, US assistance to African-led peace operations had been largely ad hoc and short-lived. Washington provided financial and material support to Zairian troops participating in the OAU Neutral Force in Chad for six months in 1981–82. Similarly, it assisted Senegalese troops in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Cease-fire Monitoring Group in Liberia in 1991–92, and later aided Tanzanian and Ugandan contingents in the same mission during 1993–94.

Despite Washington's professed "partnership" with Africa, the initial US capacity-building programme to develop African peacekeeping capabilities was essentially a product of its policy of disengagement, and fairly limited. The African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) began as the African Crisis Response Force (ACRF), and was rolled out rather clumsily during a dramatic rise in inter-ethnic tensions in Burundi in 1996. The then US president, Bill Clinton, wanted an option that did not include the deployment of US troops should the escalating political conflict in Burundi result in a bloodbath. The coup d'état in Bujumbura brought the crisis to an end, and ACRF transformed into ACRI. The

programme, which cost an average of about \$15 million a year, provided training and equipment designed for classical peacekeeping environments to eight sub-Saharan African countries at the battalion and brigade levels.¹

Although welcomed by its recipients, ACRI had more to do with what the US felt it could provide than what the African countries necessarily needed. Moreover, there was considerable dissatisfaction felt by the Pentagon over the State Department's criteria for selecting countries that were to receive training. The link between a country's participation in ACRI and the recipient's decision to contribute troops to a peace operation was often tenuous. Similarly, it is difficult to establish a definite correlation between the training offered and a recipient's improved performance.

A subsequent US capacity-building initiative known as Operation Focus Relief (OFR) represented a shift in the direction of US assistance. Unlike ACRI, OFR provided lethal training and equipment. It was undertaken in response to the May 2000 hostage crisis involving peacekeepers in the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). From the outset there was a shared understanding between Washington and the recipient countries (Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria) that their troops would be deployed to that operation with OFR-provided materiel. Six of the seven OFR-trained battalions served with distinction in UNAMSIL, with the seventh failing to deploy for reasons outside that country's control.² OFR differed from ACRI in two other ways: follow-on training was not part of the package; and the programme—costing roughly \$90 million over 15 months—was relatively expensive.

The African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) programme that succeeded ACRI sought to rectify many of ACRI's perceived shortcomings. It is more flexible and responsive to Africa's peacekeeping needs. Training for peace-enforcement environments is offered, and the provision of lethal equipment is not ruled out (although none has yet been dispensed other than ammunition for target practice, as was done in ACRI). While the hoped-for benefits of train-

ing-the-trainer initiatives have not materialized, at least in the short term, some just-in-time training for countries contributing troops to peace operations has been well received. The programme has now hit its stride, having overcome numerous bureaucratic and administrative hurdles that significantly hampered it in the early stages. Several ACRI "alumni" have received ACOTA training, as has Ethiopia. Botswana has signed up for the programme and additional countries may soon conclude agreements to receive it. However, with funding at similar levels to ACRI's—which is rather meagre—there is a limit to what the US can achieve through ACOTA.

Running concurrent with ACOTA is the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), which (although designed to counter terrorist threats in West Africa) has much in common with peacekeeping training programmes. Its objective is to improve the recipients' ability to exercise effective control over their territories. Mali and Mauritania received field training in their countries in early 2004; Chad was undergoing training in June; and it is expected that Niger will be the next recipient later this year. All four countries, however, have already been provided with PSI-issued vehicles and communications gear. These were shipped to Sierra Leone, where a US company³ taught the recipients how to use and maintain it. The first units were trained in August 2003 and the last in February 2004. The cost for this initiative is around \$8 million. The rationale for the programme was underscored earlier this year when an Algerian terrorist group travelled to Mali to purchase weapons. With US assistance, the Algerian armed forces engaged the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat. The latter retreated to Chad via Mali and Niger, with the militaries of each of those countries engaged in hot pursuit.⁴

A much larger and more costly US undertaking to counter terrorism involves the Horn of Africa, where a Combined Joint Task Force of some 1,400 US troops has been based in Djibouti since the last quarter of 2002. Unlike the aim of PSI, the primary purpose of this initiative is to develop US capabilities. While the focus is on operational activities, the Task

Force could also help to develop regional capacities to undertake civil-military operations by providing skills that would be applicable to peacekeeping. A programme to develop a small number of African air bases for the possible use of US forces in military or humanitarian operations on the continent is also being developed.

There are a number of other initiatives undertaken by Washington in the last five years that warrant mention. The African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS), created in 1999, has engaged senior-level civilian and military African leaders in myriad issues of direct relevance to the successful undertaking of peace operations. The US has also provided funds and expertise to African countries to combat the growing incidence of the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the ranks of their armed forces. It trained a battalion of Guinean soldiers to defend their country from Revolutionary United Front (RUF) incursions, with notable success. Washington also has provided ECOWAS headquarters and member states with computers and communication equipment, and installed a retired US military officer in Abuja to facilitate command and control, as well as planning, for peace operations.

Given these initiatives, some US policymakers were troubled last summer by the inability of ECOWAS to deploy a peacekeeping force to Liberia in a manner Washington considered meaningful and timely. This should have come as no surprise, given the peacekeeping commitments ECOWAS states already had in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere. It also showed the limited progress that the regional organization and its members had made, despite years of assistance from various western capacity-building programmes. Financial constraints and very limited force projection capabilities also played a role.

These policymakers viewed this situation as particularly distressing given that ECOWAS countries, both collectively and individually, were seen as significantly more advanced in peacekeeping terms than other African regions and organizations. As a reflection of

its growing recognition of the limitations of African regional organizations, the US as a member of the UN Security Council has authorized a spate of new UN missions on the continent, to which it has contributed money and logistical support, but not its own contingents. In the past year alone, the UN has established missions in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, and Liberia, which when fully deployed will comprise more than 25,000 Blue Helmets. Today, there are more than 50,000 UN peacekeepers serving throughout Africa. The number of troops serving in African-led missions has plummeted from more than 30,000 in 1999 to just a few hundred today.

It is in this context that the administration of George W Bush is reportedly making ready to launch a new programme that has been tentatively called the "Global Peace Operations Initiative" (GPOI). Details are sketchy, and there is a chance that Congress will not support it or that the administration will ultimately choose not to promote it. Initial information suggests that GPOI would provide training, equipment, and logistical support to assist foreign forces to participate in peace operations. African countries would receive a significant proportion of this aid. Funding for the programme is reportedly set at about \$130 million a year for five years.⁵ Thus, African countries would receive significantly more training and equipment than is presently possible under ACOTA, and at levels approaching what was offered under OFR.

Such a programme would be a welcome development, as resources allocated to support African peacekeeping are far below what is needed. However, these resources should be distributed differently to be made more effective. The idea of training trainers is sensible, but the recipients must first prove they have sufficient capacity and structures in place to maintain and build upon what is provided. Regional training centres should be given priority over national programmes, so that they can assist African countries and regional organizations to develop their logistical, command and control as well as force projection capabilities. Also, a way needs to be found to ensure that Nigeria benefits from the pro-

gramme. The UN Security Council's support for UN operations in Africa may peak after the expected mission in Sudan. After that it is probable that African-headed peace operations will again be called upon to take a leading role in the promotion of peace and security on the continent. It is not too late for Washington to create the partnership with Africa to which it aspires.

Notes

1. Nine countries concluded agreements to receive ACRI, but the US suspended Ethiopia from the programme before training had commenced because of that country's war with Eritrea. Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Senegal and Uganda comprised the eight recipients. Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Uganda did not complete the programme, for various reasons.
2. Senegal ultimately did not send its battalion to UNAMSIL because the UN declined its assistance, as the mission's troop ceiling had already been met.
3. The company in question is Pacific Architects and Engineers (PAE), which maintains an automotive and engineering depot in Freetown and has been providing much-needed logistical support to ECOWAS and UN peace operations in West Africa. In a period when many legitimate and troubling questions have been raised about the wisdom of relying on private businesses to provide some military-related services, PAE's activities in Africa exemplify the very positive role companies can play.
4. Craig S Smith, US training African forces to uproot terrorists, *The New York Times*, 11 May 2004, p A1.
5. B Graham, Bush plans aid to build foreign peace forces, *The Washington Post*, 19 April 2004, p A01.