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Keeping the Peace

Remaining Engaged in Africa: An Army SOF Strategy

by Lt. Col. Robert B. Adolph, Jr.

U.S. Army special-operations forces have proven their utility in the environment called low-intensity conflict. Peacetime engagement strategy, as suggested by James Locher III, former assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, puts SOF at the forefront of America's attempt to foster democracy and stability around the globe.

Nowhere is a SOF strategy potentially more beneficial than on the continent of Africa. Unlike Europe and Asia, Africa is not a major industrial power. It does not produce many finished goods for Americans to consume, nor is it a major trading partner like Germany or Japan. Yet Africa is important to the United States for reasons of pragmatic self-interest and on moral grounds. A SOF strategy in Africa looking into the next century can pay America significant dividends at relatively little cost.

The majority of nations in Africa were still under colonial rule in

1950, but decolonization came rapidly after, and by 1967 most of the former colonies had achieved independence. Unfortunately, many of the new African nations did not possess even rudimentary governmental infrastructures. The competing ideologies of democratic capitalism and Marxism-Leninism vied for influence and in some cases fueled domestic tribal animosities that can be seen today.

In some cases, lacking trained and educated populations, economic and governmental structures, and saddled with national borders imposed by former European rulers, African nations found the post-colonial period tumultuous. A great deal of political discord continues. Much of the African continent remains plagued with population problems — over-population in some regions and under-population in others. Disease is common in the central region, predominantly sleeping sickness and AIDS, and famine remains a life-threatening problem

for millions, particularly in the northeast. Radical Islam is currently making rulers of the Arabized north and east African countries uncomfortable, and the state of South Africa continues on the road toward potential racial warfare.

Despite its enormous problems, Africa remains an important region. According to a Department of State discussion paper, for the United States, Africa represents:

- The political forces of the world's largest regional bloc;
- A rich source of natural resources;
- The ancestral home of 25 million Americans;
- A growing market for American exports;
- An opportunity to demonstrate, through private enterprise and government-to-government aid, that democratic institutions and individual initiative provide a better solution to the problems of the Third World than do totalitarianism and economic regimentation; and
- Possibilities for our adversaries to exploit regional tensions and foster insecurity through the indiscriminate provision of arms and support for violent solution of local conflicts.¹

Pragmatic argument

There are both pragmatic and moral reasons for being engaged in Africa, but for the moment, let us concentrate on matters of national self-interest. The African continent is more than three times the size of the United States and possesses tremendous natural mineral resources. These mineral resources constitute much of the "grist" upon which modern societies depend. Diamonds, oil, chromium and platinum are just a few of the mineral resources critical to an industrial and ever-more-technical nation such as America. From a purely self-interested perspective, the United States must remain engaged on the continent.

Africa contains a veritable treasure house of the known world reserves of the following: chromium — 97 percent, cobalt — 69 percent, diamonds — 92 percent, manganese — 59 percent, platinum — 78 percent, tantalum — 69 percent, and vanadium — 49 percent. Annual U.S. mineral needs equal 10 trillion pounds a year — nearly two tons of metals for each citizen. Mineral imports account for approximately \$25-\$30 billion of imports every year. The U.S. is more than 50-percent dependent for 23 of 40 essential minerals.²

According to Kenneth Kessel's book, *Strategic Minerals: U.S. Alternatives*, chromium, manganese, cobalt and platinum are strategically essential. Cobalt is essential in the manufacture of jet engines; steel cannot be made without manganese; and chromium makes the creation of stainless steel possible. "These four have few or no good substitutes, are essential to the production of important weapons or key industrial processes, and are located primarily in countries of questionable supply reliability — southern Africa and the former

USSR."³

U.S. dependence is such that Congress passed the Strategic Minerals Stockpiling Act in 1979. The act was precipitated by a congressional finding that stated: "Domestic resources for some materials cannot support military, industrial, and essential civilian needs for national defense."⁴ The act "Provides that strategic and critical materials be stockpiled in the interest of national defense to preclude costly and dangerous dependence upon foreign sources of supply in times of national emergency."⁵

A March 31, 1989, review of the status of American stockpiling efforts under the legislation revealed significant shortages in many of the minerals plentiful in Africa. Further growth in technology-oriented weaponry can be expected, increasing American dependence on African mineral resources. According to L. Harold Bullis and James E. Mielke, "It seems reasonable to require that U.S. foreign policy reflect the importance of maintaining the independence and freedom of action of major U.S. supplier nations, as well as the importance

of continued U.S. access to key strategic and critical raw materials, whatever their source."⁶

Moral argument

Possibly just as important as the self-interest motive are the moral imperatives which should drive future U.S. interests in Africa. America, like many of Africa's former colonial rulers, suffers from a history pockmarked by racial prejudice. The American Civil War after 1863, with President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, was fought over the issue of black slavery. The United States is still trying to attain the goal of a color-blind society. Additionally, 25 million Americans have ethnic roots in Africa. As the world's "moral leader" after the fall of the Soviet Union, can the United States afford to ignore future African economic, governmental and social development?

America also has historical ties with a number of African nations. Morocco was the first nation to recognize the independence of the United States from Great Britain and has maintained a close and mutually beneficial relationship ever since. Liberia was founded by freed American slaves. Its capital, Monrovia, was named for former U.S. president James Monroe. Egypt, although not always a friend to America, now receives more U.S. economic and military aid than all other countries except Israel. Egypt was also a staunch ally in America's recent war with Iraq. America has maintained generally friendly relations with Zaire, as well as other non-democratic African countries. And Africa's newest nation, Namibia, was founded with the support of the U.S. working through the United Nations.

America also has an interest in the growth and perpetuation of human rights. The United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," of which the United States is not only a signatory, but one of the primary authors, reads remark-



U.S. Army photo

Although not a major industrial power, Africa offers to pay significant dividends to U.S. involvement into the next century.



U.S. Army photo

Person-to-person contacts such as this medical training exercise give U.S. forces the chance to establish rapport with local populations.

ably like the American Constitution. The Declaration recognizes "the inherent dignity and ... equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family... (and) as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law."⁷⁷

Americans might do well to remember that without support from France, America might never have succeeded in its revolution. Although difficult to imagine now, the 13 colonies could have lost their war with the English had not the French fleet blockaded British shipping and French troops assisted General George Washington. The most revolutionary words ever put to paper can be found in America's Declaration of Independence. Freedom, justice and the inherent dignity of the individual are words that echo back to us from the Baltic States, Eastern Europe and Asia, as well as Africa. American support to democracy in the Third World is a moral imperative.

SOF strategy in Africa

From the perspective of this arti-

cle, the larger question may be, "What is the strategic rationale for a SOF presence in Africa?" It is obvious that the continent is still suffering from the throes of decolonization and the after-effects of the Cold War. Ethiopia, Angola and Somalia have been a few of the African pawns in the "great game" between the U.S. and USSR. Military support provided to Ethiopia by the USSR turned that country into an armed camp and allowed it to prosecute wars in Eritrea and the Ogaden.

Some former colonial powers are still engaged on the continent. According to one source, "France has maintained a major military presence in Africa ... It has been the continent's second largest supplier of arms, providing some 9 percent of North Africa's and 30 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's requirements"⁷⁸ But France is hardly the only player. Great Britain "crushed mutinies which almost overthrew the established governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania ... It maintains small military training teams in a number of Commonwealth African countries"⁷⁹

The point in mentioning the two countries above is to demonstrate that other Western nations have interests and obligations in Africa, and that there is little America might do there that will not involve other actors — possibly in coalition toward the attainment of mutual goals.

The recent success of coalition forces in Iraq leads to the question whether similar coalitions might be possible in future political and military activities. SOF, because of their language abilities and cross-cultural-communications training, have extraordinary capability when used in coalition with other nations' forces. In fact, SF detachments were attached to Arab battalions in the Persian Gulf War for just this reason.

The question of forward-deployed forces is a thorny one in American politics. Whether or not the U.S. will continue to maintain significant military forces overseas into the 21st century remains to be determined. But a SOF presence in Africa, either forward-deployed or on a temporary and intermittent basis, may be in the long-term interests of America. It should be clear that ARSOF are generally the best trained forces available to operate on the continent of Africa as well as the remainder of the Third World.

The kinds of wars that have been fought across the African continent also support the use of SOF. A majority of armed conflicts in Africa since decolonization have been guerrilla-type wars. These have been primarily low-technology insurgencies which are the "bread and butter" of SOF. Whether in support of a fledgling democracy or a democratic insurgent movement, SOF are the best troops available to help either achieve their goals.

The new opportunities are significant. Not the least of these is the opportunity to set an example for African military establishments. By their mere presence in a Third World environment, large conven-

tional American armed forces often have negative effects. One need not look any farther than the Philippines for an example — the population of the Philippines has often been politically polarized over the conventional American military presence in their land.

Circumstances have changed. That polarization was against the backdrop of super-power competition. With the fall of the Soviet Union, democracy is the only successful political paradigm left which African nations might come to emulate. According to Edward J. Perkins, the move toward democracy in Africa is well under way:

*The new Africa is moving away from the view that the state can solve all ills — toward recognition of the important role of the individual and the community in generating and sustaining growth. Rulers of the new Africa are coming to realize that political stability is won by establishing participatory governments which respect the rights of individuals.*¹⁰

Even with some African democratic movements well under way, SOF, either permanently forward-deployed or on temporary duty, can train, advise and assist African militaries without many of the political ramifications that attend the employment of large conventional forces. Additionally, it is oftentimes the military in Third World nations that hold the real keys to power. SOF military-to-military contact can provide an example for other democratically minded military establishments.

Unlike the American political-military experience with sharp divisions between power blocs, it is common in Africa for the military to play a much larger role in domestic politics. This circumstance need not necessarily be bad. An African army which has been trained in total, or in part, by American SOF could eventually come to accept greater civilian political dominance. This is no easy task, but the example set by America's military can come to be

the model to emulate.

Also, because of the nature of many African and other Third World cultures, person-to-person contact is the most valued and long-lasting. The American notion that a one-time deployment of troops can solve the security problems of a fledgling democracy is absurd. Only long-term and consistent American policies which encourage democracy in foreign militaries and populaces can be expected to bear fruit. SOF's regional expertise, linguistic abilities and maturity make them the obvious choice to maintain many of these military-to-military contacts.

Philosophically, it must be accepted that the United States may sometimes fail in these attempts. There are no absolute answers and no guarantees of success. Where human beings are concerned, it is difficult, if not impossible, for American policy makers to determine a Third World leader's commitment to democratic principles. For both pragmatic and moral reasons, the attempt should be made; and as columnist George Will suggested concerning the people of the Third World, "The business of America is justice and securing the blessings of liberty."¹¹

The time for African democracy may be here. According to Robert Fatton Jr. in the *Political Science Quarterly*:

*Too many times they (Africans) have seen and suffered the consequences of broken promises; too many times they have experienced a politics of coups and countercoups that alters nothing except the faces of embezzlers; too many times they have been devoured by causes and leaders they have supported and embraced.*¹²

Democracy, supported by the United States, may be many African nations' best hope for a stable and just future. There are solid pragmatic and moral reasons for the United States to remain engaged, and Army special-operations forces have a unique role to play in helping to bring democratic

freedoms to the African continent in the next century. ✕

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Notes:

¹ U.S. Department of State, "Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 1985), p. 1.

² Data extracted from a briefing given by the U.S. Army Base Engineering Activity, Rock Island, Ill., to the Department of Joint and Combined Operations, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, March 1985, (hereafter called Rock Island Brief).

³ Kenneth A. Kessel, *Strategic Minerals: U.S. Alternatives* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1990), p. 21.

⁴ Rock Island Brief.

⁵ Rock Island Brief.

⁶ L. Harold Bullis and James E. Mielke, *Strategic and Critical Minerals* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 270-271.

⁷ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Basic Documents on Human Rights*, ed. Ian Brownlie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 21-22.

⁸ "Africa South of the Sahara," *Europe Publications Limited*, 17th Edition (London: 1987), p. 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Edward J. Perkins, "The Seedlings of Hope: U.S. Policy in Africa," *Current Policy*, No. 1183, Address before Africare, Washington, D.C., June 11, 1989, U.S. Department of State (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), p. 2.

¹¹ George F. Will, "A Land Fit for Heroes," *Newsweek*, 11 March 1991, p. 78.

¹² Robert Fatton Jr., "Liberal Democracy in Africa," *Political Science Quarterly*, Fall 1990, p. 470.