The Evolving US-Nigerian Relationship
and the War on Terrorism in Africa

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The Bush administration entered office with a realist-oriented foreign policy that did not perceive the African continent as an important part of the overall international strategic landscape. This geopolitical vision was altered by the attacks of 9/11, as administration officials underscored the African continent's rising status as an important "second front" in a Global War on Terrorism. The interventionist assumption behind Africa's rising geopolitical stakes is the belief that many African countries are susceptible to and, in turn, will potentially become exporters of terrorism. This is due to either the past emergence of radical regimes that were willing to host terrorist organizations on their soil (e.g., Sudan, which provided a refuge for Osama bin Laden from 1991 to 1996); the inability of weak central governments to effectively monitor outlying regions where terrorist organizations can organize and thrive (e.g., the vast Sahelian hinterlands of Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania); or the threat of state collapse and the loss of state control over the territory as a whole (e.g., Somalia since 1991).

Africa's rising status in the war on terrorism is part of an evolving US foreign policy approach that divides Africa into at least four spheres of foreign policy interest: (1) those countries in the Islamic littoral of the African continent with significant Muslim populations (including predominantly Muslim countries in West Africa such as Nigeria and Senegal) that are destined to receive priority attention due to their geographical, religious and cultural proximity to the Middle East, the perceived epicenter of the Global War on Terrorism; (2) regional powers, typically Nigeria and South Africa, but also Algeria, Kenya and Senegal, that are perceived as crucial to the maintenance of regional stability and therefore "regional anchors" of counter-terrorism efforts; (3) countries deemed important to US economic interests, most notably oil-producing countries in the Gulf of Guinea region stretching from Nigeria to Angola; and (4) the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, which remains relegated to the back-burner of US foreign policy. Nigeria, a regional power with oil resources, is considered crucial to combating perceived terrorist threats and to leading regional security initiatives that support the Bush administration's war on terror.

Nigeria as a "National Security Trifecta"

Nigeria, considered during the 1960s to be one of the "brightest stars" of the galaxy of newly independent African countries, fell out of favor with Washington after the emergence of a series of military dictatorships that culminated in Washington's imposition of sanctions (which included a ban on the travel of Nigerian high government officials and their family members to the United States, but ultimately did not disrupt the sale of Nigerian oil to US markets). In 1998, the death of General Sani Abacha, an especially brutal dictator, ushered in Nigeria's most recent experiment with democracy, replete with competitive presidential elections that earned Olusegun Obasanjo — a former military ruler from 1976 to 1979 who spent three years in jail during the Abacha era — two terms of office as president (1999-2003 and 2003-07). Nigeria's political opening has led to a new era of especially close US-Nigerian relations, with one US official referring to Nigeria as a "national security trifecta" for US interests in Africa.

The first element of this national security trifecta is Nigeria's stature as a regional hegemonic power. In addition to having the African continent's largest population (between 130 and 150 million citizens), extensive military capabilities, and oil-based economic power, Nigeria boasts a political leadership intent on playing a leading security role in West Africa and the African continent in general. For example, Nigeria has led several peacekeeping missions in its own regional neighborhood of West Africa that positively contributed to the resolution of civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and has hosted peace talks designed to defuse crises in other African re-
regions. International talks held most recently in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, focused discussion on the prevention of further violence and genocide in the Darfur region of the Sudan.

This Nigerian vision, often referred to as a Pax Nigeriana, has been wholeheartedly endorsed by the Bush administration, which has the realist intention of cultivating strategic ties with African regional powers that are capable of maintaining stability within their given regions. According to the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs, Nigeria under Obasanjo has played a “pivot role in the support of peace in Africa.” At the heart of Bush administration support for Nigeria and other African regional powers is the White House’s strong aversion to direct US military involvement in peacekeeping operations on the African continent, often derisively referred to during the 2000 presidential campaign as “ill-conceived exercises in nation building.” It is for this reason that in 2003 the Bush administration resisted initial pleas from within the West African region and the international community to commit large numbers of US troops to stem fighting in Liberia, offering instead a limited deployment of small numbers of US troops designed to provide logistical support to a larger West African peacekeeping force led by Nigeria.

A second component of the US-Nigerian national security triad is the Obasanjo administration’s willingness to play a leading role in the Bush administration’s war on terrorism. As highlighted by the State Department’s 2005 annual survey of terrorism:

- Nigeria took the lead in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union in sponsoring joint intelligence and security conferences on counterterrorism.
- The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), an organization founded by President Obasanjo and other African heads of state, condemned terrorism and called for African nations to take concrete measures to combat it.
- Nigerian security services were particularly cooperative and proactive when asked to investigate potential terrorist threats to US interests.
- Nigerian intelligence and security services worked hard to improve intelligence sharing on counterterrorism issues, and the Nigerian military worked to establish units with counterterrorism capability.
- Nigeria backed UN Resolutions 1267, 1333, and 1368, which supported measures against the Taliban and condemned the terrorist attacks on September 11.
- Nigeria consistently lent diplomatic support to Coalition efforts against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, despite the domestic political ramifications in a country that is home to Africa’s largest Muslim population.

Nigeria has also agreed to participate in the US-sponsored Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI), which promotes an integrated approach to counterterrorism that includes Nigeria and Senegal in West Africa, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia in North Africa, and the four Sahelian countries of Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. US officials view Nigeria as an important anchor of this trans-regional program.

The third component of the US-Nigerian national security triad is Nigeria’s stature as a strategically important oil-producing country. As the fifth largest exporter of oil to the United States, Nigeria has 25 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. Equally important, it comprises part of an African coastal region known as the Gulf of Guinea that is expected to provide as much as 25 percent of US oil needs by 2015. This strategic reality not surprisingly has fostered a series of fledgling US security measures, inclusive of Nigeria, that together can be referred to as the Gulf of Guinea initiative, the primary goal of which is to gradually build up an effective regional security program capable of ensuring the safe transport of the region’s oil resources to the United States.
Nigeria's Achilles' Heel: Democratic Consolidation or Decay?

Washington's increasing reliance on Nigeria to ensure regional stability, promote counterterrorism initiatives, and fulfill rising US oil needs is nonetheless worrisome for analysts who focus on the domestic shortcomings of the Nigerian polity. The military has ruled Nigeria for most of its independence era (approximately 30 of the last 46 years), and the current elected "civilian" leadership (whose leader is a former military dictator) is perceived as unable to stem the gradual decay of Nigeria's most recent experiment with democratic rule. It is only a matter of time, according to this pessimistic vision, before the Generals return to prevent the complete unraveling of the Nigerian polity. Even the most optimistic observers of Nigerian democracy are hesitant to argue that Nigeria has reached a critical turning point in its democratic development that makes another military coup highly unlikely. Indeed, if Nigerian history is our guide, the opposite is true.

Nigerian democracy is threatened by the rise of violence between its more than 250 ethnic groups and its Muslim and Christian communities, the latter comprising roughly 50 and 40 percent of the country's total population, respectively. According to the Nigerian Commission for Refugees, for example, approximately 14,000 Nigerians have been killed and more than 3 million Nigerians have been internally displaced from their homes as a result of ethnic and religious violence that has taken place in the aftermath of the transition to democracy in 1999. This violence has been especially acute in the Niger Delta, which serves as the primary source of Nigerian oil wealth. In February 2006, oil production in Nigeria dropped by nearly 20 percent due to the intensification of domestic violence, including the kidnapping of foreign oil workers and the bombing of oil pipelines by local militias. The Nigerian government typically responds to such acts with heavy-handed military force, which only contributes to further attacks and counter-attacks. These developments are worrisome for the Nigerian economy. Any long-term disruption of Nigerian oil exports will surely have a disastrous effect on the Nigerian economy.

Finally, Nigerian democracy itself is under pressure, as witnessed by President Obasanjo's attempts (which were rejected by the Nigerian Senate in May 2006) to change the Nigerian constitution so that he can run for a third term of office in 2007. The 2007 presidential elections will serve as a critical turning point in Nigerian history: they will either unleash greater religious, ethnic, and regional tensions that will make the country ripe for another military coup and, in the extreme, a civil war that could divide the country (especially if Obasanjo ignores the Nigerian Senate and seeks a third term of office); or they will have a calming effect that will continue the long process of consolidating democratic practices within the country. Moreover, the government's human rights record remains poor.

COLD WAR Redux?
THE FUTURE OF US-NIGERIAN RELATIONS

The impending challenge for the Bush administration is how to respond to events in Nigeria when the normative goal of promoting democracy clashes with the strategic goal of containing terrorist threats. The dilemma with such a policy choice is Washington's association with governments that abuse the human rights of their people, as in the case of current US ties with the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak. The US also runs the risk of becoming mired in internal African conflicts that have little if anything to do with the Global War on Terrorism. For example, local leaders denounce their domestic opponents as "terrorist threats" and employ US-supplied weapons as the means for extinguishing those "threats." An overriding preoccupation with terrorist threats may once again lead Washington to overlook the authoritarian excesses of African regimes in favor of their willingness to support US national security objectives (i.e., the war on terror).

One of the primary challenges associated with the expansion of US ties with Africa's oil-rich coun-
tries including Nigeria is the potential blurring of the strategic goals of counter-terrorism and ensuring access to oil. When one adds to this mix that the majority of Africa’s petroleum-producing countries constitute dictatorships in which oil wealth controlled by the few leads to resentment, unrest, and, in the extreme, insurrections by the many determined to enjoy their fair share of these profits, the mix can be explosive. How will US policymakers respond when an oil-producing ally in the Gulf of Guinea seeks military support (or at least a US blessing) to suppress a domestic insurgency, which is born out of economic disenfranchisement but denounced by the government in power as a “terrorist threat”? If history is our guide, the lines between counter-terrorism and access to oil will be blurred by administration officials who will likely choose oil over democracy and who will be tempted to label the insurgency as a terrorist group. Indeed, according to many policy analysts, the lines are already becoming blurred and will only become more so as the US finds itself increasingly dependent on African sources of oil in the decades to come.

It is important to note, however, that democracy promotion has never served as the principal foreign policy objective of the northern industrialized democracies, including the United States. At best it has played a secondary role behind more self-interested foreign pursuits. Rhetoric has also not always conformed to actual policies. Following 9/11, the Bush administration has had to weigh the benefits of democracy promotion when such a policy would potentially alienate important allies in the war on terrorism. In the Horn of Africa, for example, a decision to make democracy promotion the principal US foreign policy objective would have precluded the decision to make Djibouti the only site of a formal US military base on African soil. Indeed, all three of Washington’s North African allies (Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia) in the war on terrorism lack democratic political systems.

The logic of current policy was succinctly captured by an officer of the US Embassy in Tunis in 2003 who said: “In short, foreign policy is about choosing, and in this case there is no question that the security interest of combating global terrorism with our allies in North Africa is more important than the degree to which the peoples of these coun-

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