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US POLICY TOWARD SOUTH AFRICA : COMPULSIONS AND OPTIONS

International relations are not always guided by principles, norms, values and ethics. Foreign policy of nation-states, particularly that of the major and super powers, are often guided by narrow national interests which at times contradict the very ideology and philosophy which the state vows to propound. The US-South African relation is a case in point. The United States, claiming to be the citadel of the democratic world and the first country to espouse the cause of civil liberties and human values in its Declaration of Independence more than 200 years ago, has been supporting the white minority apartheid regime of South Africa which is condemned world wide as a "crime against humanity".

There is no denying the fact that South Africa is now a regional power, her geo-strategic location and rich endowment of precious mineral resources has enlisted her as an area of vital interest to the West, particularly to the US. But the anti-apartheid movement is getting momentum in South Africa and the US policy toward Pretoria is being condemned world wide. The most obvious questions in this connection are: Why the US, the most vocal proponent of democratic norms, continues to support the racist regime of South Africa? What may be the relevant compulsions behind the apparently contradictory US foreign policy posture vis-a-vis South Africa? Is the US likely to continue in foreseeable future with her support to the apartheid

regime? if not, then what are the options? The present article is an attempt to examine these and related issues.

I

South Africa with an area of 1,221,037 sq. km. holds a unique position in the African continent for its geostrategic location. Pretoria controls one of the most strategic sea-routes, the Cape, which is of vital concern for the US and West Europe as 90 percent of oil for NATO countries, 40 percent for the US and 70 percent of all strategic minerals imported by the West pass through it. The continuing Arab-Israeli conflict and the closure of the Suez Canal in 1967 have made the Cape route more important and since then traffic along this route has increased phenomenally by twenty times compared to that in 1966. According to a report in 1981, "the level of usage of the Cape route is about 2,300 ships per month which includes about 600 oil tankers. This gives a total of over 27,000 ships per year about half of which call in South Africa annually, the rest navigate the Cape without stopping"¹. Moreover, with the escalating situation in the Iran-Iraq war and the growing Soviet influence in the Red Sea area the straits of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb have become more insecure and vulnerable. On the other hand, the Suez Canal has its limited capacity and big ships and supertankers can not cross it and they are to take the Cape route. The excellent port and air facilities in South Africa have also made the Cape route more attractive.

South Africa has huge reserve of strategic raw materials which are very critical to the West, particularly to the US. It is the fourth largest supplier of non-fuel minerals and has the world's largest known deposits of chromium, manganese, platinum, vanadium and gold and other minerals which are important to the West and Japan because of their strategic, industrial and economic uses.

With the growing Soviet influence in Africa particularly arms agreements of four Southern African nations with the Warsaw Pact

1. H.L.M. Beri, "Washington's Pretoria Connection", *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi, IDSA.), Vol. IX, No. 9, December 1985, p. 890.

countries and Moscow's continuous support to the liberation struggle in Namibia have made the Republic of South Africa strategically more important to the US and the region has virtually turned into an area of superpower conflict. Surrounded by sea from three sides,

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bordering with mostly pro-Moscow regimes and locking three countries within her territory, South Africa enjoys a unique position in global security consideration of the West.

The current wave of internal socio-political dynamism in the backdrop of the practice of apartheid policy by the white minority regime and growing political unrest have created a great concern to the United States. South Africa is, in fact, almost an international outcast and is looked by the African leaders not merely as a foreign country with a different way of life, but also as the only regime that oppresses its own people, practises racism as its state philosophy. White people of European origins, comprising only one-sixth of the population, hold a monopoly of all decision-making roles in the country, with the exception of the small impoverished native reservations known as "homelands". The social and economic hardships that the blacks suffer from racist policy of the regime are formidable. The main preoccupation of the regime is "to hold on to power" and to contain black discontent leaving the latter in abject poverty, bitterness and hopelessness. South Africa remains a divided society with blacks and whites separated along political and social lines and economically, it is a society of haves and have-nots.

The white regime in Pretoria also continues to pose increasing threat to the peace and stability of the entire region by the forcible maintenance of colonialism, slavery and genocide. It has illegally occupied Namibia and consistently pursuing the policy of intransi-

gence and belligerency toward the neighbouring countries. Pretoria's main objective of regional political, economic and military dominance is to deter the African national movements including the activities of the African National Congress and at the same time, to contain the aspirations of blacks within South Africa by using force.

II

Although the US connection with South Africa is by now deeply entrenched, during the period of British domination in the region the US policy was rather one of benign indifference. As Britain withdrew from the area, both China and Soviet Union tried to exert their influence in the region. In fact, the American involvement in South Africa increased after the World War-II and, later on, with the Soviet-Cuban presence in Angola and Mozambique South Africa acquired a new position in the US strategic considerations. Meanwhile the economic importance of South Africa to the US can not be underestimated.

South Africa is the most important country from the point of view of the supply of strategic minerals increasingly critical to the US. The US Geological Survey has indentified 27 minerals as critical to the industrial societies and South Africa has reserves 11 of them. The US depends on imports of 90 percent of its chrome, 91 percent of its gold and 27 percent of its vanadium on South Africa.²

In addition to the mineral endowment of South Africa, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia are also very rich in mineral resources which has made the region more important in the US economic and strategic perspectives. Moreover, America's allies in Europe and Japan are also heavily dependent on South African minerals. In 1979 the EEC depended upon South Africa for 49

2. United States House of Representatives. Ninety-sixth Congress. *Second Session. Sub-Saharan Africa : Its Role in Critical Mineral Needs of the Western World*. A Report prepared by the Subcommittee on Mines and Mining of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs of the US House of Representatives. Washington D.C., the U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980, p. 15.

percent of their chromium, 44 percent of ferrochrome, 41 percent of manganese³ and their serious concerns raised by the fact that for these critical minerals the USSR is usually the other major world producer. C.A. Crocker, the then Assistant Secretary of African Affairs asserted that, "It is a fact—not opinion or propaganda, as is sometimes alleged, that South Africa is the Saudi Arabia of minerals".⁴ Further,

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President Reagan in March 1981 emphasized the very special relationship that the US had with South Africa : "Can we abandon a country (South Africa) that has stood beside us in every war we have fought? A country that, strategically, is essential to the free world in its production of minerals that we all must have".⁵

So in order to keep the flow of minerals unimpeded and in order to protect these minerals from possible diversion to the communist bloc countries, it appears imperative for the US to maintain and promote friendly relations with South Africa.

Investment is another area where the US has great stakes in South Africa. Investments of capital in mines, forestry, plantations, infrastructure, industries and services have become very attractive and profitable. The South African economy is deeply penetrated by transnational investments. Some 2000 major foreign companies, mainly Western, operate in South Africa and Namibia, and the pattern of investment adheres to the classic pattern of transnationals in the Third World countries—a mineral-rich economy, cheap and

3. H.L.M. Beri, *op. cit.*, p. 892.

4. C.A. Crocker, "A US Policy for the 80s", *Africa Report*, Vol. 26, No. 1, January-February 1981, p. 13.

5. Quoted by, Parbati K. Sircar in "A Second "Scramble for Africa", *Africa Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, p. 57.

plentiful labour, access to markets of the neighbouring countries. The Western states and their business and financial concerns are working in close cooperation and their activities are expanding. In late 1970s the US investments in South Africa had tripled compared to mid-1950s and it was then estimated that four out of five dollars of US investment in African manufacturing industry were invested in South African factories.⁶ In 1983 the total direct foreign investments in South Africa estimated about \$20 billion, while the indirect investments exceeded \$ 45 billion.⁷

South Africa's computer market had been dominated by US corporations. At least one third of all IBM sales were to South African government agencies which had been helping South Africa's efforts to become self-sufficient in strategic armaments production. According to an article of Jack Anderson published in Washington Post in July 1983, the actual US investments in South Africa was nearly six times more the Administration acknowledged.⁸ Meanwhile, President Reagan's policy of "constructive engagement" encouraged for more and more investments in South Africa. Some 320 American companies with their subsidiaries and affiliates account for about one fifth of total foreign investments in South Africa and they are virtually controlling the main growth sectors such as oil, cars and computers.⁹ The investors also play highly sinister role in the political sphere of the country as their future depend on the political stability of the regime.

Trade is another area where the US and its allies have close linkage with South Africa. South Africa supplies manganese chro-

6. Ann and Neva Siedman, "US Multinationals in South Africa" (Dares Salam, Tanzania), 1977, p. 105.

7. According to a report in 1983 Europe had the largest investment in South Africa-about 63 percent of the total overseas investments, while North and South America's share was about 25 percent. For details, see, *The Economist*, 30 March 1985, p. 31.

8. H.L.M. Beri, *op. cit.*, p. 893.

9. *The Economist*, 30 March 1985. p. 31.

mium, platinum, antimony, vanadium, gold and a number of other minerals. It also provides a large market for a variety of consumer goods, technology and services for the Western countries particularly for the US. Although the total two-way trade with the US is relatively small, its importance is growing and far surpasses the absolute value.

Table: Direction of South African Trade (excluding gold) 1981

Name of Countries	Exports (%)	Imports (%)
The United States	14	14
Japan	13	11
Britain	11	12
Switzerland	11	0
West Germany	7	13
France	0	5
Africa	10	2
Other Countries	26	18
Unallocated	8	25
Total	100	100

(Total Exports \$12.2 bn; Total Imports \$20.9 bn)

Source : *The Economist*, 16 July 1983, p. 27.

As the table shows in 1981 the US was the main trading partner and exported more to South Africa than imported from that country. In fact, the volume of US trade with South Africa increased in eighties which is significant in two ways: Firstly, it provides an expanding market for many American products, technology, and services at a time when these are facing keen competition elsewhere. Secondly, South Africa provides a range of primary products, including oil and strategic non-fuel minerals, on which the US has become greatly dependent. The South African armament industry has considerably enhanced its production capacity but it still requires foreign technology

particularly for its nuclear and chemical weapon research programmes which are mainly supplied by the US.

Political developments in late 1970s, particularly the expansion of Soviet influence in Angola and Ethiopia, the revolution in Iran, the purported Soviet-Cuban involvement in the Yemeni war and Soviet invasion in Afghanistan added a new momentum to US strategic and military considerations in the region. As Carter Administration took human rights as an important element of foreign policy, the Southern African region was not viewed in the context of US-Soviet competition and traditional instruments of power and force to protect the US interests were not applied which was interpreted by many as a demonstration of United States' weakness. It was also widely accused that

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the US failure to counter communism in Angola encouraged the Soviet Union in Ethiopia and Afghanistan which paved the way in installing radical Marxist governments in some other African countries whose leaders and policies were profoundly inimical to the American interests. In fact, two important phenomena in late 1970s—the growing military, economic and logistic capacities of the Soviet Union as a global power and the growing ability of Third World countries to assert their interests and to mobilise support, internal and external, led to a conspicuous return to conservatism in US foreign policy toward Third World in general.

President Reagan coming to power in early 1981 deemphasised human rights, granted more economic and military aid to Pretoria and placed the South African case in the context of East-West confrontation. The main objective of US policy was to prevent Southern

Africa, and with it ultimately the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa from falling within the communist sphere of influence through its "constructive engagement" programme. While the regimes in South Africa always capitalise on the concerns of the West about communist involvement in the region. Prime Minister P. W. Botha commenting on South Africa's strategic importance and its anti-communist stand said, "If you believe in South Africa's importance in terms of strategic minerals, food production and military facilities then you must strengthen the government's hand and help make it a bastion against communism".¹⁰ As a means to convince the West, South Africa also keeps on accusing the Soviet Union for trying "to overthrow this (South Africa) state and to create chaos so that the Kremlin can establish its hegemony here".¹¹ So, whatever distasteful South Africa's racial policies may be, the communist threat is perceived to be of greater importance and the West, particularly the US, in all probabilities, are likely to maintain ties with South Africa as a vital bulwork against Soviet expansion in the region.

South Africa is also one of the main arms purchasers of the West and there is a wide apprehension that a black majority rule in Pretoria will alienate a country of great economic and strategic importance. Moreover, South Africa is the most powerful country in the region both in terms of military and economic strength, and as the Soviet Union is gradually strengthening its footholds in Africa, Pretoria will play an important strategic role in preserving, protecting and expanding American interests in the region.

III

As we have seen, politically, economically and strategically South Africa is of great importance to the US and there is also widespread apprehension in Washington that an unfriendly regime in Pretoria could cut off Persian Gulf oil supplies, through heavily travelled Cape

10. Patrick O'Meara, "South Africa: Politics of Change", *Current History*, Vol. 80, No. 463, March 1981, p. 134.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

route, carried by super tankers to Europe and to the US, President Reagan's foreign Policy advisers including Richard Allen recognised that there were strategic reasons for US relations with South African government which was indirectly understood by the African states as US indifference to the most significant and emotional issue of inter-African politics. It is true that US has vital interest in South Africa, but at the same time it can not ignore its interests in other parts of the continent. Nigeria, the most powerful and richest country in black Africa, is the second largest supplier of oil to the US. Even as early as 1980 President Shehu Shagari of Nigeria categorically stated that his country would use any means including oil to persuade the US to use its powerful international economic and financial position to discourage and eventually to destroy apartheid in Africa. In fact, the antiapartheid sentiment is very strong and getting momentum in Africa and Washington's Pretoria connection is viewed negatively by many African states. And this is a fact which should be taken into proper cognizance by the US in formulating policy towards Africa in general and South Africa in particular.

The US Policy of "constructive engagement" was strongly criticised by African countries. Instead of solving any problem the policy contributed to intensification of the domestic political unrest in South Africa and escalation of Pretoria's hostility towards neighbouring countries and to identification of the US as a close collaborator of the white minority regime. Although on occasions the US tried to warm up relations with South Africa's neighbouring countries aimed at what was perceived as creating a broader regional security framework, the policy attained a very limited success.

Meanwhile, the struggle of black majority people in South Africa against white minority regime has acquired new momentum and at the same time protests from international community against racism and apartheid have intensified. Since 1973 when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to form an "International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid", declaring it to be "a crime against humanity", a number of resolutions have

been adopted by various regional and international organizations, including the UN, the NAM, the OAU, the OIC and the Group of 77, denouncing the apartheid policy of South Africa and criticising the Western attitude particularly the US role in South Africa. The recent Non-aligned Summit in Harare, Zimbabwe also condemned the "constructive engagement" policy of the US, called upon the US government to abandon it, pledged to back the armed struggle against South African regime and urged all member states to render effective assistance to end the apartheid policy.¹²

Now, the obvious question is whether the US would continue its policy in South Africa. The question is of more than academic interest because in case the US does so she might have to face a political isolation particularly from the Third World countries who have already doubts about genuine US commitment to its declared principle of seeking and maintaining ties with democratic regimes. Moreover, to what extent the US allies particularly Europeans, who have no less stakes in Africa, will support the US policy is still in doubt. Moreover, the US policy has also been facing tremendous criticism and protests within the US. More than any other issue since the Vietnam war, the question of apartheid has touched off a wave of public protest and voluntary arrest in the US that has spread far beyond Washington. Widespread pressure has been mounting all over the US to rid themselves of holdings that involve foreign companies with interest in South Africa. Public opinion in the US is undoubtedly in favour of improvements to be made in South Africa which would benefit the black majority. Although President Reagan in his major foreign policy statement toward South Africa in early August 1986 asserted that "Sanctions destroy America's flexibility, discard diplomatic leverage and deepen the crisis" and tried to convince the American people that "Victims of an economic boycott of South Africa would be the very people we seek to help",¹³ demands for comprehensive sanctions were raised from different quarters in the USA. And there seems to

12. *The New Nation* (Dhaka), 8 September 1986.

13. *Time*, 4 August 1986, pp. 4-11.

have already a realization in Washington that a political compromise had to be made in South Africa before a violent revolution toppled the white minority regime. Even the US Secretary of State George Shultz recognized, "The only alternative to a radical, violent outcome is a political accommodation now, before it is too late".¹⁴

Now, the question is how to avoid violent outcome and to reach a political accommodation among black majority and white minority peoples in South Africa. And what may be the options for the US taking into consideration of all its stakes in South Africa.

Mandatory economic sanctions on South Africa are widely demanded and it is considered that a comprehensive economic sanction may compel the white minority regime to end the apartheid policy. Economic sanctions on South Africa have already been adopted by many nations including some European countries. In September 1985 the US also imposed selective economic sanctions on South Africa including the ban of exports of computers, nuclear technology and loans and

If the US continues to support the South African regime, she may face a challenge of political isolation from Third world countries who have already doubts about US commitments to seek and maintain ties with democratic regimes.

export aid in several circumstances.¹⁵ But these limited sanctions had many loopholes and were hedged in by so many "waivers" that it had hardly affect on South African economy and created doubts about the US intensions. President Reagan also recently vetoed a bill approved by the Congress which demanded ban on imports of South African uranium, coal, steel, iron, textiles, agricultural products and ban on new US investments and to deny landing rights of South African aircraft in the USA.¹⁶ It (veto) had serious repercussi-

14. H.L.M. Beri, *op. cit.*, p. 888.

15. *The Economist*, 14 September 1985, p. 41.

16. *Daily Monitoring Report*, Radio Bangladesh, Dhaka, 28 September 1986, p. 4.

ons and the American people expressed their utter dissatisfaction on the failure of their Government to impose sanctions on South Africa. Meanwhile, as it was widely believed and expected the Senate overrode the veto which was a major foreign policy failure of President Reagan on an important issue. So considering the US public opinion, international reactions and allies positions (Canada, Australia and France have already agreed to impose sanctions) the Reagan Administration should reassess its policy and come forward for economic sanctions against South Africa, otherwise it will not only be unpopular within the US but at the same time may face a challenge of isolation in the international community. Somebody may argue that from previous experiences it has been observed that sanctions do not always work. It is true but South African situation is totally different and more importantly in previous cases particularly in Iran and Libya the American people fully supported their government but in case of South Africa it is quite opposite.

Meanwhile, the US may seek a political negotiation between the white minority regime and opposition leaders in South Africa. The US appears to have edge over both the parties since the white rulers because of their overwhelming dependence know it very well that without support from West particularly from the US they can not continue the apartheid policy, while the black Africans realise that within the prevailing socio-economic, political and legal structures it will be difficult for them to overthrow the present regime unless the US blessing on it is withdrawn. So the US may put sufficient pressure on the regime for more concessions and at the same time may initiate wider contacts, at various levels, with the blacks with a view to encouraging the emergence of a more moderate leadership flexible to the West. As the US have no choice "between black and white" rather more concerned about its own interests, if a black leadership can guarantee Western interests in South Africa, Washington apparently should have no problem to accept it.