

Beyond Zimbabwe

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Pliny the Elder was onto something when he observed, "There is always something new out of Africa". But if he was around today he might have added that there is little new about Africa out of Australia. The recent reporting of Robert Mugabe's wilful destruction of Zimbabwean society has momentarily attracted some national attention. However, we need to think beyond the immediate crises on the continent and begin to give Africa the greater policy consideration it deserves.

Australian policy interest and influence in Africa has waned considerably since the Fraser and Hawke governments. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of South Africa's apartheid regime Australia began to look at Africa as a problem for Europe while we focussed on strengthening relations with Asia. Yet there are good reasons- economic, security and humanitarian - why Australia should reinvigorate its policy approach to Africa. Africa might not rival Asia, the United States or Europe in its overall importance to us, but its relative importance is growing.

Economically, a new scramble for African resources is taking place. Australian companies are aware of the vast potential of Africa for developing new sources of raw materials. Woodside Petroleum is investing approximately \$US48 million over six years in a joint venture oil exploration program in Libya. BHP Billiton is seeking to develop new diamond fields in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, our companies are facing widespread stiff competition for access to these valuable resources.

China and India are amongst the significant players in the drive to develop African resources. Some examples of the scale of this are illustrative. The World Bank has estimated that Chinese direct foreign investment in Africa was over \$US 1.18 billion by mid-2006. In Sudan, Chinese corporations now control 40% of oil production. Beijing's significant involvement in the Zambian copper industry was an issue in that country's recent presidential elections.

India is not far behind. The East African littoral has had a significant Indian diaspora for centuries. Recent energy deals with Libya, Sudan and the Ivory Coast, have further widened India's influence. The environmental, labour and governance records of many of the new Asian mining and raw materials ventures are generally poor, but Africa's desire for new investment is great. There is growing concern that many developing nations are engaged in a 'race to the bottom' for investment. The comparative record of Australian firms should be an advantage, but they suffer from a commercial disadvantage when compared to many competitors.

Australian companies seeking opportunities in Africa receive inadequate policy and trade support. Australia has a permanent, professional diplomatic or trade presence in just seven of Africa's 53 nations. The detailed local knowledge and diplomatic influence that is required to develop favourable access deals to raw resources is often unavailable. This situation requires correction by the development of appropriate policy, support and representation.

Secondly, in this globalised world, many of the issues of most importance to Australia and the international community – climate change, pandemic disease, environmental degradation, people movement, even the rise of Islamism – have an important African dimension. They cannot be contained within neat geographical boundaries and their resolution will involve engagement with Africa.

Thirdly, Australia has security interests in Africa. Since our commitment to the Commonwealth Monitoring Force in Rhodesia in 1979, Australian forces have participated in 13 African operations. This exceeds the number in our own region during the same period. The Government's 2005 Defence Update acknowledges our security interests are global. Despite this, the resource and policy attention Africa receives within our security and intelligence communities is disproportionately small. The recently appointed Secretary of the Department of Defence, Mr Nick Warner, has an extensive career background in African policy. This places him in a unique minority of Australian public servants.

Our membership and record in multilateral security operations suggests that we cannot rule out future involvement in Africa. The logic behind Australia's participation in Iraq and Afghanistan could equally support involvement with anti-terrorist operations in the Horn of Africa. Such potential engagements might not have the same significance for our security interests as those occurring in Asia, but they deserve a higher level of policy preparedness and understanding than they currently receive.

Finally, we must consider Australia's policy response to humanitarian disaster. Here, Africa continues to challenge our conscience to act. The spread of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, shocking poverty, intrastate and interstate conflict, and the situation in Zimbabwe are examples where Australia needs to respond.

Compared to the scale possible from Europe or the United States, or institutions such as the World Bank, any Australian contributions will invariably be small. Nevertheless, a re-engineered and comprehensive Australian policy approach to some humanitarian issues could make the difference between pointless reaction and preventative mitigation.

Moreover, as if these reasons were not enough, domestic politics will help shape Australian attitudes towards Africa. Immigration has increased the African influence in Australian society. Ten percent of our immigrants in the last decade were African (118,000 people). Future Australian governments are likely to find an increasing community demand for involvement with Africa.

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