

From the Latent to the Manifest: US Strategic Interests in the Gulf of Guinea

Idahosa Osaretin

*Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Benin,
Benin City, Nigeria*

Telephone: 08066400829; E-mail: thechurchofbelievers@yahoo.com

KEYWORDS Energy. Security. Stakeholders. Leadership. Economic

ABSTRACT Until recently, Africa and indeed the Gulf of Guinea was not central to the United States' foreign policy objectives. However, events in the Persian Gulf (most of the world's largest oil reserves and the largest supplies of the US energy needs) corroborated by the catastrophe of September 11, 2001, necessitated a re-appraisal of Washington's policy towards the sub-region. Given that the Gulf of Guinea already supplies about 17 percent of US energy needs, the need to consolidate her presence in the sub-region became imperative. This paper traces the evolution of US presence in the Gulf of Guinea against the backdrop of the quest for the energy security. It also examines the impact of the competition between the US and her closest rivals in the region and its grave security concerns. Finally, the paper suggests that collaborative effort by the stakeholders in the sub-region is the best way to mitigate the development challenges of the area.

INTRODUCTION

The world has changed radically since 1991. Before then, international relations and national security were dominated for over half a century by the Cold War concerns. Also, events in the international arena since the end of the ideological war have shown that the world has progressively become a more dangerous place. As the sole survivor of that era, the United States has maintained a position of global primacy ever since (Traub-Merz et al. 2004).

Fundamentally, the US was not a party to the original scramble for Africa in the 1880s and 1890s. This period witnessed European nations, including Britain, France, Portugal, Germany and Belgium, turning African societies into colonies following a formal partition at the Berlin Conference between 1884 and 1885. However, the US has been engaged in Africa for over five decades, with the establishment of the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs under President Eisenhower in 1958. Throughout the Cold War and its aftermath, the US has traditionally devoted less attention to Africa compared with other regions of perceived greater interest, most notably Western Europe, Eastern Europe (including Russia and the other countries that were once part of the former Soviet Union), and, more recently, Asia, and the Middle East. Neglect of Africa at the top echelon

of the US policy making establishment is the direct result of leadership's lack of knowledge of the continent and therefore the absence of a deep-felt interest in a region that historically enjoyed few enduring political links with US as compared with the former European colonial powers. This was strengthened by a tendency to view Africa as the responsibility of those same European powers.

The Gulf of Guinea is a sub-region of Africa that is rich in natural resources. This area is emerging as an important energy player on the globe for access to diminishing global resources, particularly, hydrocarbon. Since the turn of the millennium, the deteriorating security conditions in the Persian Gulf (the major supplier of US energy requirements) has necessitated a shift of foreign policy focus to areas, such as the Gulf of Guinea. Starting from 2005, there has been growing US special attention to the sub-region. Arguably it exemplifies Washington's global policy framework it has pursued since the attacks of September 2001 (Forest et al. 2006). Pertinent questions that flow from the foregoing are: Aside energy security, what other factors necessitated the shift in focus by the US? Could this shift checkmate the security crisis in the region? Is China and more recently Russia, a threat to US energy security in the sub-region could the realignment between the US and the countries in this gulf meet the humanitarian needs

there? This paper examines the new-found relations between the US and the sub-region against the background of a deepening US involvement in Africa. In doing so, it analyses the link between the rhetoric's and realities of the renewed relationship. This will be done with a view to locating the real interest behind the US latest inroad in the sub-region, especially since the turn of the century. Besides, the possible threat of China's economic interest in the gulf to that of America's will be factored into the discourse in order to fully appraise the issues objectively.

The paper starts with an introduction and is closely followed by a theoretical framework of analysis. It continues with an overview of the relations between US and the Gulf of Guinea and ends with possible suggestions on the way forward.

THEORETICAL CONCERNS

To fully understand and perhaps appreciate what, why and how United States carries out its relations with other nations, a clear perception of the calculus of realism is an imperative. The realist approach contends that nations embedded in an anarchic international system must engage in self help to survive (Rosecrance et al. 1993). It sees humans as selfish and states as aggressive, peace must be maintained by balancing power between social groups within nations, as well as among nations, which leads to complete relations within states as well as between states (Morgenthau 1978). It also holds that in pursuit of their interest, states will attempt to amass resources, and that relations between states are determined by their relative levels of power. That level of power is in turn determined by the state's military and economic capabilities (Art 2003).

Thus, in an anarchical international system, states' behaviour is moderated by their desire for survival knowing that no supranational institution or government exists to protect them. Therefore, countries cannot rely on other states to protect them even if they share a common ideology or political form. Each state, similarly, has the liberty to think only of its own interests.

Furthermore, in realist view of the world, there is no division of labour among nations, and if there were, a country should not rely on it to safeguard its own wealth or security. Since ev-

ery state's objective is to be independent and sovereign, no state will readily accept a dependent relationship with others. Where interdependence exists, it tends to provoke conflict between nations, for each will strive to lessen dependence and to reassert its own autonomy (Rosecrance et al. 1993).

Realism, in its various forms, was the dominant theoretical approach to international relations for most of the Cold War period. It helped to explain the rivalry that emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union during the same period. However, the hope in the aftermath of the ideological war was that the enormous political and military confrontation would give way to a new system of relationship based on shared values, cooperation and collective security (Johnson 2004). Indeed this hope was expressed not only for Europe but for the global international system. This is the making that guides the phenomenon referred to as globalization (a high degree of global economic interdependence). In this context, financial collapse in one country can affect the wealth of people, companies and societies on the other side of the globe. For example, the abandonment of the centrally planned command economy by former Communist countries is of major significance for international security. Russia and China are no longer attempting to develop autonomous, socialist economies. Instead both countries have committed themselves to developing market economies, as a consequence of which their well-being depends on the well-being of other nations. Wealth is no longer dependent on the possession of land or natural resources, but on the intellectual capital and social organization to produce high quality, high technology product. Such wealth cannot be efficiently acquired by war or conquest (Soares et al. 2007).

In fact, this informed the call for a 'New World Order' by former US president, Bush (Sr.) in the context of the Gulf War in 1990. It referred to a new international system of states to replace the bi-polar Cold War Order based on a consensus among the major powers on international norms, principles of international law and human rights that should govern relations among states (George 1990). The notion, 'New International Order' has been widely derided. There are those who saw Bush's 'New International Order' merely as a framework in which the United States as the

sole remaining superpower after the Cold War can pursue its national interests and preserve its dominant role in the international system (Krauthammer 1991). This, for example is a common interpretation of the Gulf War of 1991.

However, events in the international arena since September 11, 2001, have shown that the world has progressively become a more dangerous place. Military force is now looming larger than ever as the main instrument and organizing principle of the US foreign policy. Though this was denied by General William E. "KIP" Ward when he said "while some critics might charge the United States of militarizing its foreign policy, it simply is not the case" (*Vanguard* 2008). In 2007, the US declared the Gulf of Guinea an area of strategic national interest and one that could require military intervention to protect its national resources (an apparent renaissance of the Carter Doctrine).

THE US AND THE GULF OF GUINEA

In its political history, the Gulf of Guinea has been a playground for various interests. This mineral-rich sub-region of Africa doubles as a potential huge market by reason of its population. The active, economic, diplomatic and military competition amongst the great powers (the United States, Europe, China, Japan, India, Porazic, Rusia, etc.) centres not only on securing access to the region's natural resources but also its burgeoning expansive market.

Put in context, the strategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea is particularly due to the global dynamics. Intensifying global competition for increasingly scarce energy resources is thrusting previously marginalized nations in the area into geo-strategic prominence. As demands grow in both developed and emerging economies, escalating instability in the traditional oil and gas supplier nations (for example, the Middle East, Venezuela and Russia) is causing consumer nations to search for new, more reliable sources of energy.

The role of the United States in the Gulf of Guinea is increasing. Since the end of the Cold War and particularly after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, there has been a resurgence of the US strategic interest in the sub-region. This trend is driven by oil imports, investments and military cooperation. According to ECON Analysis (2007), 17 percent of US oil imports come

from sub-Saharan Africa and by 2015, this figure will be 25 percent. Thus, Washington's position is a response to the pressures for an alternative to her over-dependence on oil supplies from the volatile Persian Gulf in the face of expanding domestic demand for petroleum products, and declining oil production at home.

However, the political life of the countries in the Gulf of Guinea has serious ramifications for the entire continent. Judged in the context of energy supply, it has profound implications for US energy security. The challenge facing the countries in the sub-region in terms of their constitutions, the level of freedom, the rule of law, and the political knowledge of opposition parties is enormous. The improper management of this basic challenge hitherto created conflicts which have taken a terrible toll on the people in the area. This state of affairs did not only undermine stability but also became a major obstacle to Africa's hope for economic growth. While some of the conflict is rooted in the history of colonial rule and the subsequent pattern of African independence that created states with little national identity, homogeneity, or experience with democratic government, others derive from a history of weak or oppressive African governments in the first decades of independence, which resulted in discrimination against minority, ethnic or religious groups. Added is the growing pressure on land by a steadily growing population, a situation aggravated by environmental degradation.

The politics of conflicts here is very much a complex web of internal and regional relationships. While the conflicts are largely internal, neighboring countries have been drawn into them, sometimes abetting them. This was true of the wars in Liberia, Sierra-Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and Guinea, where all were parties to the regional conflicts and in the Congo DR, where at one time nine African countries were directly involved in its internal war.

The question is: how does the political calculus of the Gulf of Guinea impact US energy needs? The answer according to a former US Assistant Secretary of State, Walter Kanstenier III, "is that African oil is critical to us, and it will increase and become more important as we go forward" (African Oil Policy Initiative Group 2002). In this regard, the US through AFRICOM intends to provide funds, military technology and hardware, and training as part of her security partnership

with the sub-region. To a large extent, these programmes are linked to US perception of threat in the area.

On the question of threat, the generally held views of the people of the sub-region are not like those of the US. The belief here is that anybody that poses a threat to the US interests whether real or imagined is classified as a terrorist. Thus, the AFRICOM project is received with mixed feelings. The responses to the question: what are the likely impacts of the standardization of security by AFRICOM in the Gulf of Guinea fielded by the author are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment of the impact of standardization of security by AFRICOM in the Gulf of Guinea

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Response</i>
1.	Standardization of security will invite trouble to the region.
2.	This objective will expose countries in the sub-region to America's manipulation. This is the reason behind the United States' unwillingness to help Africa build her capacity for peace and stability independently.
3.	The US does not care about Africa her presence in the Gulf of Guinea will lead to greater instability in the sub-region.
4.	The fact about whatever security AFRICOM has to offer is to protect basically US interests.
5.	There exists the possibility of areas of convergence and divergence between AFRICOM's security provisions and those already in place in the Gulf of Guinea.
6.	A full military base has its own side effects, at least, taking a cue from other parts of the world where it exists.
7.	If properly managed, it could stem armed insurgences in the sub-region.
8.	There is the possibility that the US through this mechanism will support dictators that are friendly to her course in power.
9.	It will lead to internal stability by conditioning the people in the region to respond to the interest of the US.
10.	The US could use this policy to interfere in the choice of domestic leadership in the countries in the Gulf of Guinea.
11.	The countries in the region could rely on AFRICOM for a comprehensive security programme because they currently have none.
12.	Since AFRICOM is a military and defense force, it has the capacity to exploit the vulnerability of the continent.

Source: Osaretin Idahosa 2009. The United State of America's Strategies Interest in Africa: Implications of AFRICOM for Sub-region Security in the Gulf of Guinea, Ph.D Thesis, Unpublished, Benin City: University of Benin, Nigeria.

These respondents are informed experts on the subject matter of this analysis. Their opinions were surveyed at:

- a) The Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA),
- b) The National War College in Abuja, Nigeria,
- c) The Ghanaian Consulate in Lagos, Nigeria,
- d) The Angolan Consulate in Lagos, Nigeria; and reputable academics in Nigerian Universities.

However, their identities are not revealed due to security reasons.

A content analysis of the responses tabulated above shows that 33.33 percent support AFRICOM as security architecture for the sub-region. Also, 58.33 percent of the responses show otherwise, while 8.33 percent is indifferent. This means that majority of the inhabitants of the Gulf of Guinea are adverse to the project. As such, the non-acceptability of the American project is a wake-up call for the establishment of an alternative security outfit by the sub-region. This possibly explains the repeated calls for a Gulf of Guinea Brigade in the area. Although, the proposed project faces some fundamental challenges, Africans are of the view that, once established, it would be a better alternative to AFRICOM.

OIL RIVALRY

In the struggle to maintain market access, the United States competes not only with European powers but also with rising Asian powers like China, Japan and India in the Gulf of Guinea. The influence of the US, with her superior political economic and military power projection capabilities, has to some extent grown at the expense of traditional hegemony like France and Britain. This is partly because the countries of Francophone West and Central Africa have sought to diversify relations with the outside world in terms of security, trade and investments. It is also because France has revised her approach to Africa, seeking to reduce the financial and military costs of her "neo-colonialist system" by promoting multilateral development assistance and security arrangements. This means that France is increasing her investment in promising non-Francophone countries like Nigeria and Angola and reducing her commitment to less commercially interesting Francophone countries such as Gabon.

Moreover, British influence on the Gulf of Guinea can also, to some extent, be attributed to historical or imperial links, although London has nothing like the economic influence of Paris through the Franc Zone with 14 countries in West and Central Africa as members. Nigeria remains at the centre of British interest in the sub-region, while the importance of Angola is rising. Since the mid-1990s, efforts to promote British energy interest have increasingly been accompanied by calls for more transparent and accountable petroleum revenue management in these countries. This reflects the growing preoccupation of British civil society with the potential harmful effects of oil, gas and mineral riches on developing countries.

Some US strategists are linking incursions by Chinese companies into the Gulf of Guinea and growing Chinese status to its growing military might and asking what this portends for US oil interests and its national security in the area (Carafano et al. 2003). China's phenomenal economic growth has elevated the country to world leadership status, causing many analysts to ponder her regional and international intentions and goals. China has changed her foreign policy over the years from one of confrontation to one of cooperation and economic development, from isolation to international engagement. This underlines her presence in the Gulf of Guinea these last years through an increased level of exchanges in the form of trade and cooperation. China considers the Gulf of Guinea as a partner in achieving her strategic goal.

According to Klare et al. (2004), since the US will be more dependent on foreign oil, access to increase its supplies from such sources that may not be entirely friendly has become a matter of 'US national strategic interest'. This realist view strongly implies the linking of energy to national security, and the protection of US military might on a global scale to protect her national energy security interests. For, indeed, power over the world's oil reserves is the ultimate symbol of US global military might. Viewed from this perspective, the real issue from a US global security perspective is how to ensure control over the oil-wealth in the Gulf of Guinea (Krueger 2002), and the rest of the world (Klare et al. 2004).

Also, three of Africa's biggest states, Nigeria, South Africa and Angola, appear to be vying for influence in emerging oil producing nations in

the sub-region such as Equatorial Guinea, Chad and Sao Tomé and Príncipe. These smaller nations are particularly fascinated with the perceived commercial success of the bigger nation's petroleum industries. As the sub-regional superpower, Nigeria has made inroads into emerging oil exporting nations like Sao Tomé and Príncipe in form of joint partnership. Although companies from South Africa have invested in acreages in the Gulf of Guinea, the country lacks the broad petroleum experience to be a truly interesting partner for emerging sub-regional oil producers. The impact of these states in the region could raise the stake of energy security for the US.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

United States national security strategic interests are clearly defined as regional stability, global economy, and promotion of democracy, global war on terrorism and the alleviation of human suffering. According to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (2000), "More than 50 percent of global oil demand will by 2020 be met from countries that pose a high risk of domestic instability" Thus,

The risk calculus for the global economy is straight forward: if African producing nations remain stable, they will grow as reliable suppliers of oil and gas. If they face internal unrest and disruptions, they will create shocks for the global economy (Centre for Strategic and International Studies 2000).

To guarantee her energy security in the Gulf of Guinea, the US needs to work with other partners operating in the sub-region to promote the connection between trade and development that will sustain her strategic interest. Moreover, collaboratory efforts by the stakeholders in the sub-region should be geared toward the creation of a co-prosperity zone that will be beneficial to the aggregate interests of all the parties concerned. For example, if AFRICOM is well-managed to the extent that it provides security and strategic partnership in terms of training and logistics to the countries in the sub-region, both the US and Africans stand to benefit. And if the European Union and the Chinese are made part of the multi-lateral security arrangement in the area, the lingering fragility in the sub-region would be contained.

Furthermore, if the US wants to compete

favourably in the sub-region, she should know that her interests should not be about benevolence or altruism, as this could be more damaging to her credibility. Rather, Washington's policies should be attuned to the needs of the area. To this effect, the US should set up a team of experts on African affairs (not necessarily military) to engage countries in the sub-region on the need for collaborative ventures that could be beneficial to US interests and those of the Africans. This will go a long way to nurture the much needed confidence about Washington's intentions. Africa wants to engage the US on equal terms.

REFERENCES

- Art R J 2003. *A Grand Strategy for America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- African Oil Policy Initiative Group 2002. *Africa Oil: A Priority for US Needs and African Development*. Washington D.C.: AOPIG.
- Carafano J, Gardiner N 2003. Assistance for Africa; A Better Heritage Foundation, October 15. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/Africa/Africa.bg> 1697. (Retrieved on July 2, 2005).
- Centre for Strategic and International Studies 2000. *The Geopolitics of Energy into the 21st Century I (II and III): 17-20*. New York: Centre for Strategic and International Studies.
- ECON Analysis 2007 Part II: Geopolitics, Energy Security and West Africa. Oslo, Norway. Available at <http://www.econ.no>. (Retrieved on 18 May, 2008).
- Forest J F, Sousa M V 2006. *Oil and Terrorism in the New Gulf: Framing U S Energy and Security Policies for the Gulf Guinea*. New York: Lexington Books.
- George B 1990. *Address to Congress 11 September 1990, Iraq Aggression Will not Stand*, In United States Policy Information and Texts, No. 2111, 12 September 1990, P. 17; See also national security Strategy of the United States. Washington D.C. White house, August 2006.
- Johnson C 2004. *The Sorrows of Empire; Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic: The American Empire Project*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Klare M, Volman D 2005. The African oil rush and US national security. *Third World Quarterly*, 27(4): 609-610.
- Krauthammer C 1991. The unipolar moment. *Foreign Affairs*, 70(1): 27-48.
- Krueger J 2002. Oil Stakes in West Africa. Africa New York: Centre for Strategic and International Studies. *Report Series 11*.
- Morgenthau HJ 2006. *Politics among Nations – The Struggle For Power and Peace*. 7th Edition. Revised by Kenneth W Thompson, W David. Linton: McGraw-Hill.
- Rosecreance R, Stein AA (Eds.) 1993. *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Soares de Olivera R 2007. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf of Guinea*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Traub-Merz R, Yates D 2004. *Oil Policy in the Gulf of Guinea: Security and Conflict, Economic Growth, Social Development*. Bonn: Friedrich – Ebert – Stiftung Corporation.
- Vanguard 2008. The US Launches AFRICOM. *Vanguard*, 24(2):1.