THE UNITED STATES AND NAMIBIAN INDEPENDENCE, c. 1975-1989[1]

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The United States (US) has often been much involved with countries in other parts of the world that in themselves were of little or no direct interest to it. This is, in this particular case, reflected in the fact that, though there is a considerable literature on US policy to southern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, there is no substantial scholarly work on American policy specifically in regard to Namibia. What has been written on the US and Namibia has mostly been from a Washington D.C. perspective rather than from the vantage point of the country with which that policy was concerned.[2] No one has written a study based on what the available US archives reveal on American policy on Namibia, or used the US Freedom of Information Act to gain as much relevant material as possible.[3] The fullest study of US policy in relation to Namibia, the readable but self-serving memoirs of the leading US actor involved in the 1980s, Chester Crocker, is based on his own re-collections of the events he recounts. His interpretation can now be contrasted with what is said of US policy in the recently published memoirs of one of Crocker's harshest critics in the decade prior to Namibia's independence, the President of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), and on relevant material in the archives of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs, for Namibia was of course administered by South Africa until independence.[4] Drawing on such

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2 Besides brief discussions of US policy to Namibia in many accounts of US policy in southern Africa in these decades, see SA Fischer, **Namibia becomes independent. The US contribution to regional peace** (Zurich, 1992); A Biehl, "Chester Crocker and the negotiations for Namibian independence", Stanford University, Honours thesis, 1989, and A Cooper (ed.), **Allies in Apartheid. Western capitalism in occupied Namibia** (New York, 1988).

3 For the very limited relevant material obtained by the National Security Archive in terms of that Act, see K Mokoena (ed.), **South Africa and the United States: the declassified history** (New York, 1993). Cf. also **South Africa: the making of United States policy, 1962-1989** (microfilm and 2 volume guide, c. 1991).

4 C Crocker, **High noon in Southern Africa** (New York, 1993); S Nujoma, **Where others wavered** (London, 2001); records of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Pretoria, South Africa. I have only been given limited access to these records, and I do not include any detailed citations to them in this article.

sources, as well as interviews, I was able to conduct with leading US policy-makers in Washington,[5] this article offers some preliminary reflections on some key questions relating to American policy in regard to Namibia.

1

Anyone studying this topic will be struck by the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, the insignificance of Namibia for the US, and on the other the enormous energy the US devoted to achieving its independence. A largely arid country, a long way from the US, with a population of not much more than a million in the 1980s, Namibia did possess diamonds and uranium, but was of very minimal strategic and economic importance to the US. Most Americans had never heard of it. (Walter Mondale suggested on one occasion that if you asked Americans "What is Namibia?", the likely answer would be: "A flavour of ice-cream".[6]) US trade with, and investments in, Namibia were, in terms of its global trade and investment, minuscule. They did not grow in the late 1970s and 1980s, but declined.[7] If one consults the memoirs of the leading American political figures of this period - Presidents Carter, Nixon and Reagan - or, say, those of Carter's influential National Security Adviser, Brzezinski, one notices that Namibia is either not mentioned at all, or is treated only in the most cursory fashion.[8] But on the other hand, anyone reading the literature on American foreign policy in relation to Africa in the years 1976-88 must immediately be struck by how deeply the US became involved with the Namibian issue. That involvement is reflected in the considerable attention that is devoted to Namibia in the memoirs of Cyrus Vance, Carter's Secretary of State, and of George Shultz, Reagan's Secretary of State, while the great bulk of Crocker's lengthy and detailed account of his eight years as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the Reagan years is concerned with Namibia.[9] For over a decade - from 1976 to 1989 - US foreign policy to Africa

5 These included Robert Frasure, key aide to Chester Crocker, and Don McHenry, leading member of the Western Contact Group in the Carter administration.

6 R Jaster, **South Africa in Namibia: the Botha strategy** (Lanham, 1985), p. 1.

7 American commercial involvement with Namibia goes back two hundred years, to the time when New England whalers were active in Namibian waters. In 1982 there were some 130 American companies doing business in Namibia. An American company owned a large share of the Tsumeb copper mine, which in the early 1970s was the largest single employer in the country, but the American interest was taken over by Consolidated Goldfields of South Africa in 1982. American companies were also involved in exploration for oil and gas. On earlier US policy to Namibia and the region, cf. e.g. G Bender, J Coleman and R Sklar (eds), **African crisis areas and US foreign policy** (Berkeley, 1985).

8 J Carter, **Keeping faith. Memoirs of a president** (London, 1982); R Nixon, **Memoirs of Richard Nixon** (London, 1978); R Reagan, **An American life** (London, 1990); Z Brzezinski, **Power and principle. Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981** (London, 1983); A Haig, **Caveat** (London, 1983); H Kissinger, **Years of renewal** (New York, 1999).

9 C Vance, **Hard choices. Critical years in America's foreign policy** (New York, 1983), chs. 12 and 13; G Shultz, **Turmoil and triumph. My years as Secretary of State** (New York, 1993).

was dominated by the Namibian issue, which took up far more time than any other relating to the continent. Ironically, the US spent far more time and trouble on trying to bring about Namibian independence than it did in achieving majority rule in Zimbabwe or even majority rule in South Africa itself.

The US played a key role in both sets of negotiations that together led eventually to Namibian independence. The first of these took place in 1977-78, when the US took the lead in organising and in effect chairing the so-called Western Contact Group (WCG). The negotiations that the WCG conducted with South Africa, the Front Line States and SWAPO in 1977-78 established the basic framework plan for the transition to independence, and by the end of July 1978 the WCG had got both South Africa and SWAPO to accept that plan, which was then embodied in UN Security Council Resolution 435. The US played an even more active mediating role in the negotiations between South Africa, Angola and Cuba held in a number of different cities on three continents from May to December 1988, concerning the terms on which South Africa would allow the implementation of Resolution 435, and therefore Namibian independence. The negotiations of 1988 resulted in an agreement that provided for the independence of Namibia along with total Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola and, by implication, the closing of the ANC's military bases there.[10] Even after the December 1988 agreement had been reached, the US was a leading member of the international Joint Commission set up to help guarantee that that agreement would stick. For many years the Namibian negotiations seemed to be moving the process no nearer the goal of independence, yet the US remained the leading member of the WCG until it collapsed in 1983, and after that it was the only active mediator, as Crocker continued on his own to pursue, in an extremely dogged fashion, the goal of a Namibian settlement. It is time to ask why the US played this role. How to explain the apparent contradiction between the unimportance of Namibia to the US and the extent of the US commitment to achieving its independence?

US interest in Namibia was kindled in 1976, quite suddenly. Before the collapse of the Portuguese African empire in 1974-75, all southern Africa had taken an extremely low priority in the global concerns of the State Department. It was in the aftermath of what was seen in Washington to be the Angolan disaster - when the US gave covert support to the South African invasion, mounted to try to prevent the Marxist MPLA coming to power there, and saw not only the MPLA taking power, but a large Cuban force installed - that Henry Kissinger suddenly took an interest in Namibia, as a direct result of the failure of US policy in next-door Angola.[11] In

10 The Angola-Namibian Accords signed in New York, December 1988.

11 Kissinger; P Gleijeses, **Conflicting missions. Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959-1976** (Chapel Hill, 2002).

Namibia the armed struggle had begun in August 1966, but the conflict between SWAPO and the South African Defence Force remained of low intensity until the mid 1970s. Once SWAPO could operate from bases in southern Angola, however, as it could once the MPLA had come to power, the war was bound to escalate. Kissinger feared that the Soviet Union, through the Cubans, might intervene in Namibia as well, and that in Namibia, as in Angola, a government friendly to the Soviets might come to power. Namibia might, in other words, be the next domino to fall. Kissinger therefore decided he must work to resolve the Namibian (and Rhodesian) conflicts in such a way as to prevent a repetition of what had happened in Angola. He now believed the US should intervene to promote a peaceful transition to majority rule and the installation of a moderate government in Windhoek. Neither he nor those who followed him in the State Department were interested in Namibia as such. The major US goal remained the same, from the Ford through the Carter and Reagan administrations, until the Cold War began to wind down about 1987: to settle the Namibian conflict by leading that country to independence in such a way that there would be no further Soviet/Cuban penetration in the region, and in a way conducive to reformist change in South Africa. Ironically, it was the very waning of the Cold War that enabled that desired goal to be achieved: by the time a Namibian agreement was discussed in 1988, the US was working with the Soviet Union to resolve regional conflicts and was no longer concerned about the dangers of Soviet expansionism. By then the US had devoted so much time and energy over so many years to reaching a settlement that it was accepted by all parties that it should take the lead in arranging and chairing the 1988 negotiations.

If the main US interest related directly to the Cold War, there were other, non-Cold War reasons why the US wanted to see a Namibian settlement. While there had always been those policy-makers in Washington who saw the world exclusively through global spectacles, there were others who had at least some concern for regional considerations and realities.[12] A major consideration in the minds of the policy-makers, from the beginning of active US involvement to resolve the Namibian conflict until the independence finally arrived in March 1990, was the hope that a resolution of that conflict would be a key to progress in resolving conflict in the region as a whole, and above all would promote progress away from apartheid in South Africa itself. South Africa was the key to the region, a country of far greater importance to the US than Namibia, strategically, economically and because of all the moral issues associated with apartheid and the struggle against it, issues which the makers of US foreign policy could not ignore because of the importance of race in US political life. In 1976 Kissinger thought that if he solved Namibia first - and he believed that the Namibian conflict was in substance, though not in terms

12 I do not enter here into the debate about whether one can separate "globalists" from "regionalists". On this see e.g. Bender *et al.*, **African crisis areas**.

of procedure, easier to solve than the Rhodesian one[13] - a Rhodesian settlement would follow, and such settlements would encourage peaceful change in South Africa itself.

In the event the Namibian negotiations stalled in 1978, once the plan for the transition had been accepted and the question of implementation arose, because of South African unwillingness to allow a UN-monitored election that might bring SWAPO to power. Rhodesia became independent Zimbabwe, thanks to British and not US mediation, in April 1980. Crocker and the Reagan administration's African team in the 1980s continued to believe that an agreed Namibian settlement would promote change in South Africa. If in Namibia there could be a peaceful end to apartheid and transition to majority rule, and if a moderate regime came to power there, and did not scare off whites or impose Marxist policies, it was thought that this would inevitably promote the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. And this did eventually prove to be the case, though I cannot here explore the relationship between Namibian independence and change in South Africa. There can be no doubt, however, that the way in which Namibia moved towards independence in 1989-90 enabled De Klerk to make his crucial domestic breakthrough in February 1990.[14] Had the process in Namibia come completely unstuck, he could not have made that breakthrough.

Namibia was also a bargaining chip in the US's dealings with South Africa. In 1981, for example, Crocker promised the South African government that if it was accommodating on Namibia, relations between the two countries would improve; if Resolution 435 was implemented, South Africa would gain international credibility and buy time for making internal changes.[15] It was easier for the US to put pressure on South Africa over its occupation of Namibia than over its internal apartheid policies because of the special status of Namibia in international law, which itself was a further major reason for US involvement in the Namibian issue. When the continued South African occupation of Namibia was raised at the UN every year, it fell to the US, sometimes acting alone, to veto Security Council resolutions calling for mandatory economic sanctions and other steps to be taken against South Africa for not withdrawing from Namibia. In January 1976 the US had supported the key Security Council Resolution 385 on Namibia, which called for a transfer of power from South Africa via a UN-monitored election to independence. The US, as we have seen, wanted to ensure that such a transfer of power was peaceful, did not

13 SJ Stedman, **Peacemaking in civil war. International mediation in Zimbabwe, 1974-1980** (Boulder, 1991), p. 95, quoting "a source close to Kissinger"; Fischer, p. 44.

14 Cf. my remarks in C Saunders, "The transition in Namibia and the South African case" in N Etherington (ed.), **Peace, politics and violence in the new South Africa** (Oxford, 1992).

15 "The Crocker-Botha Memorandum" in B Wood (ed.), **Namibia 1884-1984** (London, 1988). Cf. also Crocker, **passim**.

allow for Soviet or Cuban intervention, and resulted in a moderate government. It also did not want to impose sanctions on South Africa for not complying with the UN resolutions. Hence the US itself had to intervene to try to bring about the ends it desired, which it did through the WCG, then on its own.

Namibian independence, then, was never an end in itself for US policy. The US's main concerns related to the Cold War and to regional goals, and while the US was of course in principle sympathetic to the goal of national independence, it did not believe in independence at any price. It wanted to see a government come to power in Namibia through peaceful means that would safeguard Western economic interests there, and allow the continued flow of minerals, some of which were of strategic significance to the West. Such a government should not embark on radical policies, which would lead the whites to flee en masse to South Africa, for that would not be helpful in promoting change in South Africa itself. But it was widely assumed throughout this period that if a UN-monitored election, declared free and fair by the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative, did take place, as provided for in the Western plan, SWAPO would come to power. SWAPO had in its 1976 Political Programme declared its goal to be "scientific socialism", and had developed close links with the Soviet Union and the communist countries of Eastern Europe, which provided the bulk of the arms used in its war against the South African occupying forces. How sincere was the US in wanting to see a free and fair election in Namibia, if the expected outcome was a SWAPO government?

Many political activists at the time, and some writers since, have questioned that sincerity, and claimed that the US, in order that SWAPO should not come to power, and to safeguard its own economic interests in Namibia, was happy to see the negotiations spun out and Namibian independence delayed for more than a decade.[16] In particular, it is said that the introduction in 1981 of a quid pro quo - the link between Namibian independence and Cuban troop withdrawal - is evidence of US insincerity, for by introducing an extraneous condition, one not directly related to the Western plan for Namibian independence, it is suggested, the US demonstrated that it was not really committed to Namibian independence.[17]

This view cannot be upheld. It is impossible to believe that the long and complex negotiations, involving people from many countries, were conducted in bad faith, and were no more than a smokescreen erected by the US and the other Western powers to pretend they were working to bring about Namibian independence, when in fact they wished to prevent, or delay it. There were good reasons for Western countries to want the conflict ended and stability brought to the region, and an

16 E.g. A Cooper (ed.), **Allies in Apartheid** (London, 1988).
17 This is argued at length by Nujoma in **Where others wavered**, esp. ch. 21.

internationally accepted independence was seen as the only way to achieve that. From the administration of Gerald Ford to that of Ronald Reagan, the US recognised, as Pretoria did not at that time, that SWAPO's Marxism was opportunistic, and that SWAPO was predominantly a nationalist movement, and therefore would be likely to adopt pragmatic policies if it came to power.[18] Washington knew that so long as Walvis Bay remained South African territory - and the US and the other members of the WCG agreed to leave the question of its incorporation in Namibia out of the negotiations for Namibian independence - any government of an independent Namibia would be highly dependent on South Africa. The leaked record of Crocker's confidential discussions with two key South African cabinet ministers - Pik Botha and Magnus Malan - in 1981 reveals that the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs drew a clear distinction between Marxist regimes supported by Soviet proxy forces, and those that only proclaimed themselves Marxist, a distinction that had earlier been drawn by Kissinger.[19]An independent Namibia, Crocker in effect suggested to the South African ministers, would be another Mozambique, not another Angola, and so not a real threat to either South African or US interests.[20] The South African government remained unconvinced, even after the WCG got SWAPO to accept a set of Constitutional Principles in 1982 to help ensure that the constitution of the independent country, to be drawn up by a Constituent Assembly elected in the first democratic election, would provide for a liberal democratic system of government.[21] The Western plan itself, with a democratic election at its heart, was designed to promote democracy in an independent Namibia. Long before the South African policy-makers eventually came round to the view that a SWAPO government in Namibia would not necessarily pose any serious threat to South African interests, and might indeed be the kind of moderate government that was to be born in 1990, the US was prepared to see a SWAPO government come to power in Windhoek. This was some years before the advent of Gorbachev to power in Moscow and the beginnings of the winding down of the Cold War.

The controversy over the introduction of linkage by the US as a condition for implementation of the Western plan relates to a debate in the literature about the state of the negotiations when the Reagan administration took office in 1981. There were, I have already suggested, certain basic continuities in terms of goals in Namibia policy between the Carter and Reagan administrations, though Crocker repeatedly stresses the discontinuities, as does Nujoma, from an anti-Crocker

18 This is the conclusion reached by L Dobell in **SWAPO's struggle for Namibia** (Basle, 1998).
19 Kissinger, ch. 26.
20 "The Crocker-Botha Memorandum" in Wood (ed.), **Namibia 1884-1984**; Cf. Crocker.
21 M Wiechers, "Namibia: the 1982 Constitutional principles and their legal significance", **South African Yearbook of International Law**, 15 (1990).

perspective.[22] Crocker is wrong to play down the importance of what Ambassador McHenry and the other members of the WCG in the Carter administration achieved. They got the main parties to the conflict to accept the plan for the transition that was to be implemented in 1989-90. On the other hand, Crocker is correct to say that the negotiations for the implementation of that plan were deadlocked when he took office.[23] There is little evidence to support the view of McHenry that the negotiations were still making progress, and that only a little more pressure on South Africa would have seen that South Africa would have withdrawn from Namibia.[24] To those who argue that South Africa would have withdrawn if it had been threatened with economic sanctions, the question has to be asked whether such a threat was a credible one, and if carried out, would have achieved the desired result. There was no question of the rabidly anti-communist Reagan administration allowing sanctions to be imposed on South Africa through the UN. Crocker believed that linkage was the way out of the deadlock he had inherited.

2

How does one assess US policy in regard to Namibia? To what extent can it be said to have been successful? The 1988 negotiations resulted in a settlement that did link Namibian independence and total Cuban troop withdrawal, as Crocker had wanted. Namibia became independent peacefully as the result of US mediation, and a moderate government came to power. The goals of the US were achieved, and Crocker was able, in response to his critics, to point to the way in which Namibian independence was achieved as a victory for his policy and the way he had pursued it. It can still be asked, of course, whether other policies might not have achieved the desired goal sooner. Here one enters the realm of speculation, for no-one can know for sure what might have happened had alternate policies been adopted. Had more stick, and fewer carrots been offered South Africa in the years between 1978 and 1988, might Namibian independence have come years earlier? My interpretation of South African policy is that nothing short of full-scale sanctions, which were never on the cards, would have been likely to have forced South Africa to withdrawal prior to 1988. Limited sanctions might have been counter-productive, in producing an opposite reaction to that which the US wanted to achieve. As Crocker often pointed out, the US had limited leverage over the South African government. Only an extremely fortuitous combination of circumstances - the waning of the

22 Nujoma, esp. pp. 295-6.

23 There was talk in the Crocker camp of the plan being "dead in the water" in 1981. Donald McHenry has not written his memoirs but for his views see esp. H Weiland and M Braham (eds), **The Namibian peace process: Implications and lessons for the future** (Freiburg, 1994).

24 This is the view of, say, Robert Rotberg in his chapter in Bender *et al*, and I Zartman in **Ripe for resolution** (New York, 1984).

Cold War, the military stalemate in southern Angola by early 1988, and a changed set of circumstances in South Africa itself after the Township Revolt of the mid 1980s[25] - made possible the Namibian settlement in 1988. Crocker's dogged determination paid off, and the plan elaborated in 1977-78, for which McHenry must get prime credit, was implemented over ten years later. But this triumph for US diplomacy was the result of chance circumstances rather than design. Sometimes the design was wrong but the consequences positive. By in effect encouraging South African military activity in Angola, the US aided the overextension of the South African military there, which in turn helped produce the stalemate of early 1988, and that stalemate was an important reason for the South African government agreeing to settle. One of the main weaknesses in US policy to Namibia in the 1980s was its attitude to SWAPO. Here was a party that in a free election was almost certainly going to come to power, yet the Reagan administration bent over backwards not to annoy the South African government and never opened channels of communication with SWAPO. Sam Nujoma had held a meeting with Kissinger in September 1976, a meeting clearly regarded by Nujoma as of great significance,[26] but he was not welcomed in Washington in the Reagan years. That SWAPO was excluded from the 1988 negotiations had tragic consequences in April the following year, when - in part as a result of that exclusion - SWAPO fighters were sent into Namibia in violation of the cease-fire agreement.[27] It is hardly surprising that when the newly-elected President, Sam Nujoma, spoke at the independence celebrations on 21 March 1990, he accorded the US, and Crocker in particular, no thanks for the undoubted role America had played in the achievement of Namibia's independence.

Once Namibia was firmly on the road to independence, US interest fell away. The country again became of very minor significance in US eyes, especially - it can be suggested - because, in the early years after independence, it appeared to be stable and democratic. It is left to historians and memoir-writers to remember how extensive US involvement with the Namibian issue was in the not so distant past, and how crucial a role the US played in the achievement of Namibian independence. How tragic that the vast number of US tax dollars spent to achieve that goal could not have gone instead towards the socio-eocnomic development of what remains in many respects a relatively poor African country.

25 For a general discussion see e.g. R Dreyer, **Namibia and Southern Africa** (London, 1994).
26 See the attention given it in Nujoma, pp. 251-60 and photograph on p. 255.
27 There is convincing evidence for this despite Nujoma's claim in chapter 25 of his memoir that the SWAPO fighters had not crossed the border and had not violated the agreement.