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Reengaging Africa: Identifying Opportunities and Pitfalls – Focus on Southern Africa

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Executive Summary

Background

This document presents a summary of discussions held during a May 2012 roundtable of prominent representatives of civil society in the African diaspora community along with regional experts at the Royal Commonwealth Club in London, United Kingdom.

In order to encourage an open and frank exchange of ideas, the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) agreed that the discussions should be conducted on a non-attribution basis. The structure of the roundtable was informal and the topics for each session were intentionally broad to encourage far-ranging "brainstorming" and enable participants to identify the issues that they saw as important. The summaries that follow reflect the views expressed by the participants.

Key Issues

- Africans remain concerned that the renewed interest in the continent is the result of Africa's changing role in the global security landscape that is driven primarily by terrorism, piracy, and competition for natural resources.

- While there is concern that the United States increasingly engages with Africa in order to limit Chinese influence, participants noted the mixed perception of Chinese engagement on the continent presents an opportunity for the United States to build influence with the populations of Africa, which, for the most part, are still inclined to see the United States as a credible global advocate for progress on democratic reform and good governance.

- An area in which the United States can go far toward strengthening links in Africa is in higher education. Education infrastructure across Africa is in disrepair and badly in need of foreign investment.

- The most promising opportunities for building U.S. influence in Africa lie outside of traditional political and economic power structures and in engagement with the private sector, civil society, and grassroots political movements.

On Zimbabwe

- People in Zimbabwe are keenly aware of the potential challenges in the U.S.-Zimbabwe relationship yet roundtable participants thought positively of the
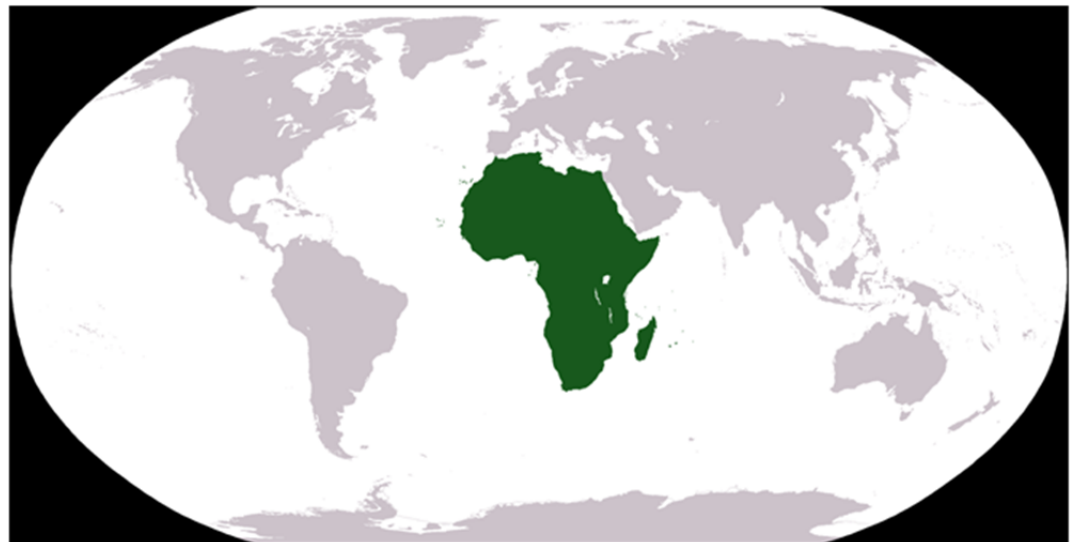
United States and were optimistic regarding potential opportunities for U.S. reengagement in Zimbabwe in the coming years.

- Participants noted that much progress can be made by looking beyond formal political structures and governments to find ways to engage with non-state actors. They further argued that it is essential for the United States to reach beyond governments and the "NGO industry" to forge people-to-people contacts between American and African "entrepreneurs," both economic and political.

- Roundtable participants largely agreed that Zimbabwe is an African problem that requires an African solution. It was noted, however, that the West, and the United States specifically, can play a lead role in making sure upcoming elections are peaceful.

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REENGAGING AFRICA: IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS – FOCUS ON SOUTHERN AFRICA

1. Part One: Roundtable Report

A. Introduction

The theme of the workshop was "Reengaging Africa: Identifying Opportunities and Pitfalls," and the discussion was conducted in two sessions. Session one focused broadly on reengagement between the West and Africa. Topics included:

- What should be the major components of a new roadmap toward reengagement?

- How can the West deepen cooperation with regional bodies to address transnational challenges on the continent?

- What role can African civil society organizations, including NGOs, religious organizations, the business community, and youth groups play in constructive engagement?

The second session focused more specifically on the southern Africa region, particularly South Africa and Zimbabwe. Topics included:

- How can the West and the United States reset its relationship with southern Africa?

- How should the West engage the next generation of leadership in southern Africa?

- As South Africa is the newest member of the BRICS, how can the West and the United States work with South Africa toward aligning foreign policy objectives?

- Where do the opportunities and potential pitfalls lie in retuning the tense Western relationship with Zimbabwe?

B. Session One: Reengagement with Africa

Opening remarks highlighted Africa's changing role in the global security landscape. Some of this shift is driven by external security concerns, including terrorism, piracy, and competition for access to Africa's strategic natural resources. At the same time, however, Africa is also beginning to emerge as an economic player in its own right. A young and vibrant private sector is emerging in Africa that is demanding internal political and economic reform and is reaching out to build economic ties at the regional and global levels. The African diaspora in the West is an essential player in the political and economic empowerment of Africa and is becoming progressively activist in its engagement with events on the continent. Increasingly, African diaspora communities are

directly influencing economic and political transformation on the continent. The African diaspora communities represented by the participants in this roundtable are already playing an important role in the transformation of their home countries.

Over the course of the morning discussion, three main issues emerged: the maturing of Africa's relationships with the broader international system; the continuing legacies of colonialism; and the need for the West, and the United States in particular, to develop new ways of engaging with Africa and Africans.

1. Africa and the International System

Much of the discussion of Africa's changing international status focused on the expectations created by the election of U.S. President Barak Obama in 2008. Several participants expressed the view that while Africans understand that the U.S. President is not the president of Africa, they have been disappointed by the lack of bold steps to change the perception of Africa as a problem to be solved rather than as an economic and strategic partner. Participants expressed concern that rather than taking the lead in recasting the nature of U.S. engagement with Africa, the current administration is continuing to pursue a reactive strategy: following the lead of Britain and France when it comes to confronting corruption; moving to counter or block the spread of Chinese influence; and focusing too narrowly on issues of primary concern to Western powers, especially counterterrorism and piracy.

There have been some positive steps, particularly the recent commitment of U.S. troops to assist in the execution of International Criminal Court warrants against Joseph Kony and other leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army. At the same time, previous progress in repairing African perceptions of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) suffered a serious setback in the aftermath of the campaign against the Gaddafi regime in Libya, as the U.S.-backed intervention reinforced the perception that AFRICOM's principle mission is to impose Western security priorities on African countries. Similar concerns were expressed concerning Kenya's military incursion into Somalia, which public opinion in Kenya tends to see as the Kenyan military fighting America's war.

2. Legacies of Colonialism

The principal barrier to recasting Africa's relationship with the West as cooperative rather than exploitive continues to be the legacies of colonialism. While the United States, in the view of roundtable participants, does not share the burden of colonial legacies that color Africa's relationship with Britain and France, it is seen as having propped up repressive and violent regimes in the region during the Cold War. Participants expressed the concern that, as the United States increasingly engages with Africa in order to limit Chinese influence, it might back away from its commitment to democratic reform. At the level of popular opinion, the credibility of the United States as a partner in

Africa will depend, in large part, on its willingness to empower Africans against corrupt and out-of-touch elites. It is not enough to push for constitutional reform and multi-party systems. As one participant pointed out, most African countries have wonderful constitutions that are meaningless in the face of regimes that are either unable or unwilling to implement them. Multi-party systems do not guarantee democracy, and democracy does not guarantee peace.

In contrast to the Western powers, China lacks any negative historical legacies. In fact, for most African countries, China stands as a positive model of a country that achieved economic development without following a Western blueprint. As such, in many parts of Africa the Chinese are very popular. Africans appreciate the Chinese willingness to build vital infrastructure on the continent, often in fragile and post-conflict settings. Still, conference participants expressed concern that, in trading dependence on Western aid for Chinese infrastructure investment, African countries run the risk of substituting one form of colonialism for another. While African regimes embrace China's "no strings" approach to aid and investment—which places no pressure on leaders to undertake political reform—African opinion at the grassroots is more wary. On the one hand, Chinese expat communities in Africa are generally viewed positively and large numbers of Africans benefit directly from Chinese development of transportation and communication infrastructure on the continent. On the other hand, China's labor policies (especially its preference to import Chinese workers rather than hire local African labor), contribution to continued corruption and political repression (through financial transfers to corrupt African leaders), and reputation for racism undermine popular enthusiasm for an expansion of Chinese-African partnership. Language also constitutes a major barrier on a continent where English and French are the most common languages for regional business and political dialog.

The mixed perception of Chinese engagement on the continent presents an opportunity for the United States to build influence with the populations of Africa, which, for the most part, are still inclined to see the United States as a credible global advocate for progress on democratic reform and good governance. If any external power is likely to partner with Africans to clean up the political and economic mess created by colonialism, it is the United States. China, in contrast, is seen as reaping the economic benefit of African leadership models designed to benefit earlier colonial powers. Thus, China has a clear interest in reinforcing the political status quo on the continent. Progress in building positive relationships in Africa, however, will require the United States to abandon its current tendency to treat influence on the continent as a zero-sum game with China.

Another area in which the United States can go far toward strengthening links in Africa is in higher education. Education infrastructure across Africa is in disrepair and badly in need of foreign investment. Expanding programs to enable African students to

study in Western universities would also contribute to reviving higher educational capacity in Africa over the long term. Roundtable participants also highlighted a need to make a greater investment in closing what they see as a "data gap" in Africa. Too many programs for economic and political development, both national and international, are grounded in subjective policy assumptions that are not backed up by rigorous, evidence-based research.

3.   Rethinking Engagement with Africa

Government-to-government engagement, in the view of the majority of participants, is limited in the extent to which it can achieve meaningful change in sub-Saharan Africa. Regional organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and the regional economic communities, have not lived up to their expectations. While participants disagreed as to whether these organizations, particularly the AU, have the potential to drive reform over the long term, there was general agreement that as long as they remain under the control of entrenched, corrupt, overwhelmingly male and geriatric elites these organizations are unlikely to meet their potential.

At a time when Africans are beginning to take political power into their own hands by demanding accountability and reform from the dysfunctional governments found in many countries, the most promising opportunities for building U.S. influence in Africa lie in engagement with the private sector, civil society, and grassroots political movements. It is at this level that the real change in Africa is unfolding. Part of this process, according to roundtable participants, will require reaching beyond governments and the "NGO industry" to forge people-to-people contacts between American and African "entrepreneurs," both economic and political. There is much progress to be made by looking beyond formal political structures and governments to find ways to engage with non-state actors. The African diaspora in the United States and Europe, along with the African-American community, should be stakeholders in this process. Democratic governments in the West lack the consistency and commitment to drive long-term change, but they can take steps—especially by eliminating some of the legal and bureaucratic barriers to cooperation—to promote and facilitate private sector and civil society programs.

C.   Session Two: Reengagement with Southern Africa

In opening the afternoon session, opening remarks emphasized some key differences in the challenges for the West to reengage in southern Africa. The most important of these is the emerging tension between the liberationist generation and the "born free" generation in South Africa and Zimbabwe, those who have no memory of the white supremacist regimes. The struggle for liberation is much more recent and closer to the surface in both South Africa and Zimbabwe than other regions of Africa, and anti-

colonial, anti-Western ideologies are still influential. The liberation heroes still dominate the political establishments in both countries, although much more overtly in Zimbabwe. But the post-liberation generation of born frees are coming of age and becoming disillusioned with the failure of the liberation generation to deliver on the promise of political freedom and economic progress. Policies such as indigenization, particularly the continuing expropriation of white-owned land and businesses in Zimbabwe, also constrain political and economic development. Finally, the failure of southern Africa to move beyond the post-liberationist mindset highlights the weakness of the AU through its failure to effectively facilitate reconciliation.

The discussion in Session Two focused mainly on two issues: barriers to greater Western influence in South Africa and Zimbabwe; and the role of the Zimbabwean diaspora in a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. Participants stressed that women are holding the society together in Zimbabwe and while they lack public and political influence, their influence within the context of family and community is considerable.

1.   Generational Tension in Southern Africa

Within the discussed dynamic between liberationists and born frees lie further generational tensions. Participants expressed that one of the greatest challenges in forging stability and human security in southern Africa lies in negotiating inter-generational power-sharing between the 40-plus percent of the population that is under 30 and the aging ruling elite. Young South Africans and Zimbabweans are losing patience with the ruling elites, who mostly still depend on the legitimacy they gained from the liberation struggle. This is not unique to the southern Africa region; countries across sub-Saharan Africa are struggling with how best to bring disaffected youth into the political process. In both South Africa and Zimbabwe, however, the cleavages between party elders (in the African National Congress [ANC] and Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front [ZANU-PF]) and youth are becoming more overt. In South Africa, the youth wing of the ANC is directly challenging the party leadership. In Zimbabwe, youth have gravitated toward the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) at the expense of the ruling ZANU-PF, although once the MDC began sharing power in 2009 many vocal youth groups have been coopted into the political power structure.

Several roundtable participants also pointed out the other largely neglected force for economic and social change in southern Africa—women. Despite some token figures such as Vice President Joice Mujuru, in Zimbabwe women remain largely outside the political establishment, but are becoming a formidable informal agent of change. Zimbabwean women are organized at the grassroots level in an effort to promote economic empowerment and address the lack of basic social services.

The limits on the United States and other Western powers' ability to influence political and economic change in southern Africa are considerable, especially concerning

Zimbabwe. Roundtable participants largely agreed that Zimbabwe is an African problem that requires an African solution. In high level engagement—between the Southern African Development Community (SADC), South Africa, Zimbabwe, the United States, and the European Union—the Western powers are, at present, too often working at cross-purposes and sending mixed messages. The United States and other Western powers need to develop a better understanding of the deep historical and cultural links within southern Africa and the potential to use those links, at the level of civil society and the private sector, to promote positive change. The United States also needs to focus on what benefits southern Africa in the long term rather than what might undermine the Mugabe regime in the near term. In particular, it needs to find ways—perhaps through SADC—to engage with the Zimbabwean military establishment. Regardless of who succeeds Mugabe, the military will remain an influential stakeholder and is badly in need of capacity building and professionalization, which the United States could help coordinate.

2.   Role of the Diaspora

On the role of the diaspora in a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, the roundtable raised as many questions as answers. While there was agreement that the Zimbabwean diaspora, in particular its financial resources and experience with democracy, can make major contributions to political and economic progress in Zimbabwe, it was less clear what the nature of that contribution was likely to be. One of the major uncertainties concerned how returning expats might be received by Zimbabweans who stayed in country, either by choice or because they had no alternative. While diaspora investment is likely to be welcomed, it is less clear that returning expats would be able to build political influence. Members of the diaspora community, however, do not necessarily believe they must return in order to make a positive contribution.

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