Britain ‘doing good’ in Africa: what opportunities for African agency?

Paper for the BISA Africa IR/Chatham House workshop, Friday 9 October 2009

Julia Gallagher
Department of Politics and International Studies
School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London
jg35@soas.ac.uk

Abstract

British government policy towards Africa shifted under Tony Blair, coming increasingly to focus on the idea of ‘doing good’. In framing such an approach, British policy overtly attempted to distance itself from the pursuit of more conventional political or economic foreign policy objectives. As a result, British work in Africa came to represent an ‘ideal’ or an ‘ethical’ policy, one that apparently rose above national interests and politics.

This paper will do two things. First, it will discuss the ways in which the recent British approaches towards Africa have deviated from more conventional forms of foreign policy – exploring the origins and anatomy of a foreign policy that is about ‘doing good’. And second, it will consider how this deviation might work to enable or disable African countries shaping their own foreign policy.

Introduction

Currently within Britain’s political circles there is a largely uncontested assumption that Africa should be treated differently from the rest of the world. This unanimity stems from a shared tendency to idealise Africa and Africans—and to idealise Britain’s own African policies.

The idea of British policy ‘doing good’ in Africa was established during Tony Blair’s time in Downing Street (1997-2007). Aid nearly doubled; the bilateral debt of Africa’s 18 poorest countries was written off; British forces intervened in Sierra Leone to restore order; Blair launched the Commission for Africa to develop a plan to help rescue the continent from its development impasse; and Britain made Africa the central theme of the UK presidencies of the EU and G8 in 2005. (See Porteous, 2008)

Blair made many fine speeches about Africa and he coined phrases that summed up both the plight of the continent and Britain’s role in rescuing it.

For example, in a speech on Africa in Addis Ababa, 7 October 2004, Blair epitomised the government view of Africa:

In all the things that I deal with in politics, and the things that make people cynical and disengaged from the political process, when I come and see what is happening here [in Ethiopia] and
see what could happen, I know that however difficult politics is, there is at least one noble cause worth fighting for. (Blair, 2004)

More famously, he told the Labour Party Conference in 2001 that:

Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it. And if we don’t, it will become deeper and angrier. (Blair, 2001)

In this paper, I am going to do two things. First, I will examine the shape and causes of this approach to Africa: what is a foreign policy that tries to ‘do good’ about; and why might a country like Britain pursue it? And second, in what ways might such an approach impact on African foreign-policy making?

The Idealisation of Africa

The political consensus behind the Blair government’s work in Africa was exceptionally broad: encompassing the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives as well as all wings of the Labour Party. While there were disagreements among these political groupings on many other areas of policy, on Africa there was a united front. In the course of my research I have conducted interviews with MPs engaging in work on Africa from the three main political parties. I was struck by the fact that it was easy to get people to talk to me about what they all considered to be a ‘good news’ story, and keen to emphasise the shared outlook on Africa across the parties.

This consensus even seemed to extend to the international NGO community, other bilateral donors and multilateral institutions. New Labour very consciously took on the ethos and objectives of the British NGOs (from which representatives were brought directly into Government from the start), and also took up the policy prescriptions and approaches of the international financial institutions and ideas about universal human rights and justice promoted by the UN and the International Criminal Court. As Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development, explained, “…you can just get on with what’s right: it’s in Africa’s interests, it’s in Europe’s interest, it’s in the world’s interests” (interview, 6 June 2007).

This sense of a British campaigns to uphold the ‘noble cause’ in Africa rest on a heavy idealisation, both of Africa itself and of British policy there. Africa was imagined as populated by the virtuous African poor, exploited by political leaders who are described in starkly ‘good’ or (more often) ‘bad’ terms (Gallagher 2009).

The notion that Britain is engaged in a ‘moral crusade’ in Africa derives from popular and historically deep-rooted conceptions of the continent as needy and helpless. During the colonial era, for example, Africans were depicted as the ideal subject populations, ‘child-like’, in need of guidance, largely untroublesome unless corrupted by their leaders. After independence, elite preoccupations with nationalism and pan-Africanism were often felt to be largely meaningless to ordinary Africans who really just wanted economic development.
The British role in these scenarios has been and remains one of taking up the cause of the voiceless African poor in an honourable attempt to induce better governance behaviour from African leaders. This advocacy assumes a curious sense of a right or facility to speak for Africans. When the depiction of African actors is flattened in this way, the continent appears emptied of politics, and policy choices are reduced to the ‘progressive’ (modern, enlightened, civil) versus the ‘corrupt’ (primordial, self-serving).

British self-idealisation stems, at least, from two factors. The first, already mentioned, is the remarkable consensus among elites on what Britain should do in Africa and how it should behave. The most heady expression of this consensus came in 2005 during the Gleneagles G8 summit, when thousands of people, organised by religious and development groups, and supported by all the main political parties, loudly expressed their support for Blair’s African initiatives.

The second factor is the British tendency to write off or sanitise conventional self-interest in Africa. This position is plausible since Britain’s economic and geopolitical interests in Africa are relatively modest. For example, in 2006 British trade with sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 2% of total trade, and two-thirds of these are with South Africa. Britain hasn’t viewed African states as of geo-political importance since they came into being. (Clapham, 2002)

When politicians do talk about British interests, they are considered to be ‘enlightened’ interests that accord with Africa’s own development priorities. Politicians argue, for example, that eradicating poverty and conflict in the poor countries of the continent will prevent the disaffection and instability that drive people to migrate to Europe or turn towards terrorism.

However, the view amongst the many British officials I have interviewed is that British engagement in Africa is not driven by conventional interests because Africa really doesn’t offer very many. What then does drive the engagement?

I argue that the relative absence of selfish interests reinforces the sense that Britain’s Africa policy is rooted in ‘the good’ rather than ‘the political’. By ‘political’ I mean activity concerned with the pursuit of and clash between different ideas and interests. By ‘good’ I mean an activity based on a sense of right, or truth, which is realized because selfish interests appear to be absent, and because of this very wide consensus on what needs to be done and how to do it. In this way, the perception that British policies are motivated purely by selfless concern for Africa remains unclouded by the complexity and ambiguity normally associated with more political relationships.

Overall, the intense idealisation of British engagement with Africa represents something like a ‘sacred space’ in the middle of profane, messy politics. Even now, with dramatic cuts in overall public spending being contemplated, international development has been singled out by the Government and opposition parties as untouchable. Gordon Brown said in his speech to the Labour Party conference last week that, ‘what was once an aspiration – 0.7% of national income spent on international development aid, has become with
Labour a promise, and will in future become a law’. (Brown, 2009) George Osborne, too, in contemplating the spending cuts a future Conservative government would have to make, has stated that only two areas will be protected – healthcare and international development. (Osborne, 2009)

In particular, British engagement with the continent appears to reflect British competence, capacity and potency, which are more difficult to achieve in messier domestic policies or more contentious foreign policies. Hence, it is plausible that British Africa policy in recent years tells us far more about widespread anxiety about recapturing a sense of the good British state than about the development needs and priorities of Africa.

More widely, I believe that Africa is able to represent the post-Cold War aspiration to a ‘good’, ‘post-political’ international order. (Fukyama, 1992) Africa’s assigned role – as a recipient of aid and a subject of international consensus – serves wider needs for an idealized internationalism. It captures a sense of common, universal ambitions; it enables international institutions to embody these; and it provides a tangible example that Cold War realism has been overcome. In other words, international consensus around Africa appears to embody the *civility* of the international system – its rules and laws, its sense of universalism, its sense of transcending the state of nature – something that is important for western-liberal countries like the UK which are heavily invested in this ideal.¹

To sum up: I think British idealized accounts of Africa and British engagement there reflect a new kind of ‘interest’ which centres on expressing a sense of the capable, good British state. Part of this involves an engagement with an ‘ideal and capable internationalism’, which consensus and the relative lack of conventional interests in Africa appears to allow.

**African agency in foreign policy**

The subject of the conference has made me think about implications for African agency in shaping foreign policy. I am going to pose some questions and some tentative answers.

I’m thinking about foreign policy as concerned broadly with four types of objective: national security; the pursuit of resources or wealth; the enhancement of prestige or the creation and projection of identity; and the attainment or preservation of autonomy and self-determination.

**Question one: What might a ‘doing good’ approach mean for African actors’ capacity to pursue these objectives?**

The whole ‘Africa as a scar’, Africa as ‘different from politics as usual’ approach rhetorically removes African states from the normal processes and dealings of international politics. In Britain this has been underlined by the growing pre-eminence of DfID over the FCO in Africa policy. DfID, better

¹ Strong international institutions are probably particularly attractive for smaller powers like Britain, because of the sense of shared security and capacity they create.
funded and staffed in African posts, defines relationships between Britain and Africa as developmental rather than political.

1. The idea that Britain doesn’t pursue conventional interests disarms African policy-makers by seizing moral authority and removing potential leverage. Britain in saying, ‘we don’t want anything from you for ourselves; we just want you to do things that will benefit your poor’ undermines a sense of reciprocity and space for negotiation. It also gives Britain a moral authority in its assertion that we can and do have the ability and right to direct African policy.

2. The stifling international consensus over what Africa needs to do – the prescribed economic, political, social reforms – defines and thereby constrains Africans’ choice of ‘interests’. Moreover, the constant instruction and direction in domestic reform from donors undermines African leaders’ ability to cultivate prestige and authority internationally.

Question two: What does this assumed role of ‘representing Africa’s poor’ – the ‘authentic African interest’ – do to the idea of foreign policy?

Donor policy is driven by the idea that African elites tend to represent their own interests, not more ‘authentic, national’ interests, in foreign policy. This stems from the assumption, discussed above, of the disconnection between African elites and Africa’s ‘poor’; the assumption of the lack of a social contract. Thus policies towards African countries since the end of the Cold War have been more or less explicitly about disarming elites.

1. Donors have promoted institutions and pluralism internally – democracy, accountability – to check elites. This results (or is intended to result) in a diffusion of power and a growing incoherence of foreign policy objectives. (Schraeder, 2001)

2. Africa has been highly porous to donor attempts to reshape political and social organization. This undermines sovereignty, reinforcing the perception that these are not substantive states, and really second-rate states, and further erodes autonomy in foreign policy. (Williams, 2000)

3. Instead, donors claim to represent the real interests of Africa themselves, bypassing African elites. In a sense, donors assume ‘capacity’ thereby ‘removing the need for foreign policy’ from Africa.

Question three: How far have opportunities for autonomy been shut down by the post-Cold War approach to Africa; how much remains?

Given the flatness and idealisation of the British imagination of Africa, there is clearly going to be a gap between the starting point – how a donor like Britain

---

2 The effect is backed up by the large disparities between African and donor wealth and power, and much of Africa’s aid-dependency, means that African-inspired objectives that differ from donors’ can be largely ignored – they are not backed up with potential benefits or threats. This point was suggested to me in a discussion with Hannes Baumann.
views African and its role there – and how this is diluted as in African capitals. There are still options for some regimes; still room for African agency.³

1. Some regimes play along successfully, promoting a ‘good subject’/complier image that draws in resources and can ensure their continuation given the need of donors to be associated with success – Ghana, Mozambique, Benin have all managed this in recent times. They make use of the donor ‘interest’ of being associated with a successful and ‘good’ programme.

2. Others reject it outright, and turn this to political capital at home, or regionally. Robert Mugabe, for example, projects a national identity and a personal prestige both domestically and regionally, although this is at the expense of his ability to attract resources.

3. Other African elites subvert it or work around it. Some have the autonomy, resources or authority to do this. For example, Meles Zenawi has leverage associated with US interests (al Qaeda in Somalia); Paul Kagame possesses moral authority, military resources and regional allegiances that allow him more autonomy. Both Zenawi and Kagame are also examples of leaders with great personal authority – they know how to talk the language of donors. This has enabled them to take more effective control over policy on national security, for example, in ways that don’t necessarily gel with donor preferences. Countries too that are rich in resources or regional political clout – Angola and Nigeria for example – are less aid-dependent and have more options open to them, should they choose to pursue them.

Conclusion

Within the current donor idealisation of Africa and its place in the international system, the idea of African autonomous foreign policies looks fragile. In the history of independent Africa, foreign policy became less and less meaningful as declining resources increasingly limited options, and African leaders lost moral stature and apparently the ability to represent national interests. Instead, and especially since the end of the Cold War, and the suffocating aid environment that has been created, these ‘national interests’ have been increasingly defined by the international community which has invested in Africa as a place of moral certainty, donors’ own sense of capacity and potency and an embodiment of a civil international order.

³ British disquiet at China’s more interest-driven engagement with Africa arises partly because it appears to open up new opportunities for African agency – through a wider access to aid; and through China’s own interests which drive possibilities for exchange and bargaining.
Bibliography


Osborne, George: Times article, available at: http://cma.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article6499556

