Australia's strategic interests in Africa

Dr Carl Ungerer, Director, National Security Project, ASPI

Africa has not been a prominent or permanent fixture on Australia's foreign or security policy agenda. Canberra has tended to view the African continent through the prism of multilateral institutions—mainly the Commonwealth and the United Nations—and often then only in the context of either conflict or humanitarian crises.

For much of the post-1945 period, Australia and Africa shared a common ocean, but not much else. Strategic interests were calculated closer to home, on both sides. And the slow economic growth in Africa, relative to the high growth rates in Asia, meant that trade and economic interests were focused elsewhere.

This year the Rudd government has signalled its intention to change direction on Africa and pursue a much stronger engagement strategy. Recent visits by Foreign Minister Stephen Smith and Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon have reinforced the government's message. The Governor-General's nine-nation tour of Africa in March and April underlines the priority the government attaches to building closer relations.

The elevation of African issues in foreign and defence policy is based, in part, on a judgment about shifting strategic priorities among the major powers. Canberra believes that Africa is drawing closer to the centre of international politics. And continuing a policy of benign neglect towards a quarter of the world's countries is no longer sufficient to meet Australia's long-term national interests.

Such judgments are reinforced by the actions of several major players in African affairs. China's demand for energy security is driving a new era of investment in African resource industries. Total bilateral trade between China and Africa has grown from around US$4 billion in 1995 to more than US$100 billion in 2008.

In Washington, the Obama Administration has called for a new engagement strategy with Africa, built around longstanding US strategic interests in the promotion of democracy and human rights. Development assistance programs will continue to be a major plank of that strategy. But so will a more comprehensive engagement in Africa's political and security structures.

Within a decade, Australian mining interests in sub-Saharan Africa have increased from virtually nothing to over US$20 billion. Despite the global economic crisis, BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto are leading a renewed push into the African resources sector.

Australia clearly wants to play a larger role in Africa and believes that it has important interests at stake. But, beyond the hallways of multilateral institutions, Canberra has little history of bilateral cooperation with most African countries and very limited diplomatic capacity to improve that pattern of engagement in the short term.

The prospect of opening new diplomatic missions as well as increasing development assistance and defence cooperation programs will increase the range of diplomatic tools at Canberra's disposal over time. But what should be the focus of our policy? And what should be our priorities?

Focus on Zimbabwe

Geoffrey Hawker heads the discipline of Politics & International Relations at Macquarie University and is the immediate past president of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific.

Zimbabwe figures little in analyses of strategic issues in Africa because it has been a rogue actor for a decade. This is an unfortunate oversight. Refugees from the Robert Mugabe regime continue to cause problems for Zimbabwe's neighbours, especially South Africa and Botswana. The country has taken up much of the time of the main regional organisation, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). And its continued deterioration, not least with health issues surrounding the spread of HIV/AIDS and cholera, could continue to bring the region down.

But it was once a relatively prosperous state and has agricultural and, especially, mineral wealth. Australia has some capacity to act and indeed could play a major part in the reconstruction process that is, perhaps, just starting to come into view. Our reputation was high in Malcolm Fraser's time and diplomatic representation has been maintained and some aid channels kept open. Links between the MDC, the opposition party now in a government of national unity with Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, and Australian officials and private citizens are of some significance.

Mugabe has vilified external actors including Australia, not least following former Prime Minister John Howard's failed intervention at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2002, and it is often not appreciated how loudly his claims have resonated in African ears everywhere. At the same time, Mugabe is probably less the problem now than the hard men of the security forces who surround him.

It will likely be South Africa's call under President Jacob Zuma to effect their removal with indemnities, a bitter result for many. But an Australian policy of comprehensive engagement through revived aid, educational and democratisation programs could then pay large dividends in restoring Australia's reputation in the region and beyond. Australian firms, especially the miners, are increasingly well known throughout the continent and a political push as the new Zimbabwe emerges will be needed to rebalance the equation.

Optimism about Zimbabwe's future does not come easily, but positive interventions there by Australia will have a disproportionately beneficial effect in comparison with almost any other African country and will be well noticed throughout the continent.

Australia in Africa – the human dimension

Dr. Tanya Lyons, School of Political and International Studies, Flinders University, and Editor of the Australasian Review of African Studies.

Australia did not colonise an African country, and has not benefited from postcolonial trade links such as the Europeans have. Australians did participate in the Boer War, and were inspired in the Scouts by Baden Powell's siege of Mafikeng.

Australian mining companies and associated industries have been gradually increasing investments in the continent over the last fifteen years, despite the prevalence of political instability and ongoing civil wars across Africa. Supported in part by the Australia-Africa Business Council, Australia is extracting increasing resources from the continent, for the profit of a limited number of Australian-based companies.

In tandem with this extraction industry Australia has welcomed thousands of refugees from Africa through the humanitarian program. The population of African-born Australians is now over 200,000. A recent government discussion paper on *African Australians: A Report on Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues*, indicates that this influx of Africans is not without associated social problems, that have not been adequately addressed.

Community engagement with Africa and Africans appears to be more consistent and deeply ingrained than at the government level, seen by the number of church and community groups raising money and awareness for various African charitable causes, not to mention sponsoring children.

Africa fell off Australia's foreign policy and political map during the Howard years, at the same time that our treatment of refugees and asylum seekers gained international notoriety. Although Downer and Howard made attempts to rein in Zimbabwe's Mugabe, the concern seemed more for the continuation of cricketing opportunities than for a realistic solution to ensure change in this brutal regime. They tried, but did not have enough teeth. Mugabe cared little for Australia's objections.

As the Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, Kevin Rudd first spoke to the Australia-South Africa Business Council in 2005 arguing for a new era of engagement with Africa, mainly because of China and India's increased investment there—we couldn't afford to be left behind in this 'new scramble for Africa'.

Rudd acknowledged the major role played by Australian mining companies but called for 'common standards for multinational corporations operating in Southern Africa.' Assuming he meant that they should operate with greater social responsibility, contributing to Africa's poverty alleviation and improved development prospects for its communities and peoples, then his vision for a new engagement with Africa looked positive.

Now as Prime Minister, Rudd's government has a new focus and strategy for Africa, implying that his interest was not fleeting, and the current enthusiasm is not simply focused on a one-way resource extraction, but is an attempt to jostle among the other bigger players.

However, the Rudd government needs to put more investment into our own human resource capacity and skills to train and develop experts in African affairs through our university sector. We need African experts to provide information, content and analysis on the political and economic climate in Africa. There are only a few topics available on African politics in all Australian universities, and less than a handful of academics who could supervise postgraduate research on African security and political issues.

Keating's engagement with Asia was at the expense of African studies. Howard's affair with the Bush Administration did nothing to change this. Obama has put Africa clearly back on the map, and Rudd sees the importance of Africa in future dealings with China. But can Rudd and his foreign affairs minister make any positive impact on the situation in Africa? Will Rudd succeed where Howard failed?

Does Africa Matter?

Jim Terrie is a former Senior Analyst with the International Crisis Group's Africa Program. He was an officer in the Australian Army and has consulted to businesses and organisations in Africa and Asia on risk management and security issues.

Australia and Australians are engaged with Africa, in a number of areas; diplomatic, security, humanitarian, development and increasingly, private sector investment. So Africa does matter to Australia. But, if, as the government has indicated, we are to make more of our engagement with Africa then the real questions are how much, how do we achieve it and at what cost?

Australian businesses will continue to look for opportunities on the continent. Investment will increase particularly in the resources area. Diplomatically we are spread across the continent in a few key locations, and while there is scope for increasing our diplomatic presence, choices would have to be made—an obvious omission being Addis Ababa—more for being the location of the African Union headquarters than the Ethiopian capital.

On the security front Australia has sent contributions to various peacekeeping missions. All of these were more about taking part in UN and alliance enterprises than any particular Africa-specific objectives. Pointedly we have not had a single permanent military attaché on the continent. Unless Somalia becomes the next global terrorist haven (a contestable notion given the fractious nature of Somali society) we will remain largely unaffected by insecurity on the continent. Similarly, those Africans understandably attempting to escape poverty and violence are heading north and not east. While the government, Australian NGOs and Australian individuals make contributions in

humanitarian and development projects these are dwarfed by those of the Europeans and North Americans.

If we are to engage further with Africa then we need to be fully prepared to operate in a difficult political terrain without compromising our values. This means acknowledging that democracy is thin, corruption is rampant and governments are often the worst offenders. Zimbabwe, Congo, Sudan and Somalia may be the worst examples but there are many 'stable' countries in Africa that exhibit similar problems—the recent descent of Kenya into politically driven inter-ethnic violence is just one example of this thin veneer.

Across a range of areas there is scope for greater engagement if we are willing to spend the time and effort. But what are the returns for Australia beyond a portion of the 53 African votes for a Security Council seat and better returns for shareholders of companies taking commercial risks in Africa? Although there is an argument for greater engagement in broader regional concerns, Australia has to make choices about how and where it spends its limited resources. Promoting development and responding to security threats in our own neighbourhood has to take greater priority. Australia's current level of engagement in Africa is commensurate with Africa's strategic importance. Africa does matter, but just not enough yet.

Dealing with the piracy problem

Dr Anthony Bergin is Director of Research Programs at ASPI

Two Royal Australian Navy warships recently frustrated a pirate attack off the coast of Somalia. Pirates attacked a merchant ship and attempted a boarding, and also approached another freighter. The Australian ships, on a global circumnavigation, provided security to the merchant vessel and stabilised the situation.

In February this year federal Transport Minister Anthony Albanese established an inquiry by the Inspector of Transport Security to investigate the impact, or potential impact, of piracy on Australian registered and international trading ships including their crews and passengers.

Of most concern to Australia has been piracy in the Straits of Malacca, through which around 40% of world trade transits. But that problem has now been almost completely eradicated as a result of coordinated air and naval measures taken between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs Joe Borg recently warned that the rapid spread of piracy eastwards from Africa may soon affect Australian interests. The Minister for Defence has just announced that the Gulf-based Anzac Class frigate *HMAS Warramunga* and P3-C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, now working on Operation Slipper, will be re-tasked and available for anti-piracy duties in and near the Gulf of

Aden. They will join the US-led multi-national Combined Task Force 151 for short-term counter-piracy missions.

It should be noted that the number of ships high-jacked is minute in terms of overall international shipping. The international community is now getting on top of the problem. There's improved cooperation between the naval forces in the area and more secure sea lane arrangements in the Gulf of Aden. There's increased air and satellite surveillance of the pirate 'mother ships'. And merchant ships are now taking recommended precautions. The possibility of piracy spreading eastwards to the point where it's a threat to Australia seems remote.

We have few direct interests here: insurance rates on shipping passing off Somalia and the Gulf of Aden have only a small impact on shipping costs of our major exports to North Asia and North America. We don't have Australian flagged ships in the area, nor many Australian seafarers on vessels in the affected areas.

Some have suggested that if we don't stop the pirates in Africa this will produce copycat practices in Southeast Asia, an area of direct strategic interest to Australia. This isn't credible. Southeast Asian waters are confined. Somali pirates operate off a lawless land. Most attacks in Southeast Asia have occurred on vessels at anchor or in port.

Would Australia throw the book at any pirates it captured? It's unlikely. Prosecuting pirates would be an expensive business and pose difficult legal questions. These burdens would outweigh our minor interest in prosecuting crimes when Australian nationals aren't the victims.

We've now reached the point where the international naval presence is an overkill: France, Denmark, Malaysia, South Korea, India, Russia, China and Iran are deploying warships to the area. The U.S. 5th Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces, stood up a multinational anti-piracy effort known as Combined Task Force 151 in January this year. CTF 151 operates primarily in and around the Gulf of Aden, but also in the Persian Sea, Indian Ocean and Red Sea.

At any given time, 12 to 16 warships from the Task Force and from other nations as well as maritime patrol aircraft are operating in the region. The EU has begun to escort World Food Organization aid shipments to Somalia, as well as monitor the area with maritime patrol aircraft. The Japan Maritime Self Defence Force has responded as well.

The suggestion that by participating we would show we can work with the Japanese and Chinese navies isn't persuasive. Those navies are very much 'doing their own thing' rather than working directly with US or EU naval task groups.

As well as assisting counter-piracy operations in the area, Australia might promote the idea of building a regional maritime regime for the Horn of Africa that would deal holistically with maritime activities: law and order (not just piracy), fisheries management, combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, marine

environmental protection and coastal management. Australian resources might be better put into such an initiative, rather than a naval contribution. As ASPI pointed out in its recent report, *Sea Change: Advancing Australia's ocean interests*, we have the right maritime expertise and strengthening oceans governance is an area where we could be more proactive.

Africa and Australia's interests

Rod Lyon is Director of the Strategy and International Program at ASPI

Australian interests in Africa tend to be diplomatic and economic rather than strategic. But we can weigh those diplomatic interests—crudely—by looking at the limited number of missions (high commissions, embassies and consulates) that Australia has in Africa. And we can weigh the economic interests by examining DFAT's trade figures, which suggest that Africa remains comparatively marginal in the Australian economic portfolio; there are no African states amongst our top ten trade partners, for example.

Yes, the Americans have come to see Africa as a more important place strategically—because of terrorism, oil, and Chinese involvement there. But few Americans, even today, would rank Africa as more important than Europe, the Middle East, Asia, or Latin America. Oil is a special interest, and current projections suggest 25% of US oil imports might be coming out of the Gulf of Guinea by about 2015; more than the percentage coming out of the entire Middle East. But that figure represents a deliberate US policy of diversifying its energy imports. It won't change the strategic precedence that Washington accords the Middle East over Africa.

Geopolitically, much of the African continent constitutes an 'atomised shatterbelt', to use Saul Cohen's description. It dominates the international rankings of 'failed states': in the 2008 Foreign Policy index, African states held seven of the top ten rankings and sixteen of the top thirty. Many Sub-Saharan African states still lack national identities, and possess introverted—almost sub-national and tribal—strategic cultures.

Australian policy-makers don't usually look at a region and then wonder what our strategic interests are within that region. Rather, Australia defines its strategic interests generically, and then seeks to apply them everywhere. In relation to Africa, we want the same things that we want everywhere else: to achieve our grand strategy of a secure Australia in a stable, liberal, prosperous world order. So, what can Australia do in (or with) Africa that would help us achieve that goal?

Well, there would be a marginal gain in Australian security if more African countries were stable, secure, well-governed spaces, able to provide for their own security. Indeed, the new US AFRICOM command is already partnering with African countries in order to help them develop those professional security forces better able to address a range of localised threats—including separatist conflict, violent extremist movements, grand theft

of oil and other valuable resources, trafficking of every form, humanitarian crises, and natural disasters—while operating under proper civilian control, and with an appropriate appreciation of human rights standards. Australian interests would also be served by those outcomes, and there might be niche opportunities for Australia to contribute to their realisation. But it could scarcely be called an urgent priority; and might well be felt more in possible Australian commitments to UN peacekeeping missions than anything more direct.

Australia, like the US, also has particular interests in African states developing the capacities to tackle transnational threats—such as al-Qaeda— that might exploit poorly-governed spaces and pose problems beyond the continent. Those capacities would include a degree of security cooperation between African national forces and those of other countries most vulnerable to such transnational threats, so perhaps Australia could put in place some basic consultative networks that it thinks appropriate to the level of threat. Australia also has other global-level interests that might have an African dimension. It would, of course, have a first-order strategic interest at stake in the—unlikely—event that African countries started moving to develop weapons of mass destruction, as South Africa did once before.

Africa's security challenges run wider than mere issues of military force development: it is a continent characterised by rapid population growth, urbanisation, environmental degradation, an entrenched AIDS epidemic and food insecurity. Australia might well have opportunities to contribute to some of those broader developmental challenges: many other players, including the US, Europe and China, already do so. But we have to beware over-reaching here. If we genuinely wish to engage as a strategic partner for Africa—and not just as a good international citizen—we should base our cooperation on enduring congruent interests. And frankly, most of our shared strategic interests are a mile wide but only an inch deep.

Africa: Peacekeeping Lessons for Australia

Michael Smith, Executive Director, Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence

The focus of UN peacekeeping operations is currently on the African continent with seven ongoing major UN-mandated missions of various types, in various phases, and with varying degrees of success. These are difficult missions, mostly inadequately resourced by the international community. The close working relationship that has developed between the United Nations and the African Union to enhance peacekeeping has seen the continent become the location where international thinking on civil-military collaboration and its practice intersect.

The Rudd government's initiative to engage more closely with Africa, and to assist the African Union in practical, but modest, ways, will benefit all parties: the African Union, the United Nations and Australia. Increased engagement with Africa will enable Australia

to participate in international discussions and to draw relevant lessons for its more immediate role in the Asia Pacific. There are at least four specific areas of African peacekeeping of specific relevance to Australia.

The first is in the area of conflict prevention. Much of the world's thinking on conflict prevention is related to Africa. The priority of the African Union's Peace and Security Commission is to prevent and/or limit conflicts on the continent, including through the establishment of a multidimensional Africa Standby Force which is scheduled to achieve part-operational capability by 2010. The recent commitment by Australia to provide a Defence Adviser to the African Union is a positive move that has been well received by the African Union and the United Nations.

A second important area is in police-military collaboration. The critical role of policing in stabilisation and peacebuilding has been recognised since the peacekeeping missions in Kosovo and East Timor, and continues to develop internationally with a major focus in Africa. Australia has an excellent reputation for the quality of its military peacekeepers and is now at the leading edge of policing through the development of the Australian Federal Police's International Deployment Group. To achieve optimum effectiveness, additional work is required to develop police-military collaboration for peacekeeping and Africa will be central to this process.

A third area focuses on the critical issue of the protection of civilians (PoC). The Security Council has recognised that the success of UN missions will be judged on an ability to protect civilians under imminent threat. This explains why PoC has increasingly become a mandated task in UN missions—a trend that is likely to be continued, including for future UN-mandated missions in the Asia Pacific. Six of the seven current UN missions in Africa require PoC, yet the principles, guidelines and resources to implement PoC are rudimentary and not universally understood and applied. Australia can assist the United Nations and the African Union to develop this capability, while at the same time learn important lessons from current African peacekeeping operations.

Finally, and because Africa is the epicentre of modern peacekeeping, much can be done to enhance training and research in civil-military relations. Australia is well placed to assist the African Union by offering a limited number of places on training courses in Australia; by including African case studies in training modules; in collaborating with relevant training institutes in Africa; and in undertaking collaborative research projects.

In summary, through its assistance in practical capacity-building initiatives, Australia has much to gain, at modest cost, by working more closely with the African Union and the United Nations in peacekeeping.

Address security and democracy together

Samuel M. Makinda is Professor of security, terrorism and counter-terrorism studies at Murdoch University in Western Australia.

Judging from the recent visits to Africa by Foreign Minister Smith, Defence Minister Fitzgibbon and the Governor-General Quentin Bryce, it appears Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's government is interested in improving relations with African countries. The government has made it clear that its increased attention to Africa is primarily aimed at advancing its national interests, which include an ambition to win a seat on the UN Security Council.

But in pursuing its national interests, is there a way in which the Australian Government can at the same time help Africa improve its security in general or deal with specific security concerns, such as terrorism?

The most prudent thing for Australia to do is to establish a framework through which it can deal with Africa on a continuing basis. Sending high-level delegations to Africa helps, but it would be better if Australia could establish a partnership with the African Union, similar to the African Union–European Union partnership. Without such an arrangement, Australia's engagement with African states looks episodic at best, or opportunistic.

If Australia established a medium-term and long-term framework for dealing with the African Union, it could not only have effective input into Africa's security architecture, but it could also help individual African states design appropriate counter-terrorism measures.

Terrorism remains a big problem in Africa. Three years before al-Qaeda attacked New York's twin towers in September 2001, it had bombed American embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) simultaneously in August 1998. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the main intellectual voice of al-Qaeda, is an Egyptian, and therefore African. Several African countries, including Morocco, Tunisia and Uganda have been subjected to terrorist attacks.

However, terrorism in Africa is essentially a governance problem. Therefore, it is important that counter-terrorism measures are conceived in terms of promoting development, good governance and democracy building. For this reason, Australia could encourage African states to pursue counter-terrorism objectives while at the same time enhancing democracy.

In addition, Australia would need to focus on working with governments as well as civil society organisations to strengthen democratic processes. What this suggests is that Australia would need to view the fight against terrorism and building democracy in Africa as two sides of the same coin.

Concluding remarks

Carl Ungerer

In his book on *Australia's Foreign Relations*, the former Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans wrote in 1995 that 'Australia's relations with Africa have tended to develop on a largely *ad hoc* basis, often as a consequence of policies on other issues, such as human rights, the Commonwealth and, especially, apartheid'.

In seeking to end the ad hoc approach to and relatively low ranking of African issues in Australia's foreign policy priorities, the Rudd government faces a number of challenges. Many of those challenges have been captured in the series of exchanges presented in this forum.

Not surprisingly, Africa's complex security issues dominate the discussion. Political, economic and social instability in many parts of Africa will continue to frustrate international efforts to engage in a more comprehensive way.

But allowing Australia's relations with Africa to drift without substance is no longer an option. The forces of globalisation are pulling the two sides of the Indian Ocean closer together. And Australia has clear national interests at stake in the African continent—our commercial presence is growing and the transnational character of emerging security threats like terrorism and piracy mean that we cannot just ignore Africa's current problems. If Australia wins a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2013, Canberra will require a more comprehensive knowledge of the range of African issues which consume much of the Security Council's time.

Finding neat solutions is the hard part. Geoffrey Hawker suggests that our focus should be on Zimbabwe where the first signs of political rehabilitation are starting to show. Achievements there could have a wider regional impact. Tanya Lyons reminds us that we are already connected to Africa through the immigration program and that human resources will be an important conduit in our increasing dialogue with African communities.

The cautionary and pragmatic assessments of both Jim Terrie and Rod Lyon offer some real pause for thought. Geography still matters. And middle powers must prioritise. Anthony Bergin cautions against any rush to assist with current security dilemmas such as piracy unless the contribution is meaningful, effective and long-term. But as Mike Smith's contribution on UN peacekeeping shows, there are some important practical lessons that Australia can bring to the table from our long history of peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, including through more collaborative research on civil-military relations.

Sam Makinda's final piece neatly pulls these various strands of the debate together and reminds us that better overall security outcomes are tied ultimately to better governance arrangements. One will not be achieved without the other. Like Mike Smith, he suggests that institutional ties through the African Union will be an important point of entry in what promises to be an interesting new chapter in Australia's foreign policy.