CHAPTER II

DIPLOMACY OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT: A NEW INITIATIVE

The conceptual framework of the policy of constructive engagement was laid out in 1980 by Chester A. Crocker, in a series of articles shortly before he became Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. As Assistant Secretary, he brought with him a new understanding of what Kissinger and Roger Morris the main Africa Aid of Kissinger in the National Security Council had tried to achieve in early 1970s.

Crocker took exception to the previous administrations abrasive rhetoric, its radical demands for a speedy transfer of power and its many attempts often half-hearted, to disassociate itself from the white regime in South Africa. He noted that the previous U.S. policy of putting overt public pressure for change, on the South African regime, had promised much more to black South Africans than it could deliver. In the process it had contributed to the erosion of influence relationship. As Crocker wrote, "in the past neither U.S. pressure nor U.S. support has been credibly organised, while U.S. policy oscillations have done little to engender respect for America's sense of purpose".

Reagan's policy orientation shifted the emphasis of the Carter Administration on human rights issues, to concerns for regional security and stability. The Carter Administration had sought to promote change through strong condemnation of the Pretoria regime's apartheid policy and the threat of economic sanctions. For Ronald Reagan, however, South Africa was a "friend and ally". A few days after his inauguration, President Reagan asked", Can we abandon a country which has withstood with us in every war we have fought, a country that strategically, is essential to the free world".

South Africa, now, as ever, presented serious dilemmas for America's policy makers. As Crocker wrote, "in political terms South Africa is not embraceable without our incurring massive diplomatic damage and risking severe domestic polarisation". But instead of seeking escape in disengagement, leading to an alignment with the forces of revolution, policy makers like Crocker suggested for broader association with South Africa. He noted, "For the West to write off South Africa (prematurely) would be an action


of the "highest moral cowardice". He maintained that quiet persuasion could better protect U.S. interests in Southern Africa while more effectively encouraging the government of the Republic of South African to abandon its racial policies.

This thinking of Reagan Administration was based on three central premises. The first was that evolutionary change was still more probable than revolutionary cataclysm. And that United States could contribute to the first in a way, that it could not to the second.

Second, the change that the United States hoped would come about through government initiative, rather than in response to the initiative of others. However, they were unlikely to come without some degree of outside interaction. External events and policies had always played a major role in South African history, often a significant one. This was likely to be the case, more than ever, as power began to ebb from the government, into the hands of the non-white community. From that analysis Reagan Administration concluded "what is needed is clear Western readiness to recognise and support positive movement and engage credibly in addressing a complex political agenda".


5. Crocker op. cit. no. 1, p. 324.
Crocker's third contention was that significant changes had already taken place for which Botha government had received little international credit and to which the west had made little if any contribution. He argued that by turning its back on the internal dynamics of reform, Washington had recently forfeited whatever little influence it had once enjoyed. Earlier Crocker had developed this point by criticising the Carter Administration. He criticised Carter Administration for its profound tactical confusion. He maintained that Carter Administration gave every appearance of being uncertain in its own mind whether it wanted South Africa to find out its own solutions or wanted to force South Africa to accept solutions of America's choosing.

Given that the main objective of American policy was not to provoke South Africa into retreating into the "lagger" but to help it find a way out. How could this be done? Crocker went some way towards providing an answer by criticising the Carter Administration for focusing on the wrong issue—the ultimate goal, rather than the process of getting there. He wrote, "probably change would only arise from hundreds of decisions, many drawn out negotiations,

and even a combination of violent and non-violent actions”.

Clearly Reagan Administration believed that it was in America’s interest to foster and support reform and to recognise that in its absence America’s interests would suffer most. It maintained that task while difficult was not impossible.

Crocker’s entire perspective of the viability of constructive engagement was rooted fundamentally in his belief that the new government under the leadership of Prime Minister P.W. Botha was significantly different from other more orthodox post-war South Africa leaders. He wrote “Over the past five years and especially since Botha took office in 1978, the obscure politics of Afrikanerdom have become more pragmatic and seemingly rational, less tribal and ideological”.

He argued that leading Afrikaner elites were recognizing that policy of apartheid had proved to be unworkable. Consequently, they were striking for purposeful change. To this, he dubbed as "political coup". As Crocker observed, “Prime Minister P.W. Botha and his senior sup-

7. Chester A. Crocker, op. cit. no. 1, p. 327.
8. Ibid., p.328.
porters have been carrying out the equivalent, in Afrikaner nationalist terms of a drawn out coup d'etat with which they will build a political apparatus capable of autocratic change."

Hence Crocker suggested that as long as South Africa appeared to be attempting to move away from its racist system of government, the United States should not concentrate on coercive methods. Rather it should assist in the creation of domestic, regional and international conditions that would make it possible for the South Africa government to move in a positive direction. Crocker wrote to Haig, in this spirit, "We can cooperate with a society undergoing constructive change".

In his judgment, this objective could be best accomplished by "working with the regime rather than against it". He argued that only by increasing the contacts between the two countries rather than the distance between them could the United States ever expect to influence South Africa. This thinking of Crocker echoed the option postulated by Roger Morris. He had postulated that:

"We can by selective relaxation of our stance towards the white regime encourage some modifications of their current racial...policies, help direct the two groups together and exert some influence on both for peaceful change. Our tangible interests form a basis of our contacts in the region".

In the early days of 'Constructive Engagement' Botha appeared to be impervious or at least capable of outsmarting, the increasingly assertive South African right wing. It composed mostly of disaffected members of the ruling National Party. Reinforcing all this was the widespread impression that the South African business community was poised to play a more active role in setting the pace of reform and determining the country's future. It was also being encouraged to do so by the Afrikaner dominated political establishment. After the uprisings of 1976, business leaders had established new foundations that would attempt to improve the lives of black people. At a widely publicised meeting in Johannesburg in 1979, Botha had explicitly asked the captains of South African business and industry to help him lead the country along a new political path.

They had, responded enthusiastically.


The Reagan administration seemed to believe that with its domestic situation under control, South Africa with American backing could also play the role of a regional power promoting peace. Once Namibia had achieved independence, other regional tensions would also be reduced. The State department hoped that recalcitrant South African whites would see the advantage of peaceful coexistence with neighbouring black ruled countries.

Such thinking, of course, meant a break with the secrecy and covert diplomacy of the Nixon years and radical departure from the old attempts to mislead the Congress. In calling for an open approach Crocker was profoundly aware of the severe penalties Nixon had eventually incurred for what he termed "the executive hijacking of policy:

**Forms of American Intervention**

As for the form of Constructive Engagement the White House had no truck at all for the punitive measures like military overthrow or economic sanctions. Policy makers were convinced that negative sanctions would be worthless as an instrument of political influence. Instead


of breaking the impasse in South Africa, they would merely stiffen white resistance and provide South African government, legitimacy for its repressive actions.

The pivot on which their assessment was based was that sanctions had worked only when the sanctioned state was weak. Contrary to it, they argued that South Africa was not as riddled by insoluble contradictions as Pretoria's enemies believed. The underlying reality was strength, rather than weakness. Crocker believed that the balance of coercive power remained overwhelmingly in favour of the whites, both domestically and regionally. Domestically, it implied that blacks lacked sufficient resources to overthrow the apartheid system. There was little likelihood that this would change soon. As Crocker observed, "the attitudinal ingredients may be there but the physical ones are not".

Moreover, it was asserted that South Africa was in a position to suppress any threatening group. South Africa was the strongest military and economic power on the Southern African subcontinent. Hence it could withstand economic sanctions and arms embargoes. At any given time it had over 60,000 servicemen on active duty and another 100,000-150,000 trained active reservists could be quickly called.

up. South Africa's active police force numbered some 35,000 and commanded 90,000 Home Guard. The South African Defence Force with varied and sophisticated armaments, had been trained for several years in coordinated land sea and air exercises to defend the country against conventional and guerrilla attack. Moreover, according to Chester Crocker South Africa's defence spending in 1967 accounted for one-third of all military expenditure in Africa (including Egypt). In terms of the indigenous manufacture of licensed or locally designed defence, equipments, it ranked with such states as Brazil, Argentina, India and Israel as a leading Third World arms producer.

Economically South Africa remained the most powerful and advanced country in the region, with 7.5 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's population, South Africa controlled one third of the region's gross product. In 1983, per capita income of $2490 was more than six times the average for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, South Africa was the only the Sub-Saharan African country, in the World Bank's category for "upper middle income developing economies".


18. Mark A. Uhlig op. cit. no. 12, p. 226.
South Africa had created a diverse economic base. In 1980, manufacturing generated almost 22% of South Africa’s gross domestic product, while mining generated almost 19 22.2%. South Africa accounted for 77% of the total GNP (1980), 77 percent of the electricity generated, 97% of the coal mined and 98% of the iron ore mined in the region.

The Reagan administration argued that this fundamental economic strength had given South Africa an impressive abilities to cope with economic pressures. With this being the case, policy makers of Reagan, Administration were tentative about pushing hard for sanctions.

Regarding economic sanctions Reagan Administration acknowledged that any interference in trade and finance would have severe consequences for the Republic. For example, according to Prof. Spandau, a 50% effective embargo on exports could do considerable damage to the South African economy. Taking 1976 as base, year his estimates indicated that white unemployment could increase by 2,55000, the figure for black unemployment 860,00. Prof. Spandau also maintained that if 50 percent of long term foreign investment was cut off, estimates indicated that the GDP would decline by about R 286 million. The expected impact on


20. Ibid.
unemployment was more severe.

Nevertheless, policy makers argued that the cost of applying economic sanctions were too high to be thought of as a viable strategy. They maintained that stringent economic sanctions would hurt non-white more than the whites and the consequences of it wouldn’t remain confined to the economy of Republic but the neighbouring countries too could not escape its possible fall outs.

Approximately 400,000–5000,000 foreign labourers were employed in South Africa at any given time. During 1978 i.e. approximately 35000 workers from Botswana, 1,55,000 from Lesotho, 14,000 from Swaziland, 27000 from Zimbabwe and 50000 from Mazamique worked in South African mining, industrial and agricultural sectors. The income of these migrant Labourers was remitted to their families in their countries. It not only earned their countries of origin foreign exchange, but had become essential to their development. A wide ranging economic boycott could result in increased unemployment among South Africa blacks. This would have catastrophic consequences on neighbouring countries and would undoubtedly affect their internal political


stability. Having considered these realities of sanctions, President Reagan stated in his Executive Order of 1985: 

"our aim cannot be to punish South Africa with economic sanctions that would injure the very people we are trying to help".

Neighbouring countries were dependent on South Africa to handle bulk of their imports and exports, to buy food and machines and for financial support. In case of ban on South African exports, most of the states concerned would be forced to purchase their requirements much more expensively from Europe and elsewhere. This would have increased their export bills and delayed deliveries due to longer distance involved.

It would also result in the loss of an import-export market for black Africa's agricultural products. Certain goods could prove difficult to dispose off elsewhere as primary products were subject to considerable international competition. Landlocked Lesotho could even find itself compelled to bring goods in by air. Considering that it was one of the poorest states in the world, the effect of sanctions against South Africa would have jeopardised Lesotho's economy very severely.

The Reagan Administration argued that even West too could not have remained unaffected. The reduction in trade would hurt the industrialised countries as well.

For the West it would paralise the flow of critical minerals, - not only from South Africa but also from the neighbouring countries given the risk that violence would spread throughout the region. They argued that although Western nations would certainly survive a short disruption of supplies by consuming strategic stockpiles, using substitute materials and curtailing non-essential uses, nevertheless even in an optimistic scenario such a disruption would be very costly. It could ultimately place the West in a very vulnerable position vis-a-vis the Soviet Union as the only major alternative supplier.

The Rockfeller Foundation funded "Study Commission on U.S. Policy Towards Southern Africa" looked at this problem in detail. The Commission found that South Africa's commodities, chromium, platinum, vanadium and manganese were of great importance to the United States. They are essential for many important industrial and defence uses. The Commission concluded that if the stoppage of those minerals occurred for five years or more, larger problems would arise. It expressed fear of being beholden to the Soviet Union, if South Africa's supplies were to be cut.

Taking together, U.S. dependence on few key miner-


25. Ibid. 
als and the Soviet Union's position as the primary alternative supplier, it was not surprising that from the very beginning Reagan Administration was reluctant to use stringent measures against South Africa. During his initial years Reagan highlighted this theme. In a televised interview he asked, "Can we abandon a country that has stood by us in every war we have fought, a country that is strategically essential to the free-world in its production of minerals that we all must have.

Reagan Administration resisted the attempt to use punitive measures against South Africa on another ground, too. They maintained that such measures might result in hardening the position of white regime in South Africa and thereby closing the door for any possible compromise. Reagan Administration argued that since sanctions would by definition be externally imposed, they would undoubtedly feed the delusion that South Africa's troubles were caused by foreign agitators. Thus, the intensified misery, and the radicalisation of the black population could well be matched by increased white intransigence - a recipe for civil war, not peaceful change.

More damaging would be the retaliation invited by such an explicitly hostile foreign policy. South Africa


could retaliate against sanctions by nationalising foreign investments, defaulting on its international debt and possibly lashing out at its vulnerable neighbours to its North. Thus Crocker wrote, "South Africa's capacity to cope with destructive action is finite but its ability to pervert our purposes and produce unintended and unforeseen consequences is not". Thus, it is hard to imagine that United States, with significant economic and political interests in Southern Africa, had taken such risks lightly.

Reagan Administration countered the pro-sanctions lobby with the argument that engagement in the economy of South Africa could be constructive for the majority of blacks. It was based on their view that industrial growth and commercial activity were the real engine of social change and political revolution. This presumed relationship between economic growth and political change was not simply a causal linkage but a theoretical statement about development and modernization. A change in a set of factors - in this instance, growth in the domestic product, the aggregate wealth, the composition of capital and the labour force - produces changes in another set of social and political factors, including the social welfare, income share, social relations, bargaining position, and political

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standing of various racial groups.

The development model most frequently advanced to accommodate the economic-political linkage was the dual economy. In this context, South Africa was divided into two separate economies— one organised around capitalist production and the other being feudal. Labour is attracted to the modern sector because of marginally higher wage rates and widespread unemployment in the traditional sector. Labour surplus conditions in the traditional economy tends to flood the developing urban labour markets. Growth under conditions of unlimited supplies of labour produces short term increases in wage employment. With accelerating growth and an increasing capacity to absorb labour in the modern sector, the labour surplus is progressively exhausted. It results in higher wage rates, lessening inequalities between the modern and traditional sectors and an enhanced bargaining position for black labour.

The belief in the economic-political connection and ameliorative effects of growth found support in scholarly literature too. Michael O'Dowd, underlined the theoretical foundations for such optimism. He asserted that


capitalism and free enterprise were equalising factors which were breaking down barriers to the mobility of labour and compartmentalization of society. It was providing a strong tendency to overcome and eliminate cultural factors in the market by creating pockets of privileges. He noted that the government was constantly being required to shore up the colour bar, up against the forces of capitalism.

He explained further: "I believe that South Africa will follow the normal pattern of political, social and economic development from minority rule, through a liberal era, to welfare state and that in the process the 'race question' will be solved or perhaps will turn but never to have existed except as a cover for economic cleavages".

These arguments about economic growth, investment and political change had achieved a special resonance among American policy makers on South Africa. Most of the policy makers claimed that black South African labour would benefit from the U.S. investments' contribution to growth in the South African economy.

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They believed that with vast sums pouring in to expand the economy, the need for skilled labour would be greater than supplied by the white population. In this situation, white trade unions would help the blacks to enter skilled jobs, if there were more jobs than the whites could handle. In view of the fact that basic political change would probably not occur until blacks acquire economic and organisational base, and effectively demand a larger share of political power, it would be a positive contribution. As the economic situation of blacks improved, they would be better equipped to press for social equality. With a greater stake in the system. They would be more likely to rely on peaceful, and orderly methods of social change.

Furthermore, Reagan Administration noted that U.S. corporations doing business in South Africa were helping to improve the lives of black workers employed by them. They cited the case of Sullivan Principles. Which had set out guidelines for American employer practices in South Africa.


34. For details on the Sullivan code of conduct, see Desaix Myers, U.S. Business in South Africa (Bloomington, Indiana University 1980)
ment to black South African workers which included equal pay for equal work and a fair minimum wages. It advocated for increasing number of disadvantaged South Africans in administrative and managerial positions and fair labour practices including the right to form and join labour unions. Additional principles included the desegregation of comfort, and work facilities. Again it called for improving quality of life of workers outside the workplace, through subsidies for housing, recreation, health and educational programmes.

Policy makers hoped that the American firms with these programmes would make a difference in South Africa. As U.S. representative Jack F. Kemp observed "the Sullivan principles are the dagger at the heart of social apartheid". With these policy premises, Reagan Administration promised a solution to many intractable problems of the Southern African region. Most important among them were the problem of Namibia and domestic policy of apartheid.