
The Role of Oil in the US Strategy towards Africa



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Abstract:

The primary dependence on foreign oil supplies presents a national security problem for the United States. Therefore, the American strategy has focused on two main axes: the search for alternative petroleum sources and securing those sources. And since Africa is characterized by abundant petroleum reserves, making it an ideal field for the implementation of relevant American agendas, in terms of exerting influence over African oil, controlling its sources, and utilizing all political, military, and commercial means to obtain it.

key words: American strategy; Africa; Oil; US; African relations.

Introduction:

The American economy is one of the largest economies in the world, accounting for 20.9% of the global GDP. This has positioned the United States as the top consumer of oil worldwide.. According to figures from the US Department of Energy, the United States consumes over 20 million barrels per day, representing approximately 23.9% of the total global consumption. However, the US production is around 8 million barrels per day, which means that the United States imports over 12 million barrels daily.

The heavy reliance of the United States on petroleum imports has made disruptions and instability in major production regions, particularly the Middle East, negatively impact the US economy. In order to ensure control over oil and secure its needs while maintaining global leadership and dominance in the international market, the United States has adopted several policies, and its strategy has focused on two main axes: searching for alternative petroleum sources and securing those sources.

One of the most important alternative sources of oil for the United States is Africa, which has become part of the strategic inventory relied upon by various industrial powers to secure their consumption and developmental needs. Despite the competition over oil resources and revenues in Africa among several countries, including the United States, France, China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Malaysia, India, and Brazil., the United States has been the most prominent in terms of extending its influence and controlling sources. It has employed all political, military, and trade methods to acquire them.

In this research, we are going to study and analyze the role of oil in the American strategy and the extent to which the United States relies on Africa as an important and primary source of its petroleum imports. We aim to understand the policies and approaches adopted by the United States to control and obtain African oil. This will be done by addressing the following question : **What is the impact of oil on the American strategy towards Africa?**

This problem leads to a set of questions, including:

- What are the historical stages and developments in US-African relations regarding oil?
- How does oil influence the American strategy towards Africa?
- What is the significance of Africa as a source of oil for the United States?
- What policies and strategies has the United States implemented to control and obtain African oil?

Study Hypotheses: The study seeks to verify the following hypotheses:

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- Oil plays a significant role in the development of US-African relations.
 - The United States has utilized various political, military, and trade methods to secure oil in Africa and obtain it
 - African oil holds great importance and serves as a significant alternative source for the development of the American economy.

Study Curricula and Approaches: The article relies on a set of scientific approaches that serve the research process and are suitable for presenting and analyzing information. These include the historical approach when studying the evolution of American interest in the African continent and referring to previous stages in the history of US-African relations. The descriptive approach is also employed, focusing on highlighting the role of oil and energy resources in the American strategy and their impact on the US economy. Also, it aims to map oil production in the African continent and emphasize its global significance. Additionally, the comparative approach, by examining, in a comparative manner, the evolution of the American strategy towards Africa and the role of oil in shaping it. And highlighting the differences in the strategies and policies implemented by the United States in the pre-Cold War and post-Cold War periods towards Africa, as well as the variations in these strategies and policies from one African country to another.

1. Development of US Interest in Africa:

American interest in the African continent began during the 1960s, coinciding with the majority of African countries gaining independence. However, the United States' focus on the Cold War and competition with the Soviet Union had a diminishing effect on its African role. (Jassim, 2009, p99)

The primary goal of US foreign policy was to contain communism on a global scale, and American policymakers viewed Africa as a vulnerable and volatile region that could potentially become a field for Soviet ideological expansion, particularly after the end of colonialism and the independence of most African countries. (Magdi,2002,p2)

In this context, the African continent served as a Soviet weapon aimed at the interests of the United States. The American perspective was built on the belief that Soviet objectives revolved around controlling oil resources and precious minerals in Southern Africa. Consequently, the Reagan administration sought to confront Soviet presence along the African coasts through consultation with US allies or unilateral actions.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly known as Zaire) serves as an example of the significance of ideological considerations during the Cold War era. Mobutu received support from the United States, particularly in light of Angola's Marxist orientation since the mid-1970s. In return, US intelligence agencies were

allowed to use Congolese territory to provide support to the UNITA opposition movement in Angola led by Savimbi. (Hamdy Abdurrahman,1999,p31)

Warren Christopher, the former US Secretary of State, explains the meaning as follows: "During the long years of the Cold War, our African policy was not defined based on how we would influence Africa, but rather on what benefits both Washington and Moscow could achieve. It is commendable today that we have moved beyond a phase of adopting policies solely aimed at protecting trade routes close to Africa, regardless of the interests of the African peoples". (Osama, 2014,p165)

After the end of the Cold War, the African continent witnessed a decline in international interest in its issues, especially from the United States, whose Secretary of Defense at the time stated in one of his statements that American interests in the continent had ended. (Abdel-Halim,2014,p143) Until recently, the entire African continent was not at the top of the United States' priorities. In 1998, the US National Security Council considered Africa to be of lesser importance compared to other continents and regions of the world. This assessment of Africa's importance was a result of a report issued by the Department of Defense in 1995, which stated: "US military interests in Africa are extremely limited, and therefore Africa has remained on the periphery of US strategic interests".(Elsayoufi,2008,p92) Instead, attention was focused on Eastern European countries and Central Asia, which had been liberated from Soviet influence. Western aid poured into those countries and regions, and Western interest became concentrated on them. (Hamdi,2013,p28)

This marginalization has manifested itself in two ways in terms of American geostrategic interests. Firstly, it was evident in the connection between Africa and American leadership in Europe, specifically Stuttgart, throughout the post-Cold War period until 2007. Secondly, operationally, it was reflected in the reluctance to directly intervene in wars and internal conflicts in Africa during the 1990s, such as what happened in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It also failed in its intervention in Somalia and was forced to withdraw. (Maslough,2014 ,p229)

However, the US foreign policy discourse towards Africa maintained two important elements, even if symbolically and rhetorically, during the 1990s. Firstly, it emphasized the promotion of democracy and human rights as one of the positive outcomes of the post-Cold War era. Secondly, it highlighted the necessity of adopting economic reform policies, within the framework of what was called political and economic conditionality, which the United States and Western countries exercised more freely towards Africa. (Hamdi,2013,p28)

This low position of Africa on the American priority list quickly changed dramatically after the events of September 11, the preparations for the US war on Iraq, the labor strikes in Venezuela, and the constant threats by its former

president, Hugo Chavez, to cut off oil supplies, in addition to the security disturbances witnessed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2003. The African continent was brought back into the international spotlight, especially in terms of energy supply, and American strategies emerged to replace Middle Eastern oil with reliance on African oil. With President Bush's announcement of his global war on terrorism and his linking of poverty to the spread of terrorism, Africa occupied a prominent position in US strategic thinking. The oil-terrorism duality may indeed be the most significant features of the US political scene in relation to Africa. (Abdel-Halim, 2014,p143)

According to the US Navy's Contemporary Conflict Center (CCC), Africa is seen as a new front in the war against revolutionary Islam. Additionally, the US foreign policy towards Africa, particularly West Africa, is, to a considerable extent, connected to three factors, as noted by the "Contemporary Conflict Center". These factors are the phenomenon of international terrorism, the continuous rise in the importance of African petroleum for American energy needs, and the significant improvement and dramatic expansion of Sino-African relations since the end of the 20th century. (Hamdi,2013,p179)

In general, we can say that US foreign policy towards any region in the world, or a specific country, is subject to various factors that either compel the US to engage or distance itself and ignore it, and Africa is no exception. The variation in US policy towards Africa from time to time and from one country to another is attributed to the recognition of the importance that Africa holds for its interests.

2. The impact of petroleum determinant on US foreign policy towards Africa:

a. African Oil : Production Regions and Its Importance :

The increasing of international interest in the African continent is due to its significant role as a major source of natural resources. Africa has become an important player in the global oil production map, with its production accounting for 11% of the world's output, according to the African Energy Commission. Additionally, Africa's crude oil reserves are estimated to be 8% of the global crude oil reserves, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. The majority of oil reserves in Africa are located in West Africa, specifically in the Gulf of Guinea. (Hanafi,2006,p86)

Africa is divided into four oil regions: North Africa, East and Central Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa.

North Africa includes two OPEC members, Libya and Algeria. Libya's oil reserves are estimated to be around 40 billion barrels, and it produces 1.6 million barrels per day. Algeria's daily production reaches 1.3 million barrels, with reserves of 12.4 billion barrels. Egypt's daily production is approximately 700,000 barrels, with reserves of 2.7 billion barrels. Other oil producers in the region include

Morocco, which produces 300,000 barrels per day and has reserves of 100 million barrels. Tunisia produces 777,000 barrels per day and has reserves of 1.7 billion barrels. However, their production levels are relatively low compared to other countries. (" Map of African Oil Distribution", www.sis.gov.eg/Ar)

In the East and Central Africa region, the prominent oil-producing countries are Sudan, which started exporting oil in 1999, Chad, the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Shabana, 2012, pp78-79) East Africa, except for Sudan, is weak in oil production. Sudan was a significant oil producer before the split (Sudan/South Sudan), producing and exporting light crude. According to the Sudanese Ministry of Energy, its production reached 5 million barrels in 2007, despite internal disturbances in various regions. The confirmed reserves at that time were around 1.25 billion barrels. (Rached Mubarak, <http://research.iaa.edu.sd/>)

In West Africa, the prominent oil-producing countries include Nigeria, Togo, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin, Sao Tome and Principe. The West Africa region is considered one of the most promising areas for oil in Africa, following significant discoveries in the Gulf of Guinea, the coastal strip between Nigeria and Angola. Reports indicate that these discoveries are among the most significant oil finds in the world in recent years. Currently, this region accounts for approximately 70% of African oil production, with a daily production volume of around 9.5 million barrels, which is equivalent to 11% of global production. (Shabana,2012,p79)

Nigeria stands at the forefront of West African countries and is the eleventh-largest oil producer in the world. Its production reached 3 million barrels per day in 2008, and its oil reserves amount to 2.35 billion barrels. The United States is the largest importer of Nigerian oil, importing between 40% and 50% of Nigeria's crude oil production. Nigeria ranks fifth as the largest source of crude oil imports to the United States. The rest of Nigeria's crude oil production is exported to some European and Asian countries, as well as Brazil, South Africa, and others. (Kounsouah, 2012,p26)

Equatorial Guinea has succeeded in increasing its oil reserves to 28.1 billion barrels and its production to 420,000 barrels per day. American companies, which hold the largest number of active exploration licenses in Equatorial Guinea, aim to raise production to 470,000 barrels per day by 2020. (Colin,2004,pp73-76) Gabon has also increased its oil reserves to 5.2 billion barrels, becoming the third-largest oil producer in Africa, with a daily production of 230,000 barrels. Cameroon's oil reserves amount to 85 million barrels, and its daily production is 83,000 barrels. (Abdel-Hamid,2008,p47) Following these countries, there are other countries in West Africa with relatively low production, such as Ivory Coast, which produces 32.9 thousand barrels per day, with reserves of 220 million barrels. Ghana's daily

production is estimated at 8,000 barrels, with reserves reaching 8.5 million barrels. (Hanafi, <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/>)

In Southern Africa, the prominent oil-producing countries include Angola, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Angola has recently become a contested point for global oil companies, particularly American companies, especially after doubling its oil production to reach two million barrels per day, making it the second-largest African producer after Nigeria. Angola exports 40% of its production to the United States, making it the eighth-largest crude oil supplier to the US worldwide. Angola's reserves are estimated at 25 billion barrels. Zambia produces 120,000 barrels per day, while Madagascar produces 90,000 barrels per day. (Khatawi,2010,216)

There are several significant reasons behind the rush for African oil, including the following:

1- African oil is characterized by its diversity, as there are around 40 types of crude oil found on the continent. Most of these types are known for their superior quality due to their lightness and higher proportions of gas and gasoline. (Talaat,2008,p37)

2- The quality of African crude oil is higher compared to the oil produced in Gulf Arab countries. According to petroleum industry terminology, a significant portion of West African production is classified as "light" and "sweet" crude, meaning it is low in viscosity and sulfur content. This makes it perfectly suitable for the needs and specifications of refineries in the East Coast market of the United States, as well as modern refining facilities in general. It can serve as a good alternative to Middle Eastern supplies and assist consuming countries in adhering to environmental conservation legislation, especially in the United States. (Hanafi,2006,p89)

3- Exploiting the Differences in Oil Agreement Conditions: In the Middle East, for example, national oil companies produce and sell oil to foreign consumers. However, in the Gulf of Guinea, foreign companies produce and extract petroleum, selling it to themselves based on production-sharing agreements. Under these agreements, foreign companies receive exploration licenses in exchange for bearing the expenses. They then share the returns with the government after deducting the costs. This arrangement aligns with the limited capabilities of African countries, allowing foreign companies to achieve massive profits. (Ghazvenian,2013,p25)

4- The oil sector on the continent experiences one of the fastest growth rates in the world. Over the past ten years, it has achieved a production growth rate of 30%, compared to 16% in other regions. For example, oil reserves in Africa doubled between 1985 and 2005, reaching an estimated 114.3 billion barrels, representing 10% of global reserves. The Gulf of Guinea alone accounts for over 70% of the continent's oil production and 75% of its reserves. (Talaat,2010,p186)

5- Additionally, African oil is close to the consumption markets in Europe and America. The West Coast of Africa is relatively close to the East Coast of the United States, which reduces transportation costs, especially considering the volatile political situations in the Middle East and the potential disruptions of oil transportation through the Suez Canal. (Hamdi, 2005,p29)

6- Economic considerations include the proximity of the West African coasts to the Eastern American markets, which represent half the distance between them and the Arabian Gulf. This proximity saves shipping time and expenses for American taxpayers. Moreover, transportation in this case occurs in open seas, avoiding the security risks of passing through straits, waterways, and affected land chokepoints, especially the Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal and the Sumed pipeline. (Khatawi,2010,pp212-214)

7- On the other hand, most of these oil reserves are located offshore, reducing the chances of conflicts between oil companies and local populations. This provides a safer environment for exploration and shipping operations, keeping them away from any disruptions on land. This is affirmed by Mr. Robert Murphy, the Foreign Affairs Ministry Advisor for African Affairs, who stated that the oil reserves in the Gulf of Guinea are primarily in the form of "offshore drilling operations" and are shielded from potential political or social disturbances. Political tensions or any other type of conflict rarely take on a regional or ideological dimension that could lead to a new embargo. (Talaat,2008,p76)

b. US Strategy Determinants Towards African Oil :

The 53 countries in Africa possess only 9 % of the world's proven petroleum reserves compared to almost 62 % for the Middle East. But Africa remains largely unexplored and may well be the location of significant future oil and gas discoveries. A U.S. Department of Energy study projected that African oil production would rise 91 % between 2002 and 2025. (David H. Shinn,2007) Africa's deepwater zones have yielded about 7.65 billion boe in new commercial finds since 2019, with 2.9 billion boe per year discovered in 2019, 425 million boe in 2020, 1.135 billion boe in 2021, 1.94 billion boe in 2022 and 1.27 billion boe since the beginning of 2023. (NJ Ayuk,2023) African oil also, tends to be high quality and low in sulfur, making it particularly desirable to refiners. Although much less significant than the Middle East as a source of oil. (David H. Shinn,2007)

Thus, the US administration has turned its attention to revitalizing American policy in Africa and enhancing control over African oil. As a result, American

interests have been distributed across all oil-rich regions and vital minerals. Especially west Africa.

The United States has learned from past experiences the dangers of heavily relying on petroleum imports and lacking control over the global market. This became evident after the establishment of OPEC and the use of petroleum as a political weapon. Furthermore, the political and security instability of major production sources highlights the risks involved. Consequently, the US strategy in Africa focuses on two main pillars: searching for alternative petroleum sources and securing those sources. The abundance of petroleum reserves in the Gulf of Guinea region provides an ideal opportunity for implementing relevant American approaches, whether it's diversifying energy supply sources away from traditional ones or militarily defending those sources. (Khatawi,2010,p216)

1/ Diversifying Petroleum Sources to Mitigate the Risk of Relying on a Single Source:

One of Us's primary energy security concerns has been to diversify its sources of foreign oil. During the 1970s oil crisis, the United States imported one-third of its petroleum. Now, it imports approximately 11.4 million barrels per day of petroleum (which includes crude oil and petroleum products), amounting to 45 percent of all petroleum consumed in America. Despite the fact that America's reliance on foreign oil has decreased since its peak in 2005, it is still vulnerable to supply disruptions, oil price shocks and OPEC supply squeezing. For Washington, the need to decrease its vulnerability to foreign oil is a principle national security interest, and the solution lies in diversifying imports away from overreliance on any one region. (Chris Mansur,2012)

Therefore, it is necessary to manage most of the US petroleum needs from abroad. Currently, the United States obtains 53% of its needs from foreign sources, and this percentage is expected to rise to 62% by 2024, assuming that US consumption continues to increase at expected rates. This implies a 50% increase in US imports, from 11.5 million barrels per day in 2000 to 17.7 million barrels per day over the next two decades. (Talaat,2008,p64)

To meet long-term needs, Spencer Abraham, the Secretary of Energy, informed the Congressional Foreign Relations Committee in June 2002 that the United States should expand and diversify its energy sources. This means that securing its energy flows requires reliance on a range of sources rather than a specific one. The urgent need for additional energy sources is pressing, and the American public opposes drilling projects in natural reserves in Alaska, where there is abundant oil. (Talaat,2008,pp18-19)

This explains the adoption of the Bush administration's policy of encouraging increased oil production worldwide to enhance the diversity of available petroleum sources for import. President Bush emphasized this approach

in his annual State of the Union address in 2006, expressing the determination to reduce reliance on 75% of American imports coming from the Middle East and obtain them from alternative sources by 2025, with West Africa being at the forefront. (Talaat,2008,pp64-65)

2/ Defend and secure access to petroleum resources :

The United States' definition of energy security remains unique and distinct, not shared by other major powers. It has evolved as a result of previous experiences and driven by the urgent need for oil. It goes beyond merely seeking petroleum sources; it encompasses securing those sources themselves. The risks it faces are not limited to political decisions opposing governments and relevant organizations, but also include protecting those sources from threats of military attack by competing or hostile forces and unfriendly parties. This definition has gained additional dimensions, both economic, concerning price stability, and strategic, regarding major powers' access to and control or acquisition of those sources. Naturally, these new threats require energy security policies to adopt different approaches and tools. (Talaat,2008,pp60-61)

The new form of American relations with Africa is based on new foundations that focus on investment inflows and improving trade relations primarily, as well as increasing cooperation in agricultural, cultural, health, technological, scientific, and economic fields. In this regard, the United States has taken several steps to strengthen its ties with Africa, in addition to the African tours by President Clinton. Examples include the US-SADC (Southern African Development Community) Forum held in Botswana in April 1999, the enactment of the African Growth and Opportunity Act aimed at increasing trade between the United States and Africa, and the US-Africa Ministerial Conference for the 21st Century held in Washington in March 1999.

And because American control over African oil opens up new markets for American products in the countries of the African continent, the United States has also worked to push Gulf of Guinea countries to increase their oil production. For example, in Nigeria, which supplies America with half of its oil production, American companies have invested over \$7.4 billion to increase its production to 4 million barrels per day by 2010. The United States exerts pressure on the government there to withdraw from OPEC, but Nigeria has rejected the American temptations. Additionally, Washington strongly supports Nigeria's control over the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The United States also imports about 40% of Angola's oil production, where the American company Chevron controls 75% of the oil production. The American administration also seeks to increase Angola's production in the coming years. As for Gabon, which exports 44% of its oil production to the United States, American companies dominate the country's production. In Equatorial Guinea, American companies dominate two-thirds of the country's oil production. (Shabana,2012,p82)

The second axis: Political; where there has been a decline in the discussion about the marginalization of the American administration in Africa, after multiple visits by American officials to the continent. This includes President Bill Clinton's tour of Africa in 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's tour of Africa in the same year, President George W. Bush's meeting with the heads of 11 African countries from Central and West Africa in September 2001, Bush's tours of Africa in July 2003 and late 2008, and Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to Gabon in 2002, which was the first visit by a US Secretary of State to this promising oil-rich country.

In order to achieve its goals, the United States works towards creating a stable political environment in the Gulf of Guinea region by resolving conflicts, as was the case in Angola in April 2002 and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The issue of South Sudan was also resolved in January 2005. (Ramez Amine,2003,p79) It collaborates with others to provide security structures characterized by freedom, peace, and lasting prosperity through three interconnected dimensions:

1. Supporting the leadership role of African states: The United States has focused on selecting a country to lead each regional area, such as South Africa in the south, Nigeria and Senegal in the west, and Ethiopia in the east.
2. Activating the role of non-governmental international organizations and coordinating with European allies to resolve conflicts.
3. Collaborating with capable reform-minded countries in Africa and sub-regional organizations that act as primary administrations to address cross-border threats in a sustainable manner. (Marai,2012,p38)

The third axis involves enhancing the military presence of the United States in Africa. Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recognizes the possibilities and risks of military clashes and intense competition over resources. Accordingly, the United States is restructuring and organizing different regions of the world based on the "flow of oil and gas" and utilizing its military apparatus. (Al-Safer,2009,p79) The reinforcement of U.S. military presence in Africa is carried out through two approaches: bilateral and multilateral.

On the bilateral level, the United States has worked on intensifying its military presence in various regions of the continent. For example, in the Horn of Africa region, the United States entered into several bilateral agreements with Eritrea, Djibouti, and Ethiopia in December 2002. These agreements allow the U.S. military freedom of movement in these countries to ensure the security of the Red Sea and confront what they refer to as terrorist organizations. (Shabana,2012,p85)

Among the agreements signed is the one between the United States and Nigeria in 2005 to secure navigation in the Niger Delta region. Additionally, agreements were reached with Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea, allowing U.S. forces to use airports in those countries. (Shabana,2012,p81)

In response to the increasing importance and value of Africa to US national security, particularly the growing interests and strategic concerns in the Gulf of Guinea, the establishment of a dedicated command for military operations in Africa is a clear indication that the United States is shaping its current interests on the continent by linking the issues of oil and terrorism or energy and security. These two aspects have become two sides of the same coin for US national interest. Military operations required to protect these resources are concentrated in areas with weak governance, according to the US vision, which necessitates establishing military cooperation to combat existing or potential terrorist activities. Some analysts argue that President Bush's linking of access to oil and natural gas resources in Africa with US national interests was the primary motivation behind the creation of AFRICOM. (Talaat,2008,p26)

Conclusion:

In this paper, we attempted to examine how oil becomes a determinant of the American strategy towards Africa.:

- 1- Oil plays a central role in shaping the US strategy towards Africa. It is a key determinant in the development of relations between the United States and African nations.
- 2- The United States has employed a range of political, military, and trade tactics to secure and access oil supplies in Africa. This highlights the strategic importance the US places on maintaining a reliable source of petroleum from the continent.
- 3- The economic significance of African oil cannot be overstated. The United States, as a major global consumer of oil, recognizes Africa as an important alternative and valuable source for its petroleum imports. This has influenced the American strategy towards Africa, as securing access to oil reserves is crucial for ensuring energy security and sustaining economic growth. The pursuit of oil resources in Africa has influenced the geopolitical dynamics between the United States and African countries. It has implications for regional stability, as well as the economic and political relationships between the US and African nations.
- 4- Overall, the role of oil in the US strategy towards Africa cannot be overlooked. It has shaped policies, influenced diplomatic engagements, and impacted the economic interests of both the United States and African countries.

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