

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Considering Public Diplomacy as Africa Boils ^[1]

Americans' attention rarely strays beyond domestic discontents these days, and when it does extend overseas it is most likely to settle on the endless war in Afghanistan or the challenging puzzle that is China.

Meanwhile, as has almost always been the case, events in Africa receive little notice. This is a particularly perilous time there. To cite just one of many hotspots, Mali, it is increasingly clear that conflict on the continent is becoming more pervasive and bloodier, with political repercussions that extend far beyond Africa. In Northern Mali, Al Qaeda-affiliated fighters impose Taliban-type rules on civilians, hold several Western hostages, and have proved so much of a regional menace that Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has threatened to call for a pan-African military force that would go into Mali to battle the militants.

This intensified fighting proceeds against the backdrop of increased competition between the United States and China for the favor of African governments and access to their resources. China recently promised to provide \$20 billion in loans to Africa during the next three years and dangled the prospect of moving some of their industries to Africa. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, playing on Africans' suspicion of China's motives, said while visiting South Africa that the United States is "working to build a partnership that adds value rather than extracts it."

So, we have superpowers dancing their minuet and Taliban wannabes inflicting misery. Sometime soon, global and local tensions are likely to make African instability unmanageable. The last things America and the rest of the world need now are another economic crisis and another conflict requiring military intervention.

Public diplomacy cannot, by itself, solve such huge problems, but it can put in place building blocks on which larger policy initiatives can be constructed. For instance, the U.S. Embassy in Mali earlier this year offered public diplomacy grants for local programs that would do the following:

- Encourage participation in democratic processes, especially by youth and women;
- Promote moderate voices;
- Reinforce mutual understanding between Mali and the United States;
- Build communication capacities in investigative journalism, social media networking, creative use of mobile phones, and other such fields.

These programs would strengthen Malian society and win friends among the many Malians who want no part of the insurgency and prefer to see their country strengthen itself without becoming economically or militarily dependent on outsiders.

Public diplomacy's great value in such cases is that rather than relying on the grand abstractions of "policy," it connects directly with individuals, providing tools they can use in bettering their lives. Now is the time to step up such efforts, strengthening civil society within Mali and elsewhere in Africa. Doing so will give Africans a better chance of meeting the huge challenges they face, and that is clearly in the strategic interest of the United States.
