

Conflicts Forum

Disarmament and Demilitarization in Southwest Africa

An Interview with Professor Chester A. Crocker

Conducted by Mark Perry on July 25, 2007

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AMERICAN foreign policy specialist and former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, was the lead senior State Department official engaged in negotiations with Cuba, Angola and South Africa on the resolution of the conflict in Namibia during the Reagan Administration. A graduate of Ohio State University, Professor Crocker received his doctorate from the School of Advanced International Studies.

As Chairman of Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential election campaign's Africa working group, Professor Crocker sought to transform US policy in Southwest Africa -- away from confrontation and towards what he called "constructive engagement." More specifically, he proposed to link Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Over the next years, and after intense diplomatic maneuvering, Assistant Secretary Crocker oversaw the implementation of UN Resolution 435 -- the granting of Namibian independence. On December 22, 1988 it was decided that Cuban troops would withdraw from Angola and South African troops would withdraw from Namibia. Soon thereafter, the South African government began its negotiations with Nelson Mandela that, eventually, brought an end to apartheid.

Conflicts Forum's Director, Mark Perry, sat down with Professor Crocker on July 25, 2007, to review these events and assess Professor Crocker's opinions on the implementation of UN Resolution 435.

Mark Perry: Let's talk a little bit about your experience with United Nations Resolution 435 and your experience as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa with the Reagan administration. You were heavily criticized for your policy of what you called "constructive engagement" -- that is to say, the administration's belief that it could solve the Namibia conflict by opening more broadly to South Africa. In retrospect, do you feel vindicated now? Do you believe now that you followed the right policy then? Those are the first two questions. And a follow-up is whether you believe that seeking regional solutions to national conflicts is the best policy to follow with the kinds of problems that the U.S. now faces -- particularly in the Middle East.

Chester Crocker: There's no question that one can't help but feel vindicated by the policy because it worked, and it worked in a sequence that was the right sequence, namely the regional issues first followed by the internal Namibian issues. When you strip away all the regional excuses then it becomes possible for countries to face their internal problems -- regional first and then internal was the sequence that we used. We didn't invent that sequence. We did some consultations and we talked to a number of African leaders and it was Julius Nyerere -- at the time Chairman of the Front Line States -- who said to me: "we have just managed to get Zimbabwe free, next item on the agenda in southern Africa is Namibia, not South Africa, not apartheid. This doesn't mean we don't

want you to criticize apartheid, but you've got to focus, you've got to get Namibia, only you can get Namibia and that's the next sequence." He was uneasy about the Angolan linkage, but he understood that we were going to engage on our terms or we weren't going to engage at all. So I think he got that point. I felt over the next seven years that I was pursuing Nyerere's advice in the sequencing of this.

MP: Zimbabwe's freedom, its independence, clearly posed a threat to South Africa -- or at least they thought it posed a threat to them. Perhaps they could see the end of apartheid coming. They thought that these independence movements in Africa posed a threat to their system of governance. Did they dig in their heels on Namibia after that?

CC: No, they were quite happy, initially, to have us redefine the inherited Namibian diplomacy as expressed in Resolution 435. This gets a little complicated, and I don't know how much detail you want, but we inherited from the Carter administration Resolution 435. It was a brilliant plan, the only problem was that it had a snowball's chance in hell of being implemented. Especially by the South Africans, because they saw nothing in it for them. We said: "We're not interested in banging our heads against a wall for nothing" and just, you know, pleading with the South Africans to decolonize a piece of ground larger than Texas. In exchange for what? From the South African nationalist Afrikaner perspective, the region looked threatening. And especially it looked threatening as you looked up at Angola, which was the only place where there was a significant conventional combat presence -- and that was Cuban, not Angolan. So we also had our own agenda. So we said: 'look let's do this in a way that gets foreigners out of everyone's kitchen and get Cubans out of Angola, get South Africans out of Namibia *and* Angola,' and that was the way that we approached the problem.

MP: So getting the Cubans out of Angola was 'what was in it' for South Africa?

CC: What was 'in it' for South Africa was getting the region to be a non-threatening region. And they may have also thought that we'd never succeed. So there may have been a bit, from their perspective, a sense of: "oh, these Americans are here to negotiate, and this is a very ambitious process that they've launched, and this is going to take some time." And they may have seen this as a way of postponing the inevitable, but if they thought they were going to out-manuever us, they thought wrong.

MP: I notice that in the final kind of heated moments of Geneva, and even during the more substantive talks over the seven years of negotiations over Namibia, that the Southwest Africa People's Organization -- SWAPO -- really wasn't a factor. That it was Angola, Cuba, and South Africa that were the major negotiators. I am surprised by this.

CC: In the first two years of the Reagan Administration, SWAPO was a factor in two ways and then of course it became a factor at the very end -- in the final months of '88 and early '89. It became a factor in 1981 and 1982 in that whenever we went to Windhoek we talked to the internal parties, the non-military parties, and we would simultaneously engage in discussions with SWAPO internal people; they had internal people and they had SWAPO leaders and people, of course, in Angola. And we would talk to them in both places. We were not prepared to give any political party in Namibia the status of party at the table. And you ask me 'why?' And the answer is: 'because there would have been no limit to the number of parties we would have had at that table.' And we would have had an endless contest with all the neighbors and with South Africa about which one should be at the table. SWAPO would have said 'No other parties can be there in our terms, they can only be there as part of the South African delegation.' South Africa would have said 'Well to hell with you, if you want to be there you'll be there as part of the Angolan delegation.' So it would have been a procedural nightmare.

Secondly, we didn't want to get involved with any internal parties when it came to Angola. We weren't there yet. With the internal conflict in Angola it would have raised the issue of UNITA [The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola] being at the table, or the ANC [the African National Congress] being at the table. We weren't there yet. So, we approached this as a state-to-state thing, a regional process, knowing that the Front Line States were talking hourly to SWAPO and SWAPO was giving them their views and that we were getting them back through the Front Line states. So unlike the Middle East example, the intimacy of Front Line States/SWAPO communication at certain stages was really very real, it was real-time.

Another place where we negotiated with SWAPO was over the so-called constitutional principles that were written into the agreements. And we negotiated in New York with a delegation of Front Line states and SWAPO being in the room for about two to three months in 1982. SWAPO was witting to that, it went along with it, but it wasn't a question of negotiating directly with SWAPO -- for the reasons I've indicated.

MP: This wasn't a matter of 'conferring legitimacy' on SWAPO, you weren't worried about that?

CC: Well we were. Because the South Africans would find that unacceptable and would therefore insist on having other Namibian parties being given some legitimacy, too, which creates a fight.

MP: And South Africa had their own Namibian parties, their proxies.

CC: Yes. Exactly. The Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, or DTA as it was called, and a bunch of others, lots of others: some of them ethnic, some of them Afrikaans-speaking, some of them Ovambo-speaking or Herero speaking. There were many, many such political parties.

MP: Was SWAPO comfortable with their proxies acting on their behalf?

CC: We didn't give them any choice. But they had their means of influence. They had a person who was U.S.-educated with an American wife sitting in New York who was a world-class diplomat as a SWAPO observer at the United Nations. This guy would sometimes run circles around us -- he was that good. And he was very thick with all the Africans, with all the Front Line States, with the Soviets, with the East Germans, who of course were often the ones developing some of the talking points. The East Germans were very active, their lawyers were good. Within the UN secretariat

MP: That's surprising to hear. Because the material on this, the official records and much of the diplomatic writings about SWAPO seems to suggest that they were very good internally, very good in Angola, very good in Namibia, but that diplomatically they weren't that good. But this turns that on its head. You are saying they were very capable of representing themselves well.

CC: They were. The issue was: where were they going to do the real decision-making and the real negotiation with their Front Line brothers. And there were options for that: Angola, which was probably the least pleasant -- Angola was a police-state, it still is, but it was very much a police-state; they (SWAPO) didn't have the capacity to be totally free in Angola. They depended on Angolan hospitality to such an extent. And Zambia, where they were welcomed and where they had offices because that became the chairman of the Front Line States -- Kenneth Kuanda became chairman after Nyerere passed from the scene. So they could interface with the Front Line States there whenever Kuanda called a meeting or they could interface in New York. And sometimes the Front Line had very good people in New York, especially when we were actively negotiating and they would send good people and SWAPO would send good people. So we got to know them in NY, not just their UN rep, but heavy hitters.

So they were capable. Let me put it to you this way: UN Resolution 435 was one of the most elaborate gifts ever given to a liberation army. If you know SWAPO's history and its make-up, as I'm sure you do, and realize it is the voice of the Ovambo people, who are 75-80 percent of Namibia. There was never any question that if you got a free and fair election they would win, with international observers and lots of foreign presence. So from our stand point, what were saying, what we spent seven years doing is: let's create the conditions for the implementation of Resolution 435. We don't need to negotiate 435 over again, it was already negotiated, by my predecessor Don McHenry who you have probably spoken with as well.

MP: Could we talk a little bit about Western Contact Group and its role in this. When you came in as Assistant Secretary in 1981 was this primarily an American initiative and did the Western Contact Group just follow along? Or were you involved in two or three negotiations -- a negotiation with the Front Line States, a negotiation with the Western Contact Group [the United States, Canada, France, Great Britain, and the Federal Republic of Germany), a negotiation with the UN, and a negotiation with the South Africans?

CC: It was a series of concentric circles. Absolutely. To say nothing of the negotiations within the Reagan administration. We inherited the Contact Group from the previous administration. The British who always looked at us, then and now, as an object for requiring advanced toilet training skills, persuaded us in the early months of the Reagan administration that we would need to contact them; and they were right. It gave us a broader base diplomatically. It enabled us to cover the Front Line States and other parts of Africa and internationally with not just the Americans speaking but a coalition of the willing that had a history and had a UN basis (i.e., UNSCR 435) so it gave us some legitimacy. But it was a full time job just negotiating inside the Contact Group. Whenever the French got 'shirty' with us the Canadians would look on with some degree of envy and awe at the way the French mistreated us.

MP: Things haven't changed. But let me change the subject and shift a bit to the implementation of the accord and the return of SWAPO and SWAPO cadre to Namibia and the question of disarmament and demilitarization. There was, for many years during these negotiations, a demand on the part of the United States -- and the Contact Group -- that SWAPO would have to disarm prior to a final settlement. And that requirement was never implemented, but it slowly disappeared after a final settlement was put in place. At the same time, there was no commensurate demand that the South African forces disarm or leave the country. To be more exact, in the end SWAPO agreed to disarm prior to being repatriated -- but it was only when South Africa said that they would leave the country and it was only after a political agreement had been signed. Can you reflect on this a little bit and whether you think these kinds of movements should be required to disarm and what that implies.

CC: What SWAPO was asking for, initially was the right to come in with its arms, into Namibia once D-Day occurred -- to come across from Angola and Zambia and bring their forces into Namibia, so that they would be having their army and then South Africa would have its army -- both confined to bases and under international supervision -- while the 435 clock was rolling. The objection to that, which didn't originate with us, was that that would imply that SWAPO had a military presence inside of Namibia. And having a military presence in Angola and Zambia is a totally different issue than having a military presence in Namibia.

MP: They clearly did have one in Angola.

CC: They did, and it was recognized that they did, and there was a war over it. And South Africa went after them and they went after South Africa and so you had a counterinsurgency war here. But SWAPO never liberated a square inch of Namibian territory. They never possessed anything in terms of Namibian sovereign territory. And that principle was very important in South African thinking. Because as soon as the clock started ticking on 435, South Africans would have to be confined to base. And what they wanted was to see SWAPO confined to base north of the border and come across without their arms.

So our policy was partly a reflection of geopolitical reality: there was simply no SWAPO military presence on a standing basis inside of Namibia. There were raids, but they were cleaned up and beaten back. So that principle was very central in South African thinking. Our view was that, look, South Africa is getting out of this territory if this agreement is ever reached, so what's the issue? SWAPO will come back and its cadres will form the basis of a new national army. There was never any doubt that the People's Liberation Army of Namibia -- the PLAN -- would become the core of the new national army of an independent Namibia. But we said: 'you can't come across with your arms during the implementation of the ceasefire agreement.'

MP: What do you say to the SWAPO argument that 'we simply don't trust the international community's ability to confine South African forces to a base while our cadre are disarmed and therefore vulnerable to these people?'

CC: Well their cadres would be confined north of the border, they would not be disarmed. That's one aspect. So they weren't being asked to bury the gun, they were being asked to stay out of Namibia as military units. Not as people, but as military units. That's a very important distinction.

MP: You have said that it was your belief that once the regional difficulties had been cleared up, that South Africa could focus on its internal problems. You seem to imply that there's a link between the resolution of the Namibia conflict and South Africa's ability to end apartheid.

CC: Yes, well I do in terms of historical sequence. Because what happened -- partly for the reason that we had this great breakthrough, partly because of the evolution in Castro's thinking, partly because of Gorbachev -- was that the South Africans lost their enemies. They lost their external excuses. It made it possible for them, with their new leader (Botha¹ would never have done this) but De

¹ Pieter Willem Botha (January 12, 1916 – October 31, 2006), commonly known as "PW" and Die Groot Krokodil (Afrikaans for "The Big Crocodile"), was the prime minister of South Africa from 1978 to 1984 and the first executive state president from 1984 to 1989. Botha was a long-time leader of South Africa's National Party and a staunch advocate of racial segregation and the apartheid system. While in power he made some small concessions towards human rights, but he always refused to apologize for apartheid. He refused to testify at the new government's Truth and

Klerk² was capable, made it possible for them to see that you could negotiate from strength, that you could reach over the table and you could gain an ally by engaging with your adversary. It was a marvelous dynamic. But I'm not saying there was a link.

MP: 'You could gain an ally by engaging with your adversary.'

CC: Yes. Because those are the people that really have the leverage. The doves in their ranks are the people that are going to enable you to make history.

MP: That's an extraordinary concept, actually.

CC: Yes, but it's not unusual. It certainly isn't unique to have me saying it. I mean that's exactly the way de Klerk saw it. And he wasn't alone in the Afrikaner ranks. They saw Mandela as the most valuable possession they had under their control. Initially, naively, they thought they could manipulate him. But when they realized they couldn't they still saw him as the most essential person, because he was the guy who could assure a soft landing for them – that would make a future that white South Africans could live in. Anyway, we're getting off the track here.

MP: Well, I'm not so sure we are. I'd like you to extend your thinking a little bit about this into an area that maybe you're not as familiar with as you are with Africa. We, the United States, are demanding disarmament of certain movements and parties in the Middle East as a precondition for talks with them. We are doing this with Hizbollah and Hamas. We say: Hamas must disarm, recognize Israel, agree to all prior agreements with Israel and renounce violence. Hamas has refused. One of the Hamas leaders whom we at Conflicts Forum has talked to told us: 'Once we agree to do that, what's left to talk about?' And our organization simply does not believe, from our experience, that the policy is going to work. Can you reflect on this and --given your experiences with SWAPO, Angola, Cuba, South Africa and the ANC -- can you comment on this?

CC: Well, I don't have some fully articulated Middle East policy to roll out for you, but I've given this a lot of thought. And I've never believed that it's very wise for us to go to liberation groups or guerilla groups, whatever you want to call them – armed rebels – and lay down pre-conditions to them before talking with

Reconciliation Commission and was fined and given a suspended jail sentence for his refusal to testify in relation to human rights violations.

² Frederik Willem de Klerk (born March 18, 1936) was the last State President of Apartheid-era South Africa, serving from September 1989 to May 1994. De Klerk was also leader of the National Party (which later became the New National Party) from February 1989 to September 1997. De Klerk is best known for engineering the end of apartheid, South Africa's racial segregation policy, and supporting the transformation of South Africa into a multi-racial democracy by entering into the negotiations that resulted in all citizens, including the country's black majority, having equal voting and other rights. He shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela in 1993 for his role in the ending of apartheid.

them, as if talking with them was a gift to them. And I'm proud to say that I worked for a Secretary of State who agreed with that philosophy and was prepared to break the taboo on dealing with the Palestinians.

MP: George Shultz.

CC: That's right. He also listened to our counsel on not preventing a dialogue between the US government and the ANC. There were many people in Washington on the right side, on the far-right side of the Republican party, and conservatives generally who were inclined to think that Margaret Thatcher had it right; that we shouldn't talk to the ANC. We didn't support that. We went ahead and talked with the ANC in overt and covert channels, as ironically the South Africans were doing at the same time, but not telling anybody. That's the interesting part of this. They were all over the ANC.

MP: So there were parallel channels, you didn't know about each other.

CC: We didn't know about each other. At least we weren't supposed to know about each other and we generally didn't. But we met with Oliver Tambo and others in London and Washington in 1986 and 1987 at the height of all the controversy here about sanctions and apartheid. We said to them that they were going to have to renounce violence and pursue a political solution with their adversaries the South African government. But we didn't try to tell them that that was a precondition. Our point rather was that it's a package deal. It's going to have to be a package. And the South Africans repeatedly tried to force Mandela to discredit the armed struggle, and to disavow the armed struggle, and to foreswear violence; that was their language. And Mandela repeatedly refused to do so. Stuck to his guns, so to speak, and never did renounce violence prior to being free. They were trying to use him, to force him to discredit or distance himself from the struggle. Even though -- again in the South African case -- the ANC didn't liberate much of anything.

So my conclusion -- to get to your point -- is that all we're doing by adopting this rigid 'no talk unless' stance is giving press conferences to ourselves and to our own body politic and to certain elements of Israeli public opinion, not all, but some, who don't want there to be that negotiation. In my lexicon, laying down preconditions to talking -- no matter who does it -- is an indication of a lack of interest in serious negotiation. It's almost like a litmus test when people start saying: 'Oh of course, as soon as you lay down your guns, or as soon as you withdraw your troops, or as soon as...' That means you're not serious, you're just posturing.

MP: You have written that of your real confidence in the 1980s and your praise for the UN as a potential mechanism for the resolution of conflicts and your faith, then, in the United Nations as a place where things can be done. Do you retain that faith, now?

CC: Yes. Conditional on knowing who's involved. And of course one of the reasons for the faith that I had was the faith that I had that Perez de Cuellar was a straight shooter. That Martti Ahtisaari³ was one of the world's most distinguished diplomats and peacemakers and that if he was Special Representative this thing was going to work. And he had other people working with him. People make a big difference

MP: Namibia was a huge success. But the one thing that sticks in my mind that seems like a minor question in retrospect is 'why the hell was Cuba in Angola?' The standard answer was, 'the Soviets wanted them there.' That does not seem to be the case.

CC: Right. I think that's getting it in reverse. I think Castro really wanted to be there. He wanted a mission of global solidarity with people who were facing 'the struggle' and he loved to take on causes, distant causes, partly because he got his fingers burnt taking on causes in the Caribbean. The power of projecting influence across that distance made him a global player and made alliances for him with the African non-aligned movement. Cuba became a driver in the non-aligned movement as a result of Angola and also Ethiopia in the late 1970s. And the tail has often wagged the dog; I think everyone assumed that Gorbachev told Castro to leave Angola – that's that not true. Castro decided that Cubans could be the real decision-makers in the Angolan war. And Cubans were disgusted with Soviet military tactics in the Angolan war. They would complain to us that the Soviets didn't know how to fight in the struggle in the African bush!

Anyway, the Cubans were feeling their oats back then, I guess, and they still had a few resources. The Cubans were very proud of what they did in that negotiation, because they escalated, they raised the ante as you know, but they raised it. I'll never forget Secretary Shultz saying: 'Crocker, what on earth is going on? Those Cubans think they're going to take on the South Africans?' And I said to him, 'George, you know, South Africans don't have the air power to contest the Cuban jets in the skies. They have the ground forces to wipe the Cubans' clocks if it comes to that, especially if the Cubans cross the border.' So in my view this was going to be like scorpions in a bottle, they're going to try to avoid eating each other, that's kind of the way it played out. Castro in other words was not looking for a big war, he was looking to get out with honor.

MP: In our work with Hizbollah we are working at a program that is not disarmament, they refuse to disarm, and the Bush administration calls Hizbollah a state within a state. The head of external relations of Hizbollah says 'We are not a state within a state we are a state within a non-state. That's why we have our guns.' But they're considering a program of what we call de-militarization. The reconstitution of the Lebanese army that reflects a much more demographically accurate accounting of Lebanon. Now there is a Christian and a Sunni officer

³ Biography/CV of Ahtisaari available at: <http://www.unosek.org/unosek/en/speenvoy.html>

corps and a Shia enlisted corps in a Shia-prominent nation. What would you say are the most important lessons that you've learned that have to be the political walk-ups to doing this and getting it right? Are there magic bullets here, or is this just a hard eight year slog? I look at what you did over a period of eight years and, I'm sorry, and this is going to sound terrible, but this was not the Middle East -- this was *Namibia*.

CC: Yes, Yes. Listen, I teach conflict management on a global basis, that's what my field is and that what's what the books I've edited are all about. Comparative case studies around the world. I think every case is a little bit different, but you need valid negotiating partners who can deliver. What the magic in Namibia that finally turned it was the ability to engage, to get the South Africans to have a valid partner that they could negotiate with and that was the Cubans. The Cubans and the South Africans needed each other; they were each others' lifeline for exit from a war that was too costly. The Angolans were almost observers in this negotiation toward the end, it was fascinating.

Which is why I look at Israel and Syria and think to myself 'why can't that get moving?' Because that is a dialogue of sovereigns, even if not of equals. If that were to move, wouldn't that lead to some other possible things, particularly as far as the occupied territories are concerned? Maybe not Lebanon, Lebanon is a different story. You need someone to engage with, who can deliver something. That is what we had in the regional conflict in Africa.

MP: You used a term: the right point, the perfect point, the melding point, the

CC: The ripe moment?

MP: Yes, the ripe moment. Sometimes things are just not there, yet. But there comes that moment where things seem to come together and you say, as a diplomat, 'this is it. This is the moment.' That clearly happened in Namibia, where you thought: 'We can get this done.' When did that happen? Did you know it at the time?

CC: 'We can get it done,' yes, there was that point. There's a lot of foreplay, a lot of polemics, a lot of testing, a lot of muscle flexing. But I knew when the right moment came. It actually happened in July of 1988. And it happened in a particular juncture, when I was having lunch with a senior Cuban who said to me: 'Why don't the South Africans understand -- we want to leave.'

MP: You knew that?

CC: Yes, and I said to him: 'That's great. You're a nice guy and I probably believe you. But *they've* never heard you say that. And they don't believe it. So your job is to persuade them that that's what you want. Not that you want to stay, and expand, and grow, and take over the region, but that you want to get out.'

And that was the moment. So I coached him, about an hour of coaching, about how to communicate that to the South Africans. It was a marvelous moment. And once he'd done so, the South Africans came up to me afterwards and said: 'Can we take him home with us? They won't believe it if we say it to the boss, but if we can take that Cuban home...' So there are moments like that where you can see something.

MP: These moments often involve the use of the right language.

CC: Yes, well communication in the broader sense, yes and there has to be a degree of sensitivity to the political requirements of the other side.

MP: People have to think they're equals at the table.

CC: Read the New York Statement of Principles of 1988 where the essence of the Namibia- Angola Accords can be contained on one page. It's a statement of equals. It sounds very generic and very principled and high-minded, but everyone's requirements are in it, so it works. But let's go back to the Middle East for a second.

I think the best example to illustrate the point, if you're looking for evidence, is Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland makes it crystal clear that you don't get people to disarm in the absence of the political opening in which they can do so with honor, even while giving up that hated instrument.

Telling Islamist opposition groups that they must pass a U.S. political litmus test on the use or support of violence while trying to isolate the radicals is quite another thing. The record in other regions suggests that successfully pressuring armed militants to abandon violence and participate in democratic elections requires a favorable political climate. I cite Northern Ireland and South Africa as evidence of that sequence. Because I think that once you've got a deal on the table, it gives them something to sell to their supporters.

MP: Thank you Professor Crocker.

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