

What legacy will Barack Obama leave in Africa?

Certainly the West is responsible for some of Africa's difficulties, but Africans themselves are responsible for their fate. Can the vision of the United States help improve its relationship with Africa when competition is so fierce?

By J. Peter Pham

The relationship between the 44th president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, and the African native continent of his father has always been something of a paradox. To be fair to Obama, there were a number of other issues demanding his attention when he took over from George W. Bush, not least of which were America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the worst global economic recession since the Second World War. And while many Africans made an incredible emotional investment in Obama's candidacy, closely following the vicissitudes of the American political process from the moment he first emerged as a realistic contender, it cannot be said that he had ever given indication that he would be as engaged as his legion of fans on the continent imagined.

Obama did make the most of his one brief foray into sub-Saharan Africa [during his first term], a visit to Ghana in July 2009, to deliver a message that perhaps only someone with his unique personal history could have. Addressing the Parliament of Ghana, the American president declared that "Africa's future is up to Africans". Obama went on to tell his audience that they had to take responsibility:

Development depends on good governance. That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, for far too long. That's the change that can unlock Africa's potential. And that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans.

Obama then proceeded to list four critical areas—building and sustaining democratic governments, supporting development that provides opportunity to more people, strengthening public health, and resolving conflicts peacefully—to which he pledged America's support.

This outlook clearly influenced the new administration's official "National Security Strategy of the United States of America", a document which was released somewhat tardily after an extensive review process in the following year. In that paper, Washington's approach to Africa was couched largely in terms of broader development goals, rather than traditional security concerns which were emphasized in earlier strategy documents.

Two years later, as Obama campaigned for reelection, his administration released an official “U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa” document, articulating how it intended to translate critical goals from the speech to the Ghanaian Parliament into action.

Renewed Engagement

Fresh from winning reelection, Obama made a second official journey to the African continent in June 2013, visiting Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania. During the journey the president unveiled a new initiative, called “Power Africa”, that promised \$7 billion over five years, drawn from several government agencies—including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), and the U.S. Export-Import (Ex-Im) Bank—to leverage commitments from the private sector—including both titans of American business like General Electric and African companies Heirs Holdings—with the goal of doubling access to electricity across sub-Saharan Africa. Initially the program will focus on a set of six countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, and Tanzania. During the trip the president also invited African leaders to the first-ever U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington the following year.

Much has been made of the “threat from Beijing” as driving the American administration’s renewed solicitude for Africa, usually with reference to China’s overtaking of the United States as the continent’s largest bilateral trading partner in 2009—a lead that the Chinese have subsequently retained—and the fact that China has been holding regular summits with African states for more than a decade. While both these observations are true, they also require a bit of context. Part of reason that Sino-African trade has boomed is that China has grown and remains heavily dependent on imports of oil and other primary commodities in order to keep its domestic industries running, while part of the reason the volume of U.S.-African trade has stagnated around \$85 billion per year is that new energy production at home, including shale gas, has lessened the amount of energy the America imports, both in total and, more precipitously, from Africa. Nigeria, for example, has fallen in the space of a few years from America’s fourth largest foreign supplier of petroleum to its eighth at the beginning of 2014. Since the middle of that year, its importance as a source for U.S. energy has declined even further as American has virtually ceased importing Nigerian crude.

And while China’s foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to Africa have risen dramatically over the course of the last decade, the continent’s largest sources of FDI remain the United States and France, followed by the United Kingdom, with China lagging far behind all three.

In any event, the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, held in August 2014, turned out to be the largest gathering of African heads of state and government ever convened by an American president as some fifty official delegations, many led by heads of state or government, as well as hundreds of top-level business leaders and civil society representatives converged on the U.S. capital. After a somewhat bumpy start and organizational choices which caused concern

among a number of diplomats and analysts and despite controversy over some of the invitees and their human rights records, the president was able to qualify the effort as “extraordinary” and its results a “success”.

The commitments during the course of the Summit were, indeed impressive, including an additional \$300 million per year in public funding for the year-old Power Africa initiative; \$7 billion in new financing to promote American exports to and investments in Africa as part of the “Doing Business in Africa Campaign”; \$110 million a year for a new “African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership” to build the capacity of African militaries to respond to emerging conflicts; \$65 million in the initial year for a new “Security Governance Initiative” to help an initial six countries (Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia) develop comprehensive security sector governance and accountability mechanisms; and \$2 billion in new funding from the Millennium Challenge Corporation for compacts that facilitate economic growth and poverty reduction in countries that have demonstrated good performance on a series of indicators. In fact, during the Summit, a second, \$489 million compact was signed with Ghana to turn around the West African country’s electricity sector and stimulate private investment.

In addition, at the same time, First Lady Michelle Obama and former First Lady Laura Bush unveiled \$200 million in support for programs fostering improved education, health, and economic opportunity. A number of important technical agreements were also signed at the margins of the Summit, ranging from the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement between the United States and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to provide a coordinated mechanism for engaging on trade and investment issues with the fifteen West African countries that are part of that subregional organization to the U.S.-Morocco Framework for Cooperation aimed at developing Moroccan training experts as well as jointly train civilian security and counterterrorism forces with other partners in the Maghreb and Sahel regions.

In line with the declining American dependence on imports of African hydrocarbons, most of the major deals announced during the Summit’s U.S.-Africa Business Forum revolved around building local energy capacity and other infrastructure construction projects, including hotels. More than anything else—and despite having to compete with news reports of the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa which, unfortunately, coincided with the opening of the Summit—the meeting was nonetheless an occasion to showcase a different narrative about Africa: the story of a continent that is increasingly marked by buoyant prospects and economic dynamism driven, in part, by political reform and improvements in governance.

Likewise policymakers and analysts in Washington have been showing greater sensibility to the common objectives on the continent shared with many of America’s treaty allies and other traditional partners, both in Africa and in Europe. Increasingly, these allies have sought ways to work together to achieve those goals. For example, the links between the United States and Morocco are among the oldest of the America’s diplomatic bonds, with Sultan Mohammed

III being, in 1777, the first foreign sovereign to recognize the independence of the thirteen former British colonies.

However, it is only more recently that the vital role the North African country can play in African security and development has become more fully appreciated by the United States. Following a November 2013 meeting in Washington between President Obama and King Mohammed VI, a joint statement noted that “the two Heads of State were pleased to note their common assessment of the critical role of human and economic development in promoting stability and security on the African continent, and committed to explore in greater detail concrete options for pragmatic, inclusive cooperation around economic and development issues of mutual interest” and committed both countries “to explore joint initiatives to promote human development and stability through food security, access to energy, and the promotion of trade” across Africa.

Prospects Going Forward

President Obama was so enthused by the results of the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit that he announced that the get-together would become a recurring event and said that he would “strongly encourage” his successor to carry on the undertaking.

With both U.S. political parties, Democratic and Republican, under pressure to demonstrate to the electorate ahead of the 2016 presidential election that they are capable of governing, rather than merely obstructing their opponents, there is demand for policy areas where genuine bipartisan consensus can be found and Africa has traditionally stood out as one of those exceptions where there has been broad continuity between administrations. In fact, a number of opportunities are coming up in the Congress that convened in January 2015, including the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), legislation first passed under President Clinton and subsequently renewed under President Bush which substantially lowered commercial barriers with the United States and allowed sub-Saharan African countries to qualify for various trade benefits. AGOA is set to expire at the end of September unless it is reauthorized by Congress and signed by the president.

Another opportunity for bipartisan cooperation is providing adequate resources to AFRICOM, the U.S. Defense Department’s geographic command responsible for implementing whatever military operations are eventually deemed necessary, whether assisting African partners or taking direct action, on the African continent.

The growth and spread across Africa of militant Islamist groups, some with links to Al-Qaeda and even the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; the continuing disintegration of Libya and the increasingly virulent Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria; the burgeoning incidents of maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea; the growth of organized crime and drug trafficking in West Africa—all these and other challenges are major concerns, not only for the countries immediately affected, but also for the United States and its other partners.

What legacy will Barack Obama leave in Africa?

J.P. Pham

Barack Obama did not come into the White House promising the transformation of America's relationship with Africa—the “change we can believe in” slogan of his first presidential campaign referred to domestic concerns—but political dynamics at home as well as geopolitical and economic circumstances abroad are such it may well turn out that the opportunities on the continent provide him with one of the best chances for an achievable, realistic, and lasting foreign policy legacy for which to strive in his remaining time in office.

J. Peter Pham is Director of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center.