Obama and Africa

After Barack Obama's first 100 days in office, Peter J Schraeder searches for indications of how the new US administration might shape foreign policy on Africa. The president's background suggests a generous approach to the continent, but he faces a number of constraints – not least the economic crisis at home and abroad.
IT IS commonplace in the US to provide assessment of a new administration's policies after the first 100 days in office. A common refrain associated with Barack Obama's presidency is that his background and personal connection to the African continent ensure a more proactive and enlightened US foreign policy toward Africa. If history is our guide, however, Africa will remain the region of least concern within the hierarchy of US foreign policy, as the Obama administration by necessity focuses on domestic issues and other regions of perceived greater importance.

Five sets of constraints may limit the manoeuvrability of the Obama administration.

The first is the crisis in the US economy. Obama's number one priority if he wants to be re-elected is responding to this crisis. Not since Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933 has a new president inherited an economy in such disastrous shape. One statistic in particular stands out: the Congressional Budget Office projected in March 2009 that the US would experience a record $1.8 trillion budget deficit in 2009. This domestic crisis will consume a significant portion of the Obama administration's first two years in office, leaving relatively little time for foreign initiatives, and especially the African continent. Requirements of responding to the crisis also mean a lack of financial resources to fund new initiatives in Africa and other regions.

A second potential constraint is Obama's inheritance of a residual fear of another 9/11-type attack. Although subsiding after eight years, especially in the face of the economic crisis, this fear remains within the fabric of US society. The Africa dimension of it

A third potential constraint involves historic White House neglect of the African continent. Throughout the Cold War and its aftermath, presidents traditionally devoted less attention to Africa than other regions of perceived greater concern - notably Europe, the Middle East, and south Asia. Even if we recognise that Obama is different to previous presidents, an Obama White House will still be consumed by foreign policy issues in regions of perceived greatest importance, leaving little time for high-level attention to Africa.

Neglect in a Democratic congress

After prioritising US relations with Europe and other northern industrialised democracies, the Obama administration has demonstrated that the Middle East is second in the foreign policy hierarchy, as witnessed by the focus on the war in Iraq, the decision to make the pursuit of Middle East peace an administration priority, and an unprecedented diplomatic overture to Iran. The third region of foreign policy concern is south Asia, as witnessed by the increase in US troops to Afghanistan and focus on Pakistan. Other key regions are Asia and Latin America. Where is Africa in all this? Presumably still last.

A fourth potential constraint is that members of the US Congress also neglect Africa. Since the primary objective of most members is to be re-elected, and since most US citizens know or care little about the African continent, it is politically unwise to spend much time on Africa. An important effect of congressional neglect of Africa is that even highly motivated chairpersons of the Africa sub-committees face an uphill task in pushing African issues to the forefront of congressional debate. In the absence of crisis, partisan and ideological differences within Congress prevent activist groups from achieving congressionally mandated changes in US foreign policy toward Africa.

Equally importantly, both Senate and House of Representatives being dominated by the Democratic Party is a double-edged sword for the White House. On average, the Congress is more liberal than Obama, and there is a great deal of pent-up demand stemming from the Bush years for a host of domestic programmes. So, there is a good chance Obama's priorities will be stymied by a Congress pushing its own priorities and initiatives, which are unlikely to include Africa.

The net result of White House and congressional neglect of Africa is that US foreign policy, perhaps more so than that toward any other region of the world, is largely delegated to high-level bureaucrats and political appointees within the bureaucracies of the executive branch.

In order to understand US foreign policy toward
Africa, one must focus on the policies and interactions of the African affairs bureaus of the national security bureaucracies, such as the State Department, the Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency, as well as their counterparts within the increasingly important economic realm, most notably the Department of Commerce. To be sure, the White House sets the overall parameters of US foreign policy on Africa, as was the case with its predecessors during the cold war. But the unique nature of the US policy-making system ensures that specific policy initiatives often emerge from and are co-ordinated by national security bureaucracies with little White House input. An important aspect of bureaucratic influence in the policy-making process on Africa is that it fosters the continuation of established policies, even when an administration with seemingly different beliefs than its predecessor takes office, such as in the shift from the Bush to the Obama administration.

One indicator of potential change is the leadership of the State Department's bureau of African affairs, which traditionally has taken the lead on US Africa policies. So, the nomination of Johnnie Carson as assistant secretary of state for African affairs offers important insights. He most recently served as national intelligence officer for Africa for the National Intelligence Council and senior vice president for the National Defense University. In the State Department, he served as deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs, ambassador to Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, and as a foreign service officer (FSO) in Portugal, Botswana, Mozambique, and Nigeria. He began his service in Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer in Tanzania.

It is unclear how much a career FSO will push for significant change in the substance and the priorities of the Africa policy. Moreover, the recent and significant nature of Carson's involvement in the intelligence arena makes it unlikely that he will be a strong proponent of significantly changing the recent heavy emphasis on US military/security policy in Africa. His extended experience in east Africa and southern Africa nonetheless bodes well for enhanced US foreign policy attention to these two regions.

Seven trends in the first 100 days

At least seven trends have become evident during the first 100 days of the Obama administration.

First, there is no question that Obama's appointments demonstrate a heightened interest in Africa. One appointee is Jonathan Scott Grafton, a retired air force major general who was raised as the son of missionary parents in the Democratic Republic of Congo and who speaks fluent Swahili. He refers to Obama as 'America's Mandela' and serves as the White House special envoy to Sudan. Another fascinating White House choice is Samantha Power, a Harvard human rights expert and Pulitzer Prize winning author (A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide), who serves as senior director for multilateral affairs at the National Security Council.

Characteristics common to these and other core members of Obama's Africa foreign policy team include early opposition to the war in Iraq, a tendency toward liberal internationalism, and an emphasis on the use of 'soft power' (diplomacy and economic aid) to advance US interests abroad. Interestingly, this foreign policy team also demonstrates Obama's reliance on those with military experience (such as Grafton), with important implications for how an Obama administration will deal with the current overwhelming influence of strategic and military initiatives in Africa.

A second trend involves Obama's governing ideology. He is not a typical liberal, but rather a pragmatic traditional realist with strong tendencies...
toward liberal internationalism, sometimes referred to by critics and admirers as an 'optimistic realist' or a 'realistic optimist'. As succinctly summarised by one observer during the presidential campaign, Obama does not speak in the moralistic tones of the most recent Bush administration, does not use the soaring rhetoric of Bush's freedom agenda, rejects the Bush administration's obsession with elections and political rights, and argues that people's aspirations are broader and more basic -- involving issues such as food, shelter, and jobs.

A sober reckoning of resources

One implication of this world view, according to those in favour of a foreign policy more firmly based on democracy and human rights, is potentially little change toward authoritarian regimes in Africa, especially those known for advancing liberalisation within the non-political sectors of their societies -- such as Tunisia and its progressive approach to women's rights. Indeed, the outlines of Obama's foreign policy toward authoritarian regimes will in many respects be demonstrated when he makes his much-awaited speech on Islam during June 2009 in Egypt -- an authoritarian US ally at the intersection of the Middle East and Africa that is considered key to advancing Obama's Middle East peace process.

A third trend is a sober reckoning of Africa programmes that require additional financial resources. During his election campaign, Obama said he aimed to double US foreign assistance to Africa as part of a promise to double the annual foreign aid budget from $25 billion to $50 billion by 2012. He underscored a desire to showcase the Bush administration's President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which he also pledged to increase from $15 billion in total funding during the Bush years to approximately $50 billion by 2012. Clearly there has been a reassessment of all this in light of the economic meltdown in the US. It is difficult to imagine the Obama administration being able to 'sell' massive foreign aid increases to the American public and the US Congress when so many Americans are jobless, losing their homes, and confronting sizable health care costs.

The Obama administration will nonetheless pursue liberal initiatives that are not dependent on additional financial resources. One example of this trend occurred in January 2009, when Obama rescinded US restrictions on international family planning measures, officially known as the Mexico City Policy but typically referred to as the 'global gag rule'. Originally put in place under Ronald Reagan, maintained by George HW Bush, lifted by Bill Clinton, and subsequently re-imposed by George W Bush, the gag rule remains a highly charged ideological policy that serves as a litmus test on both sides of the abortion debate.

Specifically, this policy ensured that no US family planning assistance could be given to foreign non-governmental organisations that performed abortions, provided counselling and referral for abortion, or lobbied to make abortion legal or more available in their country. This policy, which had a highly negative effect on the provision of health care in numerous African countries, was reversed by an Obama administration intent on demonstrating the fruits of electoral victory to its supporters.

Will he have the time?

A fifth trend is Obama's cautious approach to conflict resolution -- that is nonetheless willing to use the White House as a 'bully pulpit'. Obama entered office mindful of the fact that the US has not played enough of a role in recent years to resolve conflict in Africa. He has underscored his administration's intent to adopt a more proactive approach in this area, and has cited ongoing conflicts in Darfur, Zimbabwe, eastern Congo, the Niger Delta, and Somalia. Although Obama's knowledge of and reference to these conflicts is laudable, the reality is that effectively resolving any one of them would require the sustained attention of the White House -- and most importantly Obama himself. But it is unclear if foreign policy challenges and priorities elsewhere, including the pledge to make the Arab-Israeli peace process a priority, will permit the degree of
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A final trend is a lack of clarity over any change in
the 'democratic deficit' in US foreign policy toward
Africa. The Bush administration talked about the
normative good of democracy promotion. But when
the normative goal of promoting democracy clashed
with the strategic goal of containing terrorist threats,
the strategic goal almost certainly won, thereby more
closely associating the US with some of the worst
abusers of human rights.

The case of Tunisia is enlightening. Boasting a
dictatorship that is perceived in Washington as a
'strong US ally in the Arab world' and a 'valuable
partner in the war on terrorism', Tunisia was actively
courted by the Bush administration. In February
2004, Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's
support for US counter-terrorism initiatives was
rewarded with a highly coveted head-of-state visit to
Washington, amid a chorus of criticism from human
rights activists.

Preoccupied by terrorism threats

This visit was significant, in that it was the first
such visit granted to Ben Ali since he took power
in 1987. Bush's predecessors, Reagan, Bush senior,
and Clinton, all denied Ben Ali's request for a visit.
In short, an overriding preoccupation with terrorist
threats led the Bush administration to overlook the
authoritarian excesses of African regimes in favour of
their willingness to support US war on terror, just as
the US did during the cold war.

A key dilemma for pro-democracy activists is
that it is unclear if Obama's governing ideology -
pragmatic traditionalism with strong tendencies
for liberal internationalism - will lead to significant
change in the democratic deficit in US foreign
policy toward Africa.

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