CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S ENGAGEMENTS IN AFRICA WITHIN HISTORICAL CONTEXT: GREAT EXPECTATIONS VERSUS DAUNTING CHALLENGES

Peter J. Schraeder

Abstract

Barack Obama's election as the first African-American president of the United States raised extraordinary expectations among Africans and Africanists concerning the future of US foreign policy toward Africa. Africa nonetheless has remained the region of least concern within the global hierarchy of US foreign policy during the first two years (2009-10) of his administration, as the White House by necessity has focused on domestic issues and other regions of perceived greater importance, most notably daunting challenges associated with the ongoing crisis in the US economy and overseeing two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This chapter assesses how US foreign policy toward Africa has fared in an Obama Administration, when extraordinary expectations are confronted by daunting challenges, most of which do not originate on the African continent. It also assesses what one can expect from US foreign policy toward Africa during the second half (2011-12) of Obama's elected term of office as he confronts an increasingly critical Congress in which one chamber (the House of Representatives) is dominated by the Republican Party.

Introduction

Barack Obama's election as the first African-American president of the United States raised extraordinary expectations among Africans and Africanists concerning the future of US foreign policy toward Africa. In addition to being a product of the African Diaspora and publishing two well-received books in which Africa is referenced
(Obama 1995, 2006), Obama is the first sitting president to have visited the African continent prior to taking office, including traveling to his father’s Kenya for five weeks in 1998 before starting Harvard Law School, and to Chad, Djibouti, Kenya, and South Africa for two weeks in 2006 as part of a US Senate mission. He also made a two-day presidential visit to Ghana in July 2009 (six months after entering the White House) while returning from a Group of Eight (G-8) summit in Italy. Africa nonetheless has remained the region of least concern within the global hierarchy of US foreign policy during the first two years (2009-10) of the Obama Administration, as the White House by necessity has focused on domestic issues and other regions of perceived greater importance, most notably daunting challenges associated with the ongoing crisis in the US economy and overseeing two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The purpose of this chapter is to assess how US foreign policy toward Africa has fared during Obama’s first two years in office, when extraordinary expectations have been confronted by daunting challenges, most of which do not originate on the African continent. It also assesses what one can expect from US foreign policy toward Africa during the second half (2011-12) of Obama’s elected term of office as he confronts an increasingly critical Congress in which one chamber (the House of Representatives) is dominated by the Republican Party. The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections: the historical context of US foreign policy toward Africa, a description of five factors that have constrained the foreign policy manoeuvrability of the Obama Administration, and a discussion of six trends in Obama’s foreign policy toward Africa. In this regard, please note that ‘Africa’ includes all five regions of the African continent, including North Africa, which I argue cannot be examined in isolation from the rest of the continent.

**Historical context of US foreign policy toward Africa**

A common thread of Africanist scholarship is that US foreign policy toward Africa during the Cold War era was marked by indifference at worst and neglect at best. A corollary of this argument is that, regardless of who has occupied the White House, policies were marked more by continuity rather than change. In his presidential address to one of the annual meetings of the African Studies Association, for example, Crawford Young underscored the “essential continuity” that marked US foreign policy toward Africa since the founding in 1958
of a separate Bureau of African Affairs within the State Department. Although he carefully added that “noteworthy fluctuations” have occurred, he concluded that “these variations have been above all of style, tone, and the subtler chemistry of policy articulation, and not its underlying substance” (Young 1984: 14).

The adoption of an extended historical perspective demonstrates that one can distinguish between at least five periods of continuity and change, in which US involvement in Africa has either expanded or contracted. The first century of the American Republic (1776-1861) was marked by revolutionary fervour and the gradual expansion of US activities in all regions of the world, including Africa. This period was marked by the young Republic’s involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, whaling and other economic activities along Africa’s extensive coastlines, and the spread of missionary movements, colonisation societies, and explorers throughout Africa. This period also witnessed the opening of dozens of US consulates and embassies throughout Africa (Duignan & Gann 1984).

Many of these diplomatic missions were downgraded or closed as a result of the US Civil War (1861-65) and the period of retrenchment which followed, as the federal government focused on internal reconstruction and development. During this second period, the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, which the US attended as an observer nation, not only consecrated the formal creation of European empires and spheres of influence throughout the African continent, but impeded US efforts at regaining influence enjoyed prior to the US Civil War. This second period of US involvement (1861-1947) is thus best described as one of significant retrenchment in which future involvement was constrained by the existence of European colonial empires.

A renewed period of US expansion occurred during the Cold War (1947-89). The combination of declining colonial influence on the part of Belgium, Britain, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain (with France being the exception) with the growing diplomatic activities of the Soviet Union and its allies prompted Washington to open US embassies in almost every African country achieving independence. The hallmark of this era was the enunciation of a variety of presidential doctrines that, beginning with the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and culminating in the Reagan Doctrine of 1985, underscored Washington’s right to intervene against communist advances throughout the world, including in Africa (Ohaegbulam 1988). This approach transcended partisan loyalties as Democratic and Republican admini-
stratifications sought to enlist African leaders on the side of the United States in an emerging East-West rivalry with the communist bloc, contributing to Africa's emergence as an arena of great power competition (Schraeder 1994b).

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signalled the end of the Cold War but not the end of international rivalry in Africa. The ideologically-based Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union was replaced by a 'cold peace' in which the great powers increasingly struggled for economic supremacy in all regions of the world, including in Africa (Garten 1993). Although this cold peace manifested itself in rising US-French tensions in francophone Africa during the 1990s, not least of all due to an expanding US economic presence that was aided by proactive Clinton Administration policies (see Schraeder 2000), the Cold War's end not surprisingly fostered a re-evaluation of US foreign policy, which resulted in a certain degree of US retrenchment from the African continent from 1989 to 2001 (albeit not nearly on the same scale as what occurred in the aftermath of the US Civil War). This period of retrenchment included the initial eight months of the Bush Administration (January-August 2001), which underscored the need to pursue a more 'realist' or 'hard-headed' analysis of concrete US foreign policy interests in which the African continent figured little if at all. A statement during the 2000 presidential campaign was particularly revealing. In response to a question concerning Africa's place within a future Bush Administration, Bush noted that the continent did not "fit into the national strategic interests of the US as far as I (Bush) can see them" (quoted in Schraeder 2001: 390).

The final and most recent period of foreign policy expansion revolves around the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath. These attacks exerted a profound influence on US foreign policy as the Bush Administration announced a global war on terrorism, replete with an official doctrine (the Bush Doctrine) and pledges to aid countries threatened by terrorism, that harkened back to the initial stages of the Cold War, when President Truman pledged to aid countries threatened by communism. Among the various domestic initiatives undertaken included enactment of the Patriot Act, which provided new, aggressive powers to law enforcement agencies; creation of a Department of Homeland Security to oversee borders and coordinate domestic counterterrorism activities; reorganisation of the military's global command structure to add a Northern Command that
would be responsible for military activities in Canada, Mexico, and the US (the first time a military officer had been appointed to such a post since World War II); and, after much pressure from the public and the Congress over the intelligence failures preceding the attacks of 9/11, creation of a new cabinet-level position, Director of National Intelligence, who would be responsible for coordinating the diverse intelligence activities of fifteen agencies.

It is important to note, however, that there is a lack of consensus within the policymaking establishment over Africa's importance to the United States. In many respects, the determination of US interests in Africa varies depending on the portion of the policymaking establishment that is defining those interests. The Congressional Black Caucus and other African-American organisations such as Trans-Africa Forum not surprisingly emphasise the importance of socio-cultural interests, owing to the reality that 42 million US citizens (13.6% of the US population) claim an African-American heritage. Other members of Congress and activist organisations, such as Africa Action, underscore the importance of US humanitarian interests in alleviating chronic drought, famine, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Department of Commerce not surprisingly focuses on economic interests, including trade, investment, and the growing amount of oil imported from the African continent. The Department of State focuses on political interests, such as the electoral weight of 53 African votes within the United Nations. The Department of Defense naturally focuses on security interests, including ensuring access to bases and the ability to project power to strategic 'choke points,' such as the Straits of Bab el Mandeb in the Horn of Africa. In short, there is no consensus within the US policymaking establishment concerning Africa's importance to the United States, although recent attempts at raising Africa's standing in the US foreign policy hierarchy have emphasised the need to look 'beyond humanitarianism' and to instead focus on Africa's strategic importance to the United States (Lyman & Morrison 2006; see also Morrison & Cooke 2001; Copson 2007)

An objective analysis of the broad historical sweep of US-African relations nonetheless suggests that two sets of interests (security and economics) have competed for pre-eminence in US foreign policy toward Africa. The pursuit of economic self-interest historically has been in the forefront of US-African relations since the founding of the American Republic in 1776. Returning once again to our five major phases of contraction/expansion, it is noteworthy that economic inte-
rests largely dominated US policy considerations from 1776 to 1947, as well as from 1989 to 2001. When viewed from this long-term historical perspective, Washington’s pursuit of strategic interests during the Cold War (1947-89) and current (2001-present) eras represent anomalies in an otherwise economically inspired approach to US foreign policy toward Africa.

*Constraints on Obama administration foreign policy toward Africa*

The optimism that Obama’s election generated among Africans and specialists of US foreign policy toward Africa was captured by an African colleague, Korwa Adar, who noted during a conference in South Africa: “How many US presidential candidates prior to taking office can say that they took an HIV/AIDS test in Nairobi to raise awareness about the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, or walked with President Nelson Mandela on Robben Island in South Africa?” The answer, of course, is none. Optimism was further fuelled by Obama’s own statements: “Obviously I’ve got a personal connection to Africa that makes the trip special”, explained Obama in reference to his 2006 trip as Senator. “I also have a deep abiding interest in what happens to the African continent as a whole” (quoted in Zeleny 2006).

With history as our guide, however, it should come as no surprise that Africa has remained the region of least concern within the global hierarchy of US foreign policy, as the Obama Administration by necessity focuses on domestic issues and other regions of perceived greater importance. The sobering reality of domestic and international challenges unrelated to Africa was already evident during the presidential campaign. “The experience of Barack Obama has raised extraordinary expectations in Africa”, explained Witney W. Schneidman (2008), an advisor to the Obama campaign, “but we need to be realistic about these expectations, especially given the financial pressures in the United States”. Richard Holbrooke (2008: 2) similarly cautioned in an article in *Foreign Affairs* that the next US president would be confronted with a “daunting agenda” as he “inherits a more difficult set of international challenges than any predecessor since World War II”.

Five sets of constraints have limited the manoeuvrability of the Obama Administration, reinforcing a certain degree of continuity in US foreign policy toward Africa. Whereas some are related to more
recent socio-economic and political-military trends (crisis in the US economy and inheritance of a residual fear of 9/11), others are indicative of long-term constraints inherent in the US policymaking process concerning Africa (historical White House and congressional neglect of the African continent and bureaucratic influence in the policymaking process).

The first constraint is the continuing crisis in the US economy. Obama’s number one priority if he wants to be re-elected (and all presidents enter office with the goal of winning a second term of office) is responding to the crisis in the US economy. Not since Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933 has a new president inherited an economy in such disastrous shape, including as of January 2009 (the month of Obama’s inauguration) a credit crisis that led to a financial bailout of more than $767 billion; decreasing home values and foreclosure crisis in the US housing market (typically the one greatest investment of average Americans); dramatic decline in the stock market, which devastated retirement accounts; rising unemployment, which did not peak until late 2010; a growing health care crisis, in which one out of five Americans did not have health insurance; structural decline in the US auto industry, historically one of the mainstays of the US economy; rising national debt from $5 trillion in 2000 to $10 trillion in 2008; and a serious contraction in the US economy.

Several recent statistics stand out. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) announced on its website (see www.congressionalbudgetoffice.org) in January 2011 that it expects the annual US budget deficit to exceed $1.5 trillion in 2011 and also that the National Debt will exceed $15 trillion during that year. The CBO also predicted that joblessness would remain above 9% during 2011 and that unemployment would be approximately 8.2% on election day in November 2012. It is commonly noted by experts on US elections and party politics, such as Alan Gitelson, that if this latter statistic does not go down to at least 8% by the next presidential elections, Obama may end up being a one-term president like Jimmy Carter (1977-80) and George Bush senior (1989-92), both of whom were blamed by the electorate for poor management of the economy.

Responding to this domestic economic crisis has consumed a significant portion of Obama White House energy, as witnessed by the historic amount of legislation that the Obama Administration successfully shepherded through Congress during 2009-10. Legislation tar-
geted toward preventing the further collapse of the US economy ranged from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (signed into law in February 2009) to the Tax Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act (signed into law in December 2010). The most divisive legislation involved the signing into law in March 2010 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act, which together provided new health care protections to the US population, and which the Republican Party is attempting to overturn via both new legislation and the US court system. One can also add important socially-oriented legislation to this list, such as the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (the first piece of legislation signed into law by the president in January 2009, which relaxed the statute of limitations for equal-pay lawsuits brought by women) and the more recent “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act”, signed into law in December 2010, which repealed earlier legislation preventing gay and lesbian individuals from serving openly in the US military. The challenge, of course, is that the White House and the president personally had to expend tremendous amounts of political capital to get the above legislation passed, leaving little political oxygen for international initiatives, let alone those on the African continent.

A second constraint involves the Obama Administration’s inheritance of a residual fear of another 9/11 attack. Although subsiding significantly in the last nine years and especially in the face of the recent economic crisis, this fear nonetheless remains within the fabric of US society. This reality was demonstrated by Obama’s signing into law in January 2011 the Defense Authorization Bill, which includes a provision that imposes strict new limits on transferring detainees out of the Guantanamo Bay prison, dealing a major blow to Obama’s vows to shut down the centre and give federal court trials to many of the prisoners. This provision prevents the transfer of any detainees into the US during 2011, even for the purpose of prosecution; bans the purchase or construction of any facility inside the US for housing detainees now being held at Guantanamo (the Obama Administration was pursuing the option of refurbishing a prison in southern Illinois); and forbids the transfer of any detainee to another country unless the Secretary of Defense signs off on the safety of doing so (i.e., that the prisoner will not be tortured or otherwise mistreated). These provisions have essentially ensured that Guantanamo will not be closed during Obama’s first term in office, despite his campaign pledge and
determination to do so. This legislation was extraordinary in that it was passed when both houses of Congress were controlled by Democratic Party majorities, which is also Obama’s party. It is extremely unlikely that this legislation will change now that the House of Representatives is controlled by the Republican Party.

A third constraint involves historical White House neglect of the African continent amidst domestic and other international priorities. Throughout the Cold War and its aftermath, presidents traditionally have devoted less attention to Africa compared with other regions of perceived greater concern, most notably Europe (including Russia and the other countries that were once part of the Soviet Union) and more recently the Middle East and South Asia. Historical neglect of Africa at the highest reaches of the US policymaking establishment is the direct result of a wide variety of factors: a president's typical lack of knowledge and therefore the absence of a deep-felt interest in a region that historically enjoyed few enduring political links with the US when compared with the former European colonial powers; a tendency to view Africa as the responsibility of those same European colonial powers, especially France, whose leaders were often willing to take the lead in crisis situations; the impracticality of one person monitoring relations with 193 countries worldwide, including 53 in Africa, and therefore the necessity of delegating responsibility for handling foreign policy for those regions considered marginal to the White House; and, most important, the necessity of balancing domestic priorities with foreign affairs necessities, especially during a first term in office in which the ultimate priority of all presidents is to assure re-election, with simple electoral logic typically suggesting that Africa is not a priority for the vast majority of the voting public.

Even if we recognise that Obama is different from all previous presidents, especially concerning his personal connection to the African continent, his White House has been consumed by foreign policy issues in other regions of perceived greater importance, leaving little time for high-level White House attention to Africa. In addition to prioritising US relations with Europe and the other northern industrialised countries (as witnessed by the December 2010 ratification of a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia), the Middle East is second in the foreign policy hierarchy, as witnessed by the mandatory focus on the war in Iraq, the decision to make the pursuit of a Middle East peace an administration priority, an unprecedented early diplomatic overture to Iran, the president’s Cairo speech of summer
2010, and the necessity of responding to the dramatic political changes occurring throughout the Middle East that were sparked by the overthrow on 14 January 2011 of the Tunisian dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The third region of foreign policy concern is South Asia, as witnessed by evolving foreign policy debates that resulted in a massive increase in the US combat presence in Afghanistan and the decision to increase unmanned drone attacks in the tribal areas of Pakistan. The potential shortcomings associated with a foreign policy misstep in this region were captured in an article that questioned whether Afghanistan and South Asia in general would emerge as ‘Obama’s Vietnam’ (Blight 2009). Subsequent regions of concern include Asia and evolving partnerships with China and Japan, as well as Latin America. The key question that one must ask: Where is Africa in this US foreign policy priority? The answer: Near or at the bottom of the foreign policy hierarchy, and at best second to last only ahead of Latin America.

A fourth constraint is historical congressional neglect of the African continent. A variety of constitutionally mandated prerogatives, including the confirmation of presidential appointees, the convening of hearings, and the drafting and voting of key legislation, suggests that Congress theoretically should play an important role in defining US foreign policy toward Africa. Like their White House counterparts, however, members of Congress historically have neglected Africa relative to other regions of perceived greater interest. Re-election pressures and time constraints imposed by terms of office (two years for Representatives and six years for Senators) force them to select and prioritise the domestic and the international issues which will receive their attention. Since the primary objective of most members is to be re-elected, and since most US citizens know or care very little about the African continent, conventional wisdom suggests that it is politically unwise to focus too much time on Africa. As a result, membership on the Africa subcommittees is among the least desired congressional positions in both houses of Congress, and is often relegated to relatively junior Representatives and Senators, such as Barack Obama, who served on the Africa Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

This neglect ensures that even highly motivated chairpersons of the Africa subcommittees 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. Even during short-term crises when an issue may attract the attention of a significant number of members of Congress, control of the policymaking process naturally flows to the White House and the bureaucracies of the executive branch. It is precisely for this reason that Congress only sporadically passes Africa-related legislation, which during 2010 included the Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act, signed into law in May 2010, and the “Provision for Special Disclosures on Source of Conflict Minerals” that was included in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, signed into law in July 2010. In both cases, legislation provides more of a preferred policy roadmap than restrictive guidelines. As regards the legislation on the source of conflict minerals, for example, US corporations are not prevented from importing or trading such minerals, but rather must simply report what efforts they are undertaking to trace their origins.

Even this modest record is unlikely to be repeated in 2011, owing to the November 2010 mid-term congressional elections in which a conservative anti-Obama wave, including many members of the ultra-conservative Tea Party Movement, captured the House of Representatives and significantly reduced the Democratic Party majority in the Senate. Obama in public interviews has repeatedly referred to this victory as “humbling” and as a “shellacking”, as the White House is now forced to pivot from an inherently more friendly relationship with the Democratic Party-controlled 111th Congress (2009-11) to what is already proving to be a more conflicted relationship with the 112th Congress (2011-13), which is at least partially dominated by the Republican Party. The House of Representatives now boasts 241 Republicans (87 of whom are newly elected) and 193 Democrats (one seat was vacant as of February 2011). In the Senate, the Democrats control 51 seats, Independents control two seats (but caucus with the Democrats), and Republicans control 47 seats (twelve of which are newly elected). An increasingly conservative Congress is likely to push US foreign policy in a more hawkish direction. This conservative wave, in part at least due to the demands of Tea Party members, is also heavily focusing on deficit reduction (one of their pledges has been to trim an additional $100 billion from the current 2011 budget), which will at best lead to little new spending outside of the global war on terrorism and the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and at
worse lead to cuts in existing spending, including foreign aid to Africa.

An additional piece of the congressional puzzle is the nature of the ongoing relationship between the 43-member Congressional Black Caucus and the country's first elected African-American president. Contrary to expectations, relations between Obama and the Congressional Black Caucus have been periodically strained, not least of all due to the fact that some members feel that they are “getting far too little support from the nation’s first black president – a man they once believed would be their strongest champion” (Lerer & Henderson 2010). It is important to remember that the Congressional Black Caucus is focused first and foremost on the high unemployment rate among African-Americans – not the African continent. It is precisely for this reason that some members have been critical of Obama’s perceived lack of interest in offering programmes targeted toward alleviating the high unemployment rates among African-Americans. As a result, Africa during the last two years has been neglected by the Congressional Black Caucus relative to earlier periods, as this caucus has focused first and foremost on the increasing economic plight of African-Americans. This trend is likely to continue during 2011-12.

A fifth and final constraint is that the net result of White House and congressional neglect of Africa is that US foreign policy toward Africa, perhaps more so than that toward any other region of the world, remains largely delegated to the high-level bureaucrats and political appointees within the bureaucracies of the executive branch. Exceptions of course exist, such as the willingness of both the White House and the Congress to pressure Sudan’s government to seek a peaceful resolution of civil conflict in the southern portion of the country, but these are rare occurrences typically due to pressures from grass-roots constituencies that have the ear of the president and senior congressional leaders and that most importantly are considered crucial to re-election. In the case of Sudan, for example, a wide array of Christian groups deemed essential to Republican victories in 2004 effectively lobbied the White House to ‘do something’ to stop what they perceived as a genocidal policy that a northern-based Islamic regime was carrying out against a southern-based, predominantly Christian population, including the practice of southern Christians being sold as slaves in northern Sudan.

In order to fully understand US foreign policy toward Africa, one must therefore focus on the policies and interactions of the African
affairs bureaus of the traditional national security bureaucracies, such as the State Department, the Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 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 toward Africa, as was the case with its predecessors during the Cold War. But the unique nature of the US policymaking system ensures that specific policy initiatives often emerge from and are coordinated by the national security bureaucracies with little White House input.

The net result of what can be referred to as ‘bureaucratic influence’ in the policymaking process (Schraeder 1994a), and hence why it can be referred to as a constraint, 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 of the keys to potential change is who leads the State Department and especially the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs, which traditionally has assumed a leading role concerning US foreign policy toward Africa. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who narrowly lost the electoral contest for the Democratic Party nomination for the 2008 presidential elections, and whom Obama wisely brought into his administration with a serious policymaking role, has clearly set a tone of heightened US interest in Africa, as set by her husband’s Administration and continued under the Bush Administration. Clinton sought to underscore Africa’s priority within the Obama Administration by undertaking in August 2009 an 11-day visit of seven African countries: Angola, Cape Verde, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, and South Africa. During this trip, which was widely hailed throughout Africa, Clinton highlighted the issue of sexual violence against African women, especially within the continuing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Once this trip was over, however, Clinton’s primary focus returned to other regions of more pressing importance, including Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

The bellwether of Administration interest in Africa was the selection of Johnnie Carson, former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. He previously served as the National Intelligence Officer for Africa for the National Intelligence Council and Senior Vice President for the Nati-
onal Defense University. In the State Department, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Ambassador to Uganda (1991-94), Zimbabwe (1995-97) and Kenya (1999-2003), and as a Foreign Service Officer (FSO) in Botswana, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Portugal. He began his service in Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer in Tanzania. Carson’s long-term experience as a career Foreign Service Officer within the State Department nonetheless ensured that he was unlikely to press for substantial new directions in US foreign policy, instead attempting to make existing policies more effective. Moreover, his substantial involvement in the intelligence arena also meant that he was an unlikely candidate for significantly altering the Bush Administration’s substantial investment in military initiatives. His extended experience in East and Southern Africa nonetheless has boded well for enhanced foreign policy attention to these regions, including confronting election irregularities and corruption in Kenya and pressuring the authoritarian regime of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe to accept greater political pluralism.

Emerging trends in Obama foreign policy toward Africa

At least six trends in US foreign policy toward Africa have emerged during Obama’s first two years in office (2009-10) that are likely to continue as we approach the 2012 presidential election campaign, which in actuality will begin in 2011 as Republican candidates jockey for position and Democrats decide if they wish to mount a primary challenge to Obama (highly unlikely). First, Obama’s foreign policy campaign team included an unprecedented number of close advisors with impressive backgrounds in Africa, which signalled that the Obama White House would have a heightened interest in Africa. This group included Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs under the Clinton Administration, who helped lead Obama’s campaign foreign policy bureaucracy, and who serves as US Ambassador to the United Nations; and Samantha Power, Harvard human rights expert and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, who resigned from the campaign in March 2008 after calling Hillary Clinton ‘a monster’, and is currently Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs at the National Security Council. Other Africanists joined the Administration after the election, such as Michelle Gavin, former foreign policy advisor to Senator Russell Feingold (Democrat-Wisconsin), who serves as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Africa in
the National Security Council. The transition of these Africanists from campaign workers to political appointees in an Obama White House provided a clear sense of Obama’s priorities in Africa. Three characteristics common to this core Africa foreign policy team included 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.

The White House foreign policy team also included a number of core advisors with military experience, with important implications for how Obama would approach military initiatives on the African continent. This group included Jonathan Scott Gration, retired Air Force major general who voted for Bush in 2000, accompanied Obama to Africa, refers to Obama as ‘America’s Mandela’, was raised as the son of missionary parents in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), speaks fluent Swahili, and who currently is White House Special Envoy to Sudan; Mark Lippert, Obama’s former Senate foreign policy advisor, who in 2008 returned from a tour of duty in Iraq as a Navy Seal, who initially served as White House National Security Council Chief of Staff, and who at the end of 2009 returned to active duty for the US Navy; and James L. Jones, a career military officer who rose to the rank of General in the United States Marine Corps and who served as Obama’s first national security advisor. Denis McDonough, one of Obama’s top foreign policy aides, national security coordinator for the campaign, former foreign policy advisor to Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, and currently White House Deputy National Security Advisor, is also a key player within this group. Together these individuals ensured that an Obama White House would be sympathetic to the continuation of Defense Department initiatives in Africa, such as the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) that was created under the Bush Administration and that Obama visited as Senator in 2006 along with General Gration. Despite criticism from African partners opposed to the possibility of this new command being stationed on the African continent, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party that hoped for a decrease in US military initiatives in Africa, and career Foreign Service Officers who did not appreciate what they perceived as the Pentagon’s encroachment on classic State Department turf, AFRICOM has enjoyed expanding resources and support under the Obama Administration (LeVan 2010; Office of Inspector General 2009). Indeed, it is arguable that the Oba-
ma White House has the most military-influenced National Security Council in the post-World War II history of the United States.

Obama’s reshuffling of presidential advisors, which coincided with the 2010 mid-term congressional elections, has signalled an increasingly corporate-friendly overlay to its national security structure so as to repair relations with the corporate world, who were perceived as bruised owing to the array of financial reform and regulatory legislation promoted by the White House during its first two years in office. Jones was replaced as national security advisor by Thomas E. Donilon, a partner in the prestigious Washington law firm of O’Melveny & Myers. Similarly, Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel, who returned to Chicago to run in the city’s first open mayoral race in decades, was replaced by Bill Daley (the brother of Chicago’s current mayor, Richard M. Daley), who served as chairman of the Midwest region and head of the Office of Corporate Responsibility for JP Morgan Chase, having previously served as president of SBC Communications. The implication of these administrative changes is that Obama is desirous of a more Washington-savvy and corporate-friendly core as he prepares to run in the 2012 presidential elections. As a result, Africa initiatives dealing with trade and investment, such as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), will receive a warm welcome at the White House.

A second trend, which focuses on Obama’s governing ideology, is the continuation of a pragmatic traditional realist approach, albeit one with strong tendencies toward liberal internationalism, in US foreign policy toward Africa. Obama is far from being a typical liberal, and is in fact much closer to being a traditional realist, at least in the realm of foreign policy, sometimes being 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 more recent Bush Administration, does not use the soaring rhetoric of Bush’s freedom agenda, rejects the Bush Administration’s obsession with elections, and argues that people’s aspirations are broader and more basic, including food, shelter, and jobs.

The foreign policy impact of this pragmatic realism has been Obama’s embrace of a variety of national security initiatives inherited from the Bush Administration, which critics, such as the Association for Concerned Africa Scholars (see http://concernedafricascholars.org), had hoped would be significantly altered once the Democratic
Party won the White House. One of the best examples of this inherited national security structure is a set of three regionally-based counter-terrorism programmes in the Islamic coastal regions of the African continent, including the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) that includes North Africa, the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) that is responsible for the ‘Greater Horn of Africa’, and the East African Regional Strategic Initiative (EARSI), which replaced the East African Counter-Terrorism Initiative (EACTI). These counter-terrorism initiatives are buttressed by AFRICOM, the International Military Education and Training (IMET) and other US military aid programmes, and the Gulf of Guinea Initiative, the primary goal of which is to gradually build up an effective regional security programme capable of ensuring the safe transport of oil resources to the United States (Ploch 2010).

Together these regional security programmes provide useful insights into the evolving priorities of US foreign policy toward Africa. First, these programmes serve as the core of an evolving foreign policy approach that, during the Bush Administration and continuing under the Obama Administration, has divided Africa into at least four spheres of variable foreign policy interest: (1) those regions (North and East Africa) destined to receive priority attention owing to their connection to the wider Middle East, sizeable Muslim populations, and US struggle against global terrorism; (2) regional powers, typically Nigeria and South Africa, but also including Algeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Senegal, that are perceived as crucial to the maintenance of regional stability and therefore as ‘regional anchors’ of US foreign policy initiatives; (3) countries deemed important to US economic interests, most notably oil-producing countries in the Gulf of Guinea region; and (4) the remainder of Sub-Saharan Africa, which remains relegated to the back-burner of US foreign policy. Not surprisingly, US foreign policy increasingly focused on those countries in which core foreign policy interests intersect, as in the case of Algeria, a regional power with oil resources that is considered crucial to combating perceived terrorist threats in North Africa.

A third reality of Obama’s Africa policies has been a sober reckoning concerning Africa programmes that require significant financial resources. Obama early on proposed several new foreign aid initiatives or the expansion of existing foreign aid initiatives concerning Africa. During the campaign, for example, he noted his intention to double US foreign assistance to Africa (which had already trebled
during the Bush Administration) as part of a promise to double the annual foreign aid budget from 25 billion USD to 50 billion USD by 2012. He in particular underscored a desire to showcase the Bush Administration’s highly successful President’s Emergency Programme for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which he also pledged to increase from 15 billion USD in total funding during the Bush years to approximately 50 billion USD by 2012. There has been a sober reckoning in this regard, especially in light of the economic meltdown in the US economy. Although slight increases in PEPFAR levels beyond the levels of the last year of the Bush Administration are likely to remain unchanged, it is difficult to imagine how the Obama Administration will be able to ‘sell’ foreign aid increases to both the American public and the US Congress when so many Americans are either jobless, losing their homes, confronting catastrophic health care costs, and/or all three together.

Swift movement nonetheless has been and will continue to be evident concerning liberal initiatives favoured by the base of the Democratic Party that are not dependent on additional US financial resources. One of the best examples of this trend occurred on 23 January 2009, when Obama officially rescinded US restrictions on international family planning policies 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 Bush senior, lifted by Clinton, and subsequently re-imposed by Bush junior, the gag rule remains a charged ideological policy that serves as a litmus test on both sides of the abortion debate. As explained on the Population Action International (PAI) website (see www.populationaction.org), this policy ensured during the Reagan and both Bush administrations that no US family planning assistance could be provided to foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) ‘that use funding from any other source to: perform abortions ... provide counselling and referral for abortion; or lobby to make abortion legal or more available in their country’. This policy, and others like it, has been or will continue to be reversed by an administration intent on demonstrating the fruits of electoral victory to its supporters. Most recently in February 2011, the Obama Administration rescinded a large portion of a 2008 rule put in place by the Bush Administration that had provided broad-based protections to medical providers who opposed abortion and other related procedures based on religious or moral grounds.
A fourth trend in Obama Administration foreign policy toward Africa has been a 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 proactive role in recent years in resolving conflict on the African continent. In Rwanda, Obama was critical of the Clinton Administration’s unwillingness to act and, in fact, its refusal to label what was happening in Rwanda as genocide. Obama was similarly critical of the Bush Administration’s refusal to take a more forceful approach to the Darfur crisis, despite the Bush Administration’s willingness to describe as genocide the policies of the Bashir regime. Obama instead promised to take a more proactive approach to African conflict resolution.

Although Obama’s knowledge of and reference to these conflicts during the campaign was laudable, an important policymaking reality is that effectively resolving any one of these conflicts would require the sustained attention of the White House. Moreover, the number of conflicts requiring attention has grown, as witnessed by the fact that the International Crisis Group (ICG) lists a total of twenty ongoing conflicts in all regions of the African continent (see www.icg.org). To its credit, the Obama Administration appears to have focused on prioritising a select number of conflicts for attention, beginning with the Sudan, and including the Democratic Republic of Congo and the wider Great Lakes region, and Somalia and the interlocking conflicts in the Horn of Africa. The challenge, of course, is that foreign policy challenges and priorities outside of Africa, including Obama’s pledge to make the Arab-Israeli peace process a White House priority, has not permitted the degree of high-level White House attention necessary to make effective conflict resolution in Africa a reality. And, a potentially contradictory element of administration conflict resolution measures is that US funding for peacekeeping operations, arguably crucial to maintaining stability in post-conflict transitional environments, declined from 530 million USD in 2009 to 332 million USD in 2010 and 286 million USD in 2011. The amount reserved for African peacekeeping operations declined even further, from 382 million USD in 2009 to 188 million USD in 2010 and 138 million USD in 2011 (Department of State 2010).

Obama’s handling of conflict resolution in the Sudan – arguably the African conflict that has received the greatest amount of US attention during the last two years and that has resulted in a relatively
peaceful and historic referendum vote in favour of the secession of southern Sudan – demonstrates both the potential pitfalls and promise of presidential involvement in the conflict resolution process. Specifically, although the Sudan case was relatively unique in that a presidential envoy was appointed and the White House had promised to make it a priority, the demands of the US domestic economy and other regional priorities meant that there was not sustained attention on the part of either the White House or Obama, which is necessary to make effective US leadership in conflict resolution a reality. Indeed, in mid-2010, John Prendergast, co-founder of the Enough Project, an initiative to end genocide and crimes against humanity (Prendergast & Cheadle 2007), severely criticised the Obama White House for a largely hands-off approach and the lack of sustained involvement on the part of the president. “Six months before the self-determination referenda for South Sudan and Abeyei, US policy is not contributing in a meaningful way to peace and justice in the Sudan”, explained Prendergast (2010). “Complicating matters greatly, the Obama Administration is not implementing the policy of benchmarks, incentives, and consequences articulated by Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Rice in October 2009, a policy which appears to have either been put on hold or abandoned”. Criticism by the Enough Project and from other sources was at least partially responsible for greater White House involvement, including Obama’s meeting with Sudanese leaders in September 2010 and his op-ed piece in The New York Times just prior to the Sudanese referendum setting out both carrots and sticks:

Today I am repeating my offer to Sudan’s leaders – if you fulfill your obligations and choose peace, there is a path to normal relations with the United States, including the lifting of economic sanctions and beginning the process, in accordance with United States law, of removing Sudan from the list of states that sponsor terrorism. In contrast, those who flout their international obligations will face more pressure and isolation (Obama 2011: A11).

It is precisely this type of high-level presidential involvement that is necessary to create an effective and coordinated US approach to conflict resolution but will invariably be lacking outside of the Sudan case.

A fifth trend in Obama foreign policy toward Africa is a heightened focus on socio-economic and development issues. Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign criticised the fact that US development assistance to the poorest African countries decreased by nearly 50% from 2000 to 2008. He similarly criticised the fact that
the percentage of development assistance provided to the best-governed African countries had declined even more (by nearly 66%) during the same period. These trends were at least partially due to an overemphasis during the Bush Administration on military policies as part of the global war on terrorism. The Obama Administration pledged to reverse this trend by strengthening a variety of non-military programmes designed to promote socio-economic and political development, including the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and PEPFAR.

One of the most noteworthy proposals in this regard is Obama’s pledge to restore the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to a position of pre-eminence in the foreign aid hierarchy. USAID funding was severely curtailed during the Bush Administration, as increasing amounts of aid were channelled through the US military establishment and newly-created quasi-independent foreign aid programmes, such as PEPFAR. The Obama Administration’s vision for restructuring the foreign aid structure entailed the moving to USAID of foreign aid programmes currently under more than a dozen different executive branch agencies. The key to this process is the belief that USAID, and not the Pentagon, should play the central role in the formulation and implementation of development and other related foreign policy strategies, not only in Africa, but in all regions of the developing world. Although the USAID budget was increased from 1.2 billion USD in 2009 to 1.7 billion USD in 2010 and 2011, critics note that USAID Director Rajiv Shah was nominated only in November 2009 (ten months after Obama took office), and as of autumn 2010 as many as 12 senior management positions had yet to be confirmed by the US Senate. “USAID cannot be the premier development agency everyone envisions without appointed and confirmed leaders at the helm of its regional and functional bureaus”, explains Staats (2010). “Nor can it elevate development across the US government – as Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates have called for – without a full cadre of assistant administrators to inform major development policy reviews taking place right now and congressional efforts to rewrite foreign assistance legislation”.

A final trend is a mixed record concerning the democratic deficit in US foreign policy toward Africa. Historically speaking, when the normative goal of promoting democracy has clashed with the stra-
tегic goal of containing terrorist threats, the strategic goal typically has won, often associating the US with unsavoury African regimes. The State Department's Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for Fiscal Year 2011 demonstrates how this trend has continued under the Obama Administration. In the case of Central Africa, for example, positive rationales are provided for maintaining foreign aid levels to Rwanda and Uganda, despite the fact that both countries are dictatorships that have become increasingly authoritarian in recent years. One of the rationales offered is that both countries constitute valuable regional partners, especially in the military realm. The Rwandan Defense Force (RDF) is lauded as the sixth largest contributor to global peacekeeping forces, most notably the joint United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), where a Rwandan is overall commander. Similarly, the Ugandan Defense Force (UDF) is described as constituting the backbone of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). In short, both regimes are rewarded for their support of U.S.-favoured military operations in Africa at the expense of normative goals, such as democracy promotion.

The US response to pro-democracy movements in North Africa and the wider Middle East at the beginning of 2011 nonetheless demonstrates the importance of having a president who has a personal understanding of Islam (a good portion of his early life was spent in Indonesia) and who is more likely than his Republican Party predecessors to be supportive of democratic openings, including in strategic US allies. For example, Obama sought to underscore an opening to the Islamic world by deciding to grant his first television interview as president (26 January 2009) to an Arabic-language television network, Al Arabiya, an event that was followed by his June 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt, in which he underscored the need for a "new beginning" in the relationship between the United States and the Islamic world. One of the first major tests of Obama's beliefs in this regard was demonstrated by his administration's response to ongoing political crises in the Middle East and North Africa that were sparked by the January 2011 overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the subsequent overthrow of Hosni Mubarak from power in Egypt in February 2011. In these and other cases, including in pro-US Bahrain where the US Fifth Fleet is based, the Obama Administration has made clear its unswerving support for the rights of oppressed populations, including unfettered access to the internet and other social
media, and has resoundingly denounced any use of government force against demonstrators. In the case of Egypt, Obama and other administration officials publicly warned of dire implications for US aid to Egypt if the Egyptian military used force against the demonstrators. Such statements were certainly critical in the Egyptian military’s decision to ultimately remove Mubarak from power, an act that was resoundingly decried by Israel and conservative opponents of the Obama regime as having abandoned a long-term strategic US ally who was key to the Arab-Israeli Middle East process. It is difficult to imagine the Bush Administration setting the same tone both publicly and privately with such close US strategic allies in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Barack Obama’s election as the 44th president of the United States constituted an historic event for the US and the world in general, and his background and personal connection to the African continent have raised extraordinary expectations concerning the future of US foreign policy toward Africa. He and his administration, however, are confronted with daunting challenges that have limited his manoeuvrability concerning Africa. Critical among these is the continuing crisis in the US economy, which invariably focuses presidential attention on the domestic arena at the expense of foreign policy and forces the White House to make difficult budget choices. Even if the US economic crisis were resolved tomorrow, Africa would still find itself marginalised against the backdrop of competing foreign policy concerns from other regions of perceived greater importance, not to mention the restrictive political constraints associated with the fact that as of January 2011 the White House must deal with a US Congress that is partially dominated by the Republican Party and its Tea Party allies. Moreover, the beginning of the 2012 presidential campaign (which began in January 2011!) means that little if anything of substance will emerge concerning Africa in either 2011 or 2012 beyond reacting to events that emerge on the African continent. As a result, the next potential period of change will be January 2013, when either Obama is returned to the White House and is no longer constrained by having to win another election (and therefore his true foreign policy interests can shine) or the White House is occupied by a newly elected Republican president with presumably different foreign policy priorities from his predecessor. Either way, 2011 and 2012
are unlikely to yield major changes in US foreign policy toward Africa.

References


How governments respond to change, pp. 111-137. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.