Great Expectations versus Daunting Challenges: Prospects for U.S. Foreign Policy toward Africa during the Obama Administration

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Barack Obama’s historic election as the forty-fourth president of the United States has raised extraordinary expectations among both Africans and Africanists as concerns the future of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. In addition to being a product of the African diaspora (his father was Kenyan) and publishing two well-received books in which Africa is referenced (Dreams of My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance and The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream), Obama is the first sitting president to have visited the African continent prior to taking office, including traveling during two weeks in 2006 as a U.S. senator to Chad, Djibouti, Kenya, and South Africa. The optimism generated by Obama’s election was captured by an African colleague, who noted, “How many U.S. 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 has been further fueled 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.”

If history is our guide, however, Africa will remain the region of least concern within the global hierarchy of U.S. foreign policy, as the Obama administration by necessity focuses on domestic issues and other regions of perceived greater importance. Indeed, 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 Whitney W. Schneidman, an adviser to the Obama campaign, “but we need to be realistic about these expectations, especially given the financial pressures in the United States.” Richard Holbrooke similarly cautioned in an article in Foreign Affairs that the next U.S. 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.” The question that we have to ask ourselves, and the purpose of this paper, is how U.S. foreign policy toward Africa will fare in an Obama administration, when “extraordinary expectations” are confronted by “daunting” challenges, most of which do not originate on the African continent. The remainder of this paper is
divided into two sections: a description of five factors that may potentially con-
strain the foreign policy maneuverability of an Obama administration as con-
cerns Africa, and a discussion of six emerging trends in Obama foreign policy
toward Africa.

Potential Constraints on “Great Expectations”
Five sets of constraints may limit the maneuverability of the Obama administra-
tion, potentially reinforcing continuity in U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. Whereas some are related to more recent socioeconomic and political-military
trends (crisis in the U.S. economy and inheritance of a residual fear of 9/11),
others are indicative of long-term constraints inherent in the U.S. policy-making
process as concerns Africa (historic White House and congressional neglect of the
African continent and bureaucratic influence in the policy-making process
as concerns Africa).

1. Crisis in the U.S. Economy
President Obama’s number one priority if he wants to be reelected (and all
presidents enter office with the goal of winning a second term of office) is re-
spending to the crisis in the U.S. economy. Not since Franklin D. Roosevelt
took office in 1933 has a new president inherited an economy in such disas-
trous shape, including a credit crisis that has led to a financial bailout of more
than $700 billion; decreasing home values and foreclosure crisis in the U.S.
housing market (typically the one greatest investment of average Americans);
dramatic decline in the stock market that has devastated retirement accounts;
rising unemployment that economists argue will not peak until late 2010; a
growing health care crisis, in which one out of five Americans does not have
health insurance; structural decline in the U.S. auto industry, historically one of
the mainstays of the U.S. economy; rising national debt from 5 trillion in 2000
to 10 trillion in 2008; and a serious contraction in the U.S. economy. One statis-
tic in particular stands out: the Congressional Budget Office projected in March
2009 that the United States would experience a record $1.8 trillion budget deficit
in 2009.

This domestic crisis will clearly consume a significant portion of the Obama
administration’s first two years in office, leaving little time, relatively speaking,
for foreign initiatives and especially those targeted toward the African conti-
nent. Moreover, the financial requirements of responding to this crisis will in-
vitably mean the lack of financial resources to fund new initiatives in Africa and
other regions of the world.

2. Inheritance of a Residual Fear of 9/11
A second potential constraint involves the Obama administration’s inheritance
of a residual fear of another 9/11 attack. Although it has subsided significantly
in the last eight years and especially in the face of the recent economic crisis,
this fear nonetheless remains within the fabric of U.S. society, as demonstrated
by the fear generated by the unannounced low-level flight of Air Force One
over New York City during the week of April 27 for a photo opportunity. The
Africa dimension of this residual fear is that the Obama administration has
inherited a series of national security initiatives, often critiqued as the
"militarization of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa," that a president seeking to avoid missteps on the path to reelection may be hesitant to dismantle.

One of the best examples of this inherited national security structure is a set of three regionally based counterterrorism programs in the "Islamic littoral" or coastal regions of the African continent: the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCIT) which includes North Africa; the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), which is responsible for the "Greater Horn of Africa"; and the East African Counter-Terrorism Initiative (EACITI). These counterterrorism initiatives are buttressed by the creation of a continent-wide Africa Command (AFRICOM), expansion of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program and other U.S. military aid programs, and the Gulf of Guinea Initiative, the primary goal of which is to gradually build up an effective regional security program capable of ensuring the safe transport of oil resources to the United States.

Together these regional security programs provide useful insights into the evolving nature of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. First, these programs serve as the core of an evolving foreign policy approach that, during the Bush administration, divided Africa into at least four spheres of variable foreign policy interest: (1) those regions (North and East Africa) destined to receive priority attention due to their proximity to the Middle East, the perceived epicenter of the global war on 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 counterterrorism efforts; (3) countries deemed important to U.S. 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 U.S. foreign policy. Not surprisingly, U.S. 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. Most important, these are not initiatives that a president seeking to avoid missteps on the path to reelection in 2012 will necessarily dismantle.

3. Historic White House Neglect of the African Continent
A third potential constraint involves historic White House neglect of the African continent amidst domestic and other international priorities. It is typically assumed by foreign observers that presidents and their principal foreign policy advisers will be the most influential and the most activist in terms of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. Throughout the Cold War and its aftermath, however, presidents traditionally have devoted less attention to Africa compared to 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.

Historic neglect of Africa at the highest reaches of the U.S. policy-making 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 United States as 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 nearly 200 countries worldwide, including fifty-three in Africa, and therefore the necessity of delegating responsibility for handling foreign policy for those regions considered marginal by 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 reelection, with simple electoral logic typically suggesting that Africa is not a priority for the vast majority of the voting public.

Even if we recognize that Barack Obama is different from all previous presidents, especially as concerns his personal connection to the African continent, an Obama White House will be consumed by foreign policy issues in other regions of perceived greater importance, potentially leaving little time for high-level White House attention to Africa. This tendency has already emerged during the first 100 days of the Obama administration. In addition to prioritizing U.S. relations with Europe and the northern industrialized countries (witness Obama's attendance at the G-20 Summit), the Obama administration has clearly demonstrated that 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, and an unprecedented diplomatic overture to Iran. The third region of foreign policy concern is South Asia, as witnessed by the increase of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and focus on Pakistan. Subsequent regions of concern include Asia and Latin America. The key question that one must ask: where is Africa in this U.S. foreign policy priority? Still presumably last.

4. Historic Congressional Neglect of the African Continent
A fourth potential constraint that may limit the maneuverability of an Obama administration as concerns Africa is historic 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 U.S. 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. Reelection pressures and time constraints imposed by terms of office (two years for representatives and six years for senators) force them to select and prioritize the domestic and the international issues which will receive their attention. Since the primary objective of most members is to be reelected, and since most U.S. 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 therefore relegated to relatively junior representatives and senators, such as Barack Obama, who served on the Africa Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.
An important impact of congressional neglect of Africa is 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 U.S. 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 policy-making process naturally flows to the White House and the bureaucracies of the executive branch. In this regard, the resurgence of guerrilla activity in the eastern provinces of Congo-Kinshasa at the beginning of 1999, let alone the involvement of several foreign armies in this conflict (what some policy makers typically referred to as "Africa's first world war"), failed to rise to the level of a policy-making crisis in the nonideological context of the post-Cold War era; a far cry from the crisis atmosphere which prevailed in the 1960s when a guerrilla insurgency within the same region was perceived by U.S. policy makers as threatening to install a pro-Soviet regime under the leadership of Patrice Lumumba.

Most important, the fact that both the Senate and the House of Representatives are dominated by the Democratic Party is in fact a double-edged sword for the Obama 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 whole host of domestic programs. Key question: Will Obama be able to take the lead and build working majorities that will support his priorities/initiatives, or will he be confronted by an overly activist Congress intent on pushing its own priorities/initiatives?

5. Bureaucratic Influence in the Policy-Making Process
The net result of White House and congressional neglect of Africa is that U.S. 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 grassroots constituencies that have the ear of the president and senior congressional leaders and that, most important, are considered crucial to reelection. 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 understand U.S. foreign policy toward Africa fully, 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 U.S. foreign policy toward Africa, as was the case of its predecessors during the Cold War.
But the unique nature of the U.S. policy-making 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 policy-making process 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. The key to potential change is who leads the State Department, and especially the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs, which traditionally has taken the lead as concerns U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. Toward this end, the nomination of Johnnie Carson as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs offers important insights. He most recently served as the 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 (1991–1994), Zimbabwe (1995–1997), and Kenya (1999–2003), 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.

An important reason for citing this long litany of Johnnie Carson’s Africa experience is to underscore that it is unclear how much a career FSO will push for significant change in the substance and the priorities of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. Moreover, the recent and significant nature of his involvement in the intelligence arena makes it unlikely that he will be a strong proponent for significantly changing the recent overemphasis on U.S. military/security policy toward Africa. His extended experience in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) and Southern Africa (Botswana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe) nonetheless bodes well for enhanced U.S. foreign policy attention to these two regions.

New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy toward Africa?

It is always perilous when one tries to peer into a crystal ball to discern future foreign policy tendencies just months after a new administration has taken office. However, if we look at what Obama has said and done during the campaign as well as emerging foreign policy threads during the first 100 days of his administration, against the backdrop of the five potential constraints already mentioned, we can get an idea of where an Obama administration may be headed as concerns Africa. Six trends in particular stand out.

1. Campaign and Presidential Appointments Demonstrate a Heightened Interest in Africa

The Obama campaign oversaw a massive three-hundred-person foreign-policy campaign bureaucracy, organized like a mini-State Department, to assist a presidential candidate whose lack of national security experience was a concern to voters during the campaign. This team included an unprecedented number of close advisers with impressive backgrounds in Africa. Their transitions to political appointees in an Obama White House provide an early sense of Obama’s priorities in Africa. To cite but five examples:
Susan Rice: assistant secretary of state for African affairs under the Clinton administration, who helped lead Obama's campaign foreign policy bureaucracy, and who currently is the U.S. Representative to the United Nations.

Mark Lippert: Obama's former Senate foreign policy adviser, who in 2008 returned from a Navy tour of duty in Iraq (Navy SEAL), and who currently is White House National Security Council Chief of Staff.

Denis McDonough: one of Obama's top foreign policy aides, national security coordinator for the campaign, former foreign policy adviser to Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, and current White House deputy national security advisor.

Jonathan Scott Grtation, retired Air Force major general who voted for Bush in 2000, accompanied Obama to Africa, refers to Obama as "America's Mandela," 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.

Samantha Power, Harvard human rights expert and Pulitzer Prize–winning author (A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide), who resigned her post as foreign policy adviser in the Obama campaign in March 2008 after calling Hillary Clinton "a monster," and currently is Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs at the National Security Council.

Three characteristics common to this core 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 U.S. interests abroad. Interestingly enough, this foreign policy team also demonstrates Obama's reliance on those with military experience (e.g., military backgrounds of Lippert and Gration), with important implications as to how an Obama administration will deal with the current overwhelming influence of strategic/military initiatives in Africa.

2. Obama's Governing Ideology: Pragmatic Traditional Realism with Strong Tendencies toward Liberal Internationalism

President Obama is not a typical liberal, but rather a pragmatic traditional realist with strong tendencies toward liberal internationalism, sometimes referred to as an "optimistic realist" or a "realistic optimist." As succinctly summarized by one observer during the presidential campaign, Obama

- often praises the foreign policy of the Bush senior administration ("I have enormous sympathy for the foreign policy of George H. W. Bush," he said in May 2008);

- does not speak in the moralistic tones (i.e., "good" versus "evil") of the Bush administration, perceiving countries and extremist groups as
complex, and motivated by power, greed, and fear, as much as by pure ideology;

- does not portray countries/movements as part of a monolithic threat (e.g., differentiates between various trends/tendencies within the Islamic world);

- does not use the soaring rhetoric of Bush’s freedom agenda, preferring instead to talk about enhancing people’s economic prospects, civil society, and his key word, “dignity”;

- rejects the Bush administration’s obsession with elections and political rights, and argues that people’s aspirations are broader and more basic—including food, shelter, and jobs (“Once those aspirations are met, it opens up space for the kind of democratic regimes we want”);

- holds a view of democratic development that is slow, organic, and incremental, usually held by conservatives; and

- talks admiringly about Dean Acheson, George Kennan, and Reinhold Niebuhr, all of whom were imbued with a sense of the limits of idealism and of the power of the United States to transform the world.

The implications of this worldview remain unclear. Those in favor of a foreign policy more firmly based on democracy and human rights are nonetheless increasingly beginning to worry that Obama’s worldview will result in little change toward authoritarian regimes in Africa, especially those that are known for advancing liberalization within the nonpolitical sectors of their societies, such as Tunisia and its progressive approach to women’s rights. According to these commentators, the outline of Obama’s foreign policy toward authoritarian regimes was in many respects demonstrated when he made his much-awaited speech on Islam during June 2009 in Cairo, Egypt—an authoritarian U.S. ally at the intersection of the Middle East and Africa that is considered key to advancing the Obama administration’s Middle East peace process.

3. Sober Reckoning as Concerns Africa Programs That Will Require Additional U.S. Financial Resources

President Obama has proposed several new foreign aid initiatives and the expansion of existing foreign aid initiatives as concerns Africa. During the campaign, for example, he noted his intention to double U.S. 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 to $50 billion by 2012. He in particular underscored a desire to showcase the Bush administration’s highly successful President’s Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) program, which he also pledged to increase from $15 billion in total funding during the Bush years to approximately $50 billion by 2012. There clearly has been a sober reckoning in this regard, especially in light of the economic meltdown in the U.S. economy. Although current PEPFAR levels will likely remain sacrosanct, it is difficult to imagine how the Obama administration will be able to “sell” massive foreign aid increases to both the American public and the U.S. Congress when so many Americans are either
jobless, losing their homes, confronting catastrophic health care costs, or experiencing all three together. One promising trend: the U.S. Congress recently approved a record $900 million for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Swift movement nonetheless has been and will continue to be evident as concerns Democratic Party/liberal initiatives that are not dependent on additional U.S. financial resources. One of the best examples of this trend occurred on January 23, 2009, when President Obama officially rescinded U.S. 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 George H. W. Bush, lifted by 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 during the Reagan and both Bush administrations that no U.S. family planning assistance could be provided to foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) “that use funding from any other source to: perform abortions . . . provide counseling and referral for abortion; or lobby to make abortion legal or more available in their country.”

According to “Population Action International,” the gag rule exerted a highly negative impact on numerous African countries, including Kenya, during the most recent Bush administration:

- Kenya’s leading reproductive health care providers have suffered serious budget cuts and were forced to close eight clinics, lay off large numbers of staff and scale back programs.
- In most cases, those shuttered clinics were the only source of health care for local communities.
- Community-based outreach services throughout Kenya’s rural areas have been greatly curtailed as the country’s primary family planning organizations cut back due to a lack of funds. Outreach services are often the only access rural men and women have to contraceptive supplies and education on HIV/AIDS.
- Kenya’s leading family planning organizations have been forced to withdraw from a U.S.-funded project to provide comprehensive and holistic reproductive and child health care, as well as HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, to vulnerable populations in Kenya; the project is consequently losing ground.

This policy, and others like it, has been/will be reversed by an Obama administration intent on demonstrating the fruits of electoral victory to its supporters. An early extended presidential visit to the African continent, almost certainly to include stops in Kenya and South Africa, constitutes another policy initiative that will entail little financial cost but that will generate great enthusiasm among both the Democratic Party base and Africans throughout the continent. Indeed, the countries visited (outside of Kenya) will offer perhaps the strongest indicator of Obama foreign policy toward Africa. In this regard,
great enthusiasm was generated by President Obama’s decision in July 2009 to make a two-day visit to Ghana—an African model for democratic governance and economic development—as part of a longer trip that included participation in the G-8 Summit in Rome, Italy, and a visit to Russia.

4. Cautious Approach to Conflict Resolution That Will Nonetheless Use the White House as a Bully Pulpit

The Obama administration has demonstrated a cautious approach to conflict resolution that is nonetheless willing to use the White House as a “bully pulpit.” President Obama entered office mindful of the fact that the United States has not played enough of a proactive role in recent years to resolve conflict on the African continent. In the case of Rwanda, for example, 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.

President Obama has underscored his administration’s intention to take a more proactive approach to African conflict resolution, and has specifically cited ongoing conflicts in Darfur, Zimbabwe, the eastern Congo, the Niger Delta, and Somalia. Although Obama’s knowledge of and reference to these conflicts is laudable, an important policy-making reality to consider is that effectively resolving any one of these conflicts would require the sustained attention of the White House and, most important, President Obama himself. It is nonetheless unclear if foreign policy challenges and priorities elsewhere, including Obama’s pledge to make the Arab-Israeli peace process a White House priority, will permit the degree of high-level White House attention necessary to make effective conflict resolution in Africa a reality.

5. Heightened Focus on Socioeconomic and Development Issues

President Obama has criticized the fact that U.S. development assistance to the poorest African countries decreased by nearly 50 percent from 2000 to 2008. He similarly has criticized the fact that the percentage of development assistance provided to the best-governed African countries has declined even more (by nearly 66 percent) during the same period. These trends were at least partially due to the militarization of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa during the Bush years, as part of the global war on terrorism. The Obama administration has pledged to reverse this trend, by strengthening a variety of nonmilitary programs designed to promote socioeconomic and political development, including the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) (which is inclusive of North Africa), and PEPFAR.

The most noteworthy and far-reaching proposal in this regard is Obama’s pledge to remake and restore the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to a position of preeminence in the foreign aid hierarchy. USAID funding was severely curtailed during the Bush administration, as increasing amounts of aid were channeled through the U.S. military establishment.
and newly created quasi-independent foreign aid programs, such as PEPFAR. As envisioned by its proponents within the Obama administration, this restructuring process would entail the moving to USAID of foreign aid programs currently under at least twenty-one 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.

6. Unclear Change in the Democratic Deficit in U.S. 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 United States with some of the worst abusers of human rights, such as the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak. In fact, all three of the closest U.S. allies in North Africa—Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia—are dictatorships. Other countries with which the United States has a strategic partnership in the region also have poor human rights records (e.g., Djibouti).

The case of Tunisia is particularly enlightening. Boasting a dictatorship that is perceived in Washington as a “strong U.S. ally in the Arab world” and a “valuable partner in the war on terrorism,” Tunisia was actively courted by the Bush administration. The capital, Tunis, is home to a rising number of U.S. facilities commensurate with its increasingly close relationship with Washington, including a new $42 million U.S. embassy, a Foreign Service Institute for teaching Arabic to U.S. government personnel who are preparing to work in Arabic-speaking countries, and a regional office for coordinating the activities of the MEPI program in North Africa (the only other such regional office is in the United Arab Emirates).

Any question as to whether democracy promotion or national security objectives dominated the U.S.-Tunisian relationship during the Bush administration was best addressed by then-secretary of state Colin Powell’s response to a question while on an official visit to Tunis in December 2003. When asked about President Ben Ali’s use of repression to silence dissent and ensure his unrivaled control over the Tunisian political scene since assuming power via extraordinary means in 1987, Powell’s response was that this was “a matter between him [Ben Ali] and the Tunisian people.” My wife and I were living in Tunisia at the time, and Powell’s statements were highly discouraging to human rights activists. Two months later in February 2004, Ben Ali’s strong support for U.S. counterterrorism initiatives was rewarded with a highly coveted head-of-state visit to Washington, including a White House visit with President Bush, amid a rising chorus of criticism by human rights activists. This visit was significant, in that it was the first such visit granted to Ben Ali since he took power in 1987. Although all of Bush’s predecessors (Reagan, Bush senior, and Clinton) denied Ben Ali’s request for a head-of-state visit, the Bush administration accepted, because of Tunisia’s perceived importance in the global war on terrorism. In short, an overriding preoccupation with terrorist threats led the Bush administration to overlook the authoritarian excesses of African regimes.
in favor of their willingness to support U.S. national security objectives (i.e., the war on terrorism), just as the United States did during the Cold War. The key dilemma for pro-democracy activists: it is unclear whether Obama’s governing ideology—pragmatic traditional realism with strong tendencies toward liberal internationalism—will lead to significant change in the democratic deficit in U.S. foreign policy toward Africa.