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Setting a Course for Obama's Rudderless Africa Policy

Brett D. Schaefer, Charlotte M. Florance, and Anthony B. Kim

African leaders and citizens had great expectations in 2008 that the election of President Barack Obama would elevate the prominence of Africa and its concerns in U.S. government deliberations. These expectations have not been met with concrete policy action. During President Obama's first four years in office, he spent less than 24 hours in Africa, making a brief stopover in Accra, Ghana, on the way back to the U.S. from Europe. The President made a more extended trip to Africa in 2013, where he announced that the U.S. would plan to host a summit with African leaders.

The upcoming August 4–6 summit with over 40 heads of African nations expected to attend, unfortunately, is poised to simply reinforce the Obama Administration's unfocused policy with few major announcements, agreements, or policy developments expected to be revealed. A photo-op and rhetoric do not substitute for serious policy to address mutual U.S. and African priorities on economic engagement, security, and governance.

Aimless Africa Policy

Shortly before the 2008 election, a senior Obama campaign Africa policy advisor outlined an agenda of (1) accelerating Africa's integration into the global economy; (2) enhancing regional peace and security; and (3) deepening democracy and account-

ability and reducing poverty.¹ These priorities were largely incorporated into the Administration's 2009 Africa policy framework.² The State Department's Bureau of African Affairs points to the *U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa*, most recently updated in June 2012, as the definitive statement on America's regional priorities which include strengthening democratic institutions, spurring economic growth, increasing trade and development, advancing peace and security, and promoting opportunity and development.³

Although generic, these priorities are unobjectionable. The problem is that the Administration has neglected Africa and done little to advance these policies aggressively, which has diluted the goodwill created with Africans by previous U.S. Administrations.

There are precious few initiatives, accomplishments, and policy advances that the Obama Administration has implemented to follow through on this broad agenda. Even the Power Africa initiative, announced by President Obama during his 2013 trip and touted as a "new approach to development," is more a reshuffling and reprioritization of existing resources than a major new initiative.⁴ Meanwhile, issues identified as priorities in his first term remain unresolved, such as instability and humanitarian crises in Sudan or renewing and strengthening the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which is set to expire on September 30, 2015.

Policy has for the most part been a passive continuity of preexisting policies such as the Bush Administration's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), with leadership on most issues ceded to the United Nations or the French—e.g., instability in Mali and the Central African Republic. While

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214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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the Administration was quick to claim credit for the emergence of an independent South Sudan in 2011, little attention was made to the serious devolution in governance following the country's independence, and it is now embroiled in a civil war.

A Summit in Search of an Agenda

According to the Administration, "The Summit will build on the progress made since the President's trip to Africa last summer, advance the Administration's focus on trade and investment in Africa, and highlight America's commitment to Africa's security, its democratic development, and its people."⁵ Nonetheless, how the summit contributes to that goal remains unclear.⁶ Indeed, the summit agenda and Administration statements prior to the event largely echo previous policy statements that also announced U.S. intent to strengthen democratic institutions, spur trade and investment, advance peace and security, and promote development.

Some have interpreted the summit as a response to perceived inroads being made by China and other countries in the region. China, India, Japan, and the European Union have been holding similar summits for years. However, there will be no one-on-one meetings between Obama and African leaders. Few major announcements or agreements are anticipated, and the \$900 million in business deals reportedly set to be announced at the U.S.-Africa Business Forum accompanying the summit pales in comparison to the \$32

billion pledged by Japan in 2013 and the \$10 billion of new loans announced by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during a trip to four African nations in May.⁷

It was appropriate that the Administration did not invite the region's worst despotic leaders: Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, and Eritrea's Isaias Afwerki. However, inclusion of leaders such as Teodoro Obiang Nguema—the autocratic president of Equatorial Guinea criticized for human rights abuses and corruption by the State Department—undermines the argument that the U.S. is focusing its relationships on countries dedicated to improving governance.

The summit looks to be a missed opportunity to refocus America's Africa policy, but a refocusing is necessary. Ultimately, the actions the U.S. takes toward building greater partnerships with African countries following the summit will be the ultimate test of President Obama's leadership and commitment to Africans. Specific steps that should be taken are:

- **Renew and upgrade AGOA.** As the law stands, nearly all imports from eligible sub-Saharan countries can enter the U.S. duty-free through September 2015. The Administration should work with Congress to quickly renew and upgrade AGOA to advance economic freedom in Africa, encourage economic integration within the region, and set the stage for a free trade agreement between the U.S. and Africa.⁸

1. Witney W. Schneidman, "Africa: Obama's Three Objectives for Continent," AllAfrica.com, September 29, 2008, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200809291346.html?viewall=1> (accessed August 1, 2014).

2. Phillip Carter III, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Policy in Africa in the 21st Century," February 9, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2009/117326.htm> (accessed August 1, 2014).

3. The White House, "U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa," June 2012, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/209377.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2014).

4. U.S. Agency for International Development, "Power Africa," <http://www.usaid.gov/powerafrica> (accessed August 1, 2014).

5. Press release, "Statement by the Press Secretary Announcing the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit," The White House, January 21, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/21/statement-press-secretary-announcing-us-africa-leaders-summit> (accessed August 1, 2014).

6. Gordon Lubold, "Has the White House Bungled a Historic Africa Summit?," ForeignPolicy.com, July 9, 2014, http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/07/09/white_house_africa_summit (accessed August 1, 2014).

7. Dan Keller, "Obama's Africa Summit Set to See \$900m+ in Deals Announced," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 22, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/frontiers/2014/07/22/obamas-africa-summit-set-to-see-900m-in-deals-announced/> (accessed August 1, 2014); Mike Cohen and David J. Lynch, "Obama Seeks Closer Africa Ties as China Is First Choice," Bloomberg News, July 29, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-07-28/obama-bids-to-forge-african-ties-as-china-becomes-first-choice.html> (accessed August 1, 2014); and Isabel Reynolds and Takashi Hirokawa, "Abe Offers \$32 Billion to Africa as Japan Seeks Resources Access," Bloomberg News, June 1, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-31/japan-seeks-african-trade-inroads-at-summit-as-china-dominates.html> (accessed August 1, 2014).

8. Brett D. Schaefer, Anthony B. Kim, and Charlotte Florance, "Congress Should Pave the Way for a U.S.-Africa Free Trade Agreement," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2836, August 19, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/08/congress-should-pave-the-way-for-a-usafrica-free-trade-agreement>.

- **Shift traditional development assistance to the Millennium Challenge Corporation and treatment of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tropical diseases.** Evidence that increased foreign economic aid leads to improved economic growth and development is scant.⁹ Equally notable is that government development assistance is growing less relevant as private financial flows have grown. The U.S. should focus its assistance on proven initiatives (such as PEPFAR) with measurable impact that bolster America's credibility or encourage policy changes to enable African nations to take greater advantage of private financial flows and entrepreneurship.
- **Pursue fundamental reforms of America's food assistance programs that would increase efficiency and effectiveness.** Food aid programs should be run for the benefit of people who are starving. Eliminating legal requirements on the use of U.S. food and shipping would result in more timely response to crises as well as savings from shorter shipping distances and competitive pricing.¹⁰
- **Reinforce the importance of democratic governance in Africa¹¹ and publicly support the region's democratic standard bearers.** Countries such as Botswana, Cabo Verde, Ghana, and Mauritius should be held as examples for the region, and the U.S. should support their growing regional leadership roles while isolating those with poor records for human rights and the rule of law.
- **Identify counterterrorism as the overriding U.S. security priority for the region.** Violent extremism is undermining stability in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, other African countries. The U.S.'s preeminent priority should be to work with other countries such as Niger, where the U.S. has a drone base, to counter this threat.
- **Promote security cooperation in the region.** The U.S. should leverage its existing strategic dialogue partnerships with Algeria, Angola, Morocco, South Africa, and Tunisia to foster greater regional security cooperation. The U.S. should increase funding and support for training and professionalization of African militaries and also dedicate more resources to maintaining training and retention of trained units. The goal should be to better enable African militaries to assume more responsibility for regional security and peacekeeping through the African Union or regional groupings or in support of U.N. peacekeeping.
- **Review and address flaws in U.N. peacekeeping.** The U.S. has supported U.N. peacekeeping and missions to address various crises in Africa. The U.N. has a mixed record on resolving these crises. Worse—as evidenced by a recent U.N. report finding that peacekeeping missions charged with protecting civilians failed to respond to 80 percent of incidents from 2010 to 2013—there are questions of whether U.N. peacekeepers are willing and able to fulfill their responsibilities.¹² The U.S. is the largest contributor to U.N. peacekeeping, being assessed 28.4 percent of the peacekeeping budget, and has a responsibility to ensure that the missions are improving the situations where they are deployed and that peacekeepers are fulfilling their responsibilities.

9. See for instance, Claudia R. Williamson, "Exploring the Failure of Foreign Aid: The Role of Incentives and Information," *Review of Austrian Economics*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 17-33, <http://www.nyudri.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/driwp88.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2014).

10. Bryan Riley and Brett D. Schaefer, "Congress Should Reject Proposed Food Aid Shipping Mandate," *Heritage Foundation Issue Brief* No. 4228, May 23, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/05/congress-should-reject-proposed-food-aid-shipping-mandate> (accessed August 1, 2014).

11. Charlotte Florance, "Africa: U.S. Leadership Needed to Promote Democracy," *The Daily Signal*, January 29, 2014, <http://dailysignal.com/2014/01/29/africa-u-s-leadership-needed-promote-democracy/>.

12. United Nations General Assembly, "Evaluation of the Implementation and Results of Protection of Civilians Mandates in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations," March 7, 2014, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/787 (accessed August 1, 2014).

Africa Is Watching

During the upcoming summit, which marks a critical juncture of America's engagement with Africa, peoples of the continent will be watching, reading, and listening closely to the words of the Obama Administration. President Obama still has an opportunity to advance forward-looking engagement with Africa. It would be a shame if he just settled for recycled rhetoric and an expensive photo-op.

—**Brett D. Schaefer** is Jay Kingham Fellow in International Regulatory Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. **Charlotte M. Florance** is a Research Associate for Economic Freedom in Africa and the Middle East in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign and National Security Policy of the Davis Institute. **Anthony B. Kim** is a Senior Policy Analyst for Economic Freedom in the Center for Trade and Economics, of the Institute for Economic Freedom and Opportunity, at The Heritage Foundation.