

**ASR FORUM**

**Africa in the Age of Obama**

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**Superb Intentions and U.S. Policy Constraints**

David S. Wiley

Barack Obama's election was an extraordinary event in American and world history, but already in his second year as president, the luster and the popularity of the Obama administration has faded, even among many who mobilized to elect him. In addition to fighting two wars, Obama is attempting to fix a broken health care system in the context of a nationally contentious electorate and Congress. He also is coping with a mounting debt burden from seeking to recover from an economic collapse and public anger at an environmental disaster of mega proportions, requiring him to rein in the banks and corporations that were unleashed from public regulation during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton years. In addition, he is commander-in-chief of the U.S. military and its rapidly expanding U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

This was an administration elected on "hope for change." Indeed, Obama's election raised expectations across the U.S. and throughout Africa that a man of African heritage, indeed a global person, could be and had been elected. This quintessentially optimistic, intelligent, and gifted American is the product of a Kenyan father and an internationally engaged mother, a multicultural childhood, and a global education as graduate of a private secondary school and elite American universities, and he has been pinned simultaneously with American, biracial, African American, African, and even global identities (see Zeleza 2009).

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**David Wiley** is a professor of sociology and African studies at Michigan State University. He has served as director of MSU's African Studies Center, president of the African Studies Association, co-chair of the Council of Directors of Title VI National Resource Centers, vice-chair of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, and co-chair of the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars. His current research concerns environment and development in East and southern Africa and international education in the United States. E-mail: [wiley@msu.edu](mailto:wiley@msu.edu)

## The Good News on the Obama Africa Policies

Before becoming president, Obama had shown good instincts on Africa and the needs of the poorer nations. In 2007, before his presidential campaign was under way, he introduced Senate Bill 2433, the Global Poverty Act, which aims to “reduce by one-half the proportion of people worldwide, between 1990 and 2015, who live on less than \$1 per day.” At the urging of the U.K and several European nations, he was seeking to join them in providing 0.7 percent of the gross national product for foreign aid as part of the U.N. Millennium Development Goals plan. (Congress did not pass the Act.) More recently, Obama’s 2010 budget proposes doubling U.S. foreign aid to more than \$50 billion per year despite the burden of a \$1.75 trillion deficit and the worst recession in more than a quarter of a century (see Patten 2009). The Obama administration also has proposed a 54 percent increase in international family planning and reproductive health programs, the highest funding levels ever. As reflected in his budgets, Obama’s priorities include increased support for the IMF and World Bank, increased global health programs, more support for U.N. peacekeeping activities, and increased funding for combating climate change, for agriculture, and for the Peace Corps. Finally, Obama has proposed a 10 percent increase in funding and broader support for the State Department in order to give new focus to diplomatic negotiation rather than the “hard power” of the U.S. military, a reversal of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld policies.

On a similar note, soon after taking office, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a commitment to African development and multilateral cooperation by “helping African nations . . . conserve their natural resources and reap fair benefits from them; stopping war in Congo; [and] ending autocracy in Zimbabwe and human devastation in Darfur.” “We must work hard with our African friends to reach the Millennium Development Goals in health, education and economic opportunities,” she added, referring to a set of goals set out by the United Nations that seek to end poverty and hunger; instill universal education, gender equality, and child and maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS; and promote environmental sustainability and global partnerships (Clinton 2010).

Similarly, Obama places a new emphasis on multilateralist foreign policy that respects the global diversity of differing interests and values among nations. To the West Point graduating class in 2010 he pointed out that their “success will be measured not merely by performance on the battlefield, but also by your understanding of the cultures and traditions and languages in the place where you serve.” He continued with a description of a new perspective on U.S. international cooperation:

We are clear-eyed about the shortfalls of our international system. But America has not succeeded by stepping out of the currents of cooperation—we have succeeded by steering those currents in the direction of

liberty and justice, so nations thrive by meeting their responsibilities and face consequences when they don't. . . . The international order we seek is one that can resolve the challenges of our times—countering violent extremism and insurgency; stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and securing nuclear materials; combating a changing climate and sustaining global growth; helping countries feed themselves and care for their sick; preventing conflict and healing wounds. If we are successful in these tasks, that will lessen conflicts around the world. (Obama 2010)

Obama also offers a new openness to the United Nations family of organizations, from paying the backlog of U.S. dues to responding with less belligerence toward those nations with whom the U.S. disagrees. There are even new possibilities of support for some of the U.N. protocols that the U.S. has opposed or ignored for decades. For instance, the U.S. and Somalia are the only two nations that have not ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Obama has described the failure to ratify as “embarrassing” and has promised its review. In addition, the U.S. has not yet ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and Hillary Clinton has indicated that “the Obama Administration will continue to work for the ratification of CEDAW . . . because we believe it is past time, to take this step for women in our country and in all countries (2010).” We also are told that the administration has suggested to the U.N. Office in Washington that it may be willing to move ahead on the Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) agreements as well as those other U.N. treaties and protocols that have an impact on Africans across the continent. Surprisingly, though, in November 2009 the State Department, deferring to the Department of Defense, indicated that the administration would not support the international convention banning land mines, a position that may be reviewed after sixty-eight U.S. Senators called for supporting it (Butler 2009). Whether or not action is taken on these global treaties will set the context for U.S. foreign policy and U.S. military aid, sales, and action abroad.

### **Enlarging the U.S. Military Role in Africa**

The painfully bad news about Obama's foreign policy is reflected in a photo on Inauguration day of a U.S. soldier at Guantanamo Bay Prison replacing the portrait of the Commander in Chief, President Bush, with one of President Obama. Obama became president of the entire government—all the facets of the Washington foreign and military policy, including the policy consensus on Africa in effect when he took office. As Lubeck, Watts, and Lipschutz (2007) reported from the Center for International Policy, soon after September 11, 2001, the precursors of a new U.S. strategy had emerged under Defense Secretary Rumsfeld:

Citing energy security and terrorist concerns, the U.S. military radically revised its strategic vision for the West African region; strategy shifted primarily from training for peacekeeping missions in Africa to training for counter-terrorism and energy security. Nigeria has been a particular target of this shift in energy security policy, not only as a strategic ally in the region but also as a “front line” state in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Like its predecessor, anti-communism, the GWOT is a timeless, borderless geopolitical strategy whose presumptions lead to defining all conflicts, insurrections and civil wars as terrorist threats, regardless of the facts on the ground.

As part of that new perspective, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) had been invented by 2006, separating Africa (excepting Egypt) from the Central (Middle East) and European Commands. Now, officially, AFRICOM “supports the U.S. Department of State in the achievement of US foreign policy objectives in Africa, . . . where appropriate provides personnel and logistical support to State Department–funded activities, . . . [and] work[s] closely with U.S. embassies in Africa to coordinate training programs to improve African nations’ security capacity” (AFRICOM 2009). Even before his election, Obama’s foreign policy team had written,

There will be situations that require the United States to work with its partners in Africa to fight terrorism with lethal force. . . . AFRICOM, . . . [w]orking under the foreign policy leadership of the State Department[,] . . . should help to integrate military (especially non-lethal capabilities) with all the other elements of US power and diplomacy. AFRICOM should promote a more united and coordinated engagement plan for Africa. (Leon H. Sullivan Foundation 2007)

To achieve greater integration of military and civilian policy, unique among U.S. geographic commands, AFRICOM has two deputies reporting to the four-star army general commander, one for Military Operations (DCMO) and one for Civil-Military Activities (DCMA). The latter directs the command’s plans and programs for health, humanitarian assistance, de-mining action, disaster response, security sector reform, Peace Support Operations, and partner-building functions (Ward 2007).

Despite Obama’s plans to increase the State Department’s authority and budget, it has fewer than 10 percent of the Africa experts (probably circa 220) of AFRICOM and the Pentagon. The Department of Defense contingent consists of AFRICOM’s 1,465 Africa-focused personnel at headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, alone (as of October 2008), plus additional officers and employees at the Molesworth Base in the U.K. of the United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) and many analytic, support, and instructional personnel at the Pentagon, the Defense Language Institute (in both Washington, D.C., and California), and at various U.S. military bases.

Since 2008, AFRICOM’s training and other operations in Africa have

grown rapidly, especially across the Sahel from Senegal and Mali to Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti (site of the single U.S. base in Africa). While publicizing human interest stories such as rebuilding a school, immunizing children, and clearing unexploded munitions in Nigeria, AFRICOM has been engaged in military training, joint operations (especially in the Horn of Africa), familiarization visits, and enlargement of U.S. military liaison missions in embassies across the continent.

In September 2009, apparently with White House approval, General David Petraeus, commander of the Central Command, issued a classified Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force Execute Order, part of “a massive expansion of clandestine military and intelligence operations worldwide, ...giving the military’s combatant commanders significant new authority to conduct unconventional warfare... including intelligence gathering and reconnaissance activities in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and Central Asia” (Ambinder 2010). Going beyond the Bush administration’s approval of some covert military activities far from war zones, the new order regularizes clandestine military visits and makes more systematic the building of “networks that could ‘penetrate, disrupt, defeat or destroy’ Al Qaeda and other militant groups, as well as to ‘prepare the environment’ for future attacks by American or local military forces” (Mazzetti 2010).

## Conclusion

Barack Obama assumed the presidency with good instincts and hopes and plans for better U.S. relations with Africa’s nations and peoples. He is hobbled, however, by the U.S. and global economic crises and the continuing U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, which deters him from assigning the funds and implementing the programs needed to give new support to Africa. Perhaps, even more, he is shackled with the modern American history of approaching the world with the power and the threat of a strong military, built with a military and intelligence budget larger than all other nations combined, to ensure access to Africa’s natural resources and to oppose militant Islamic radicalism. It is not surprising that shortage of development funds, the pressing needs for petroleum and other minerals, and the focus on militarily dominating perceived or potential enemies now continues to shape U.S. relations with Africa rather than the more progressive vision Obama has voiced.

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