

# **A Smarter U.S. Approach to Africa**

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**Opening chapter in the forthcoming CSIS Africa Program report:**

*Africa Policy in the George W. Bush Years:  
Recommendations for the Obama Administration*

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## **The Bush Era: a Powerful Legacy**

During President George W. Bush's eight-year tenure, U.S. policy towards Africa underwent a dramatic enlargement, marked by an expansion of U.S. interests, a high-level diplomatic push on Sudan, unprecedented resource flows, and the establishment of several historic initiatives. This unfolded in an era in which security, energy, and health emerged as new, near-strategic U.S. interests in Africa, and in which U.S. Africa policy ascended to a position far closer to mainstream foreign policy than ever before. The U.S. constituency for an activist Africa policy broadened considerably to include public health institutions, powerful new foundations, vocal religious groups, and a more active corporate sector. U.S. Africa policy attracted consistently strong bipartisan support. But it was also criticized for approaches that were imbalanced, unsustainable, underpowered, and inconsistent.

Expectations for the Bush administration vis-à-vis Africa were initially low. Yet almost immediately upon taking office, beginning first with a major diplomatic investment to end the North-South civil war in Sudan, President Bush lent his leadership and sustained commitment to high-profile, signature initiatives that each had a heavy or predominant focus on Africa: the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM.). Assistance levels to Africa trebled, and favorable opinion towards the United States held, especially in those states where the administration made its greatest commitments. The U.S. reputation in Africa remained better than in other regions of the world where U.S. policy approaches on counter-terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, allegations of torture and prisoner abuse, and climate change, among other issues, undermined U.S. standing.

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Over time, PEPFAR and MCC became symbols of the value of investing substantially in soft power in Africa, and in the case of PEPFAR, came to be commonly regarded as among the most positive of Bush era legacies. These initiatives created new models for the delivery of U.S. foreign aid, and established public health as a new dominant foreign assistance priority.

Despite these significant achievements, there were limitations in U.S. policy approaches to Africa. Competing demands of other U.S. foreign policy priorities impeded the sustained high-level attention essential to achieve results in Africa. Hesitation and innate skepticism persisted among senior policymakers, grounded in awareness of the tough enduring obstacles to achieving sustainable policy successes in Africa. These are fundamental realities that the new administration will have to confront.

Much work lies ahead, and many questions do not yet have answers. It is not yet clear how the important but unfinished Bush era legacies are to be refined and sustained effectively into the future and assured of essential support from both U.S. governing institutions and African partners, especially in a time of worsening economic crisis at home and globally. Nor is it clear how rising U.S. security engagement in Africa is to be reconciled effectively with commitments to reducing poverty and promoting democracy, human rights, and good governance: no integrated U.S. policy strategy has yet to be set out. Institutionally, it is not clear how PEPFAR, MCC, and USAID are to better integrated, less encumbered by fragmentation, and buoyed by a renewed effort to place them within a single, overarching development frame.

### **Paradox and weakness**

Paradoxically, the Bush era revealed that in a period of significantly enlarged U.S. engagement in Africa, U.S. influence actually declined. This was because of U.S. policy weaknesses, because Africa has become a far more intensely competitive political and economic marketplace, and because a number of African states have embraced a problematic and defiant mode of malgovernance, and found other external partners to support them. U.S. sway on the continent has become objectively less than it was in the Cold War era.

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Power and alliances in Africa have become more broadly distributed, driven by new trade and investment relationships, an area where U.S. attention has lagged. Western humanitarian and public health flows are often taken as a given and an obligation for wealthy, developed countries. African states have become more sensitive to U.S. unilateralism and any appearance of Western presumption. African energy and commodity producers have enjoyed heightened revenue flows, and African states are today actively courted by a range of new partners and suitors from China, Russia, India, Brazil, Malaysia, and others.

Africa has also seen a deflation of strong democratic and human rights leadership, in South Africa and Nigeria especially, and a willful disregard of democratic norms and a deliberate turn back to harsh, authoritarian tactics: witness coups in Guinea and

Mauritania, and profoundly flawed elections in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia, accompanied by violent repression.

The Bush era also exposed serious limitations in U.S. approaches. A massive U.S. investment in HIV/AIDS—despite its immeasurable human impact—carries little U.S. leverage: a large-scale life-sustainment project cannot, for obvious ethical reasons, be easily suspended or reduced in retaliation for a recipient country's behavior on other sensitive governance issues. In the Bush years, U.S. diplomatic skill and leadership have often been weak, and bilateral relations with critically important African states—Nigeria, South Africa, Angola—have withered. Conspicuously insufficient U.S. diplomatic capacities vis-à-vis Africa made it difficult, if not impossible, for the State Department to provide effective policy oversight and to create coherence across institutionally fragmented initiatives.

Important gaps emerged, most notably in U.S. energy policy towards Africa and in U.S. engagement with China. Counterterrorism approaches were at critical moments narrowly defined, imbalanced, and costly to conflict resolution efforts in Somalia and promotion of democratic governance in Kenya and Ethiopia. A vocal and well-organized U.S. domestic constituency on the Darfur crisis in Sudan maintained pressure for leadership on that conflict but at the same time gravely limited the leeway essential to U.S. diplomatic efforts and undermined the work of U.S. envoys. The absorption by the Bush administration in Sudan also meant that chronic crises in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo did not receive the senior-level attention and sustained, robust engagement that they warranted, given their humanitarian import, the scale of atrocities and abuses, and the destabilizing threat they pose to their neighbors. Robert Mugabe's tyranny in Zimbabwe and protracted, enabling support from South Africa also never became a consistent policy priority.

President Bush's commitments on HIV/AIDS and malaria, on a massive scale and at massive cost, have had the appearance if not the reality of crowding out other important health priorities and straining health systems. These initiatives unfolded in a period when U.S. investments in basic development needs and democracy promotion in Africa were relatively static, provoking calls for renewed commitments in these areas and greater balance in foreign assistance approaches.

## **Opportunities for the Obama Administration**

The new administration of President Barack Obama inherits from the Bush administration major institutional legacies that will require active sustainment and refinement. It faces expectations that the United States will carry forward a highly activist African agenda matched by adequate new resource flows. As it considers its own signature priorities, it is under pressure to be careful in preserving major gains. Within the newly formed Obama administration, internal pressures have mounted for the introduction of a broad new development framework that could encompass PEPFAR,

MCC, and basic needs and governance, that could elevate development as a top priority, give it greater institutional heft and independence, and grant it higher-level political leadership. How these ambitions play out, whether they enjoy adequate high-level backing and consensus, whether they can be instituted quickly and effectively, and how they ultimately shape U.S. approaches to Africa remain key questions that will require time to resolve. Hasty overcommitment to structural reform of U.S. foreign aid would be a costly mistake.

President Obama's arrival on the world stage stirs considerable enthusiasm, expectation, and goodwill from within Africa. This may create an opening for an Obama administration to build systematically on the Bush administration's legacy, better bridge U.S. security concerns with long-term development and governance issues, and lay down signature achievements of its own.

At the same time, the incoming administration confronts a wall of new high-order demands inside Africa: an arc of worsening instability and conflict including Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Somalia, with grave uncertainty hanging over Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Uganda. It confronts domestic and global demands as well: an uncertain and dangerous global recession and severe economic downturn in the United States; active U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; and daunting security challenges in North Korea, Iran, and elsewhere in the Middle East. In this context, President Obama's entry may create outsized expectations that rapidly lead to disillusion. This could be acute if the global economic downturn results in worsening poverty, malnutrition, and instability among vulnerable African states, and if the United States and other Western powers are perceived as indifferent.

The tough realities before the Obama administration may downgrade Africa as a foreign policy priority. These challenges may obscure what is at stake, how much progress has been achieved through higher U.S. engagement, and how much additional special effort may be needed to mitigate the impacts a global recession will have on the continent. At a minimum, the economic crisis at home in the United States, the price of a domestic stimulus and recovery package, and the broader global economic downturn argue for a sober realism. There can and should be a redoubling of effort in U.S. approaches toward Africa, giving priority to preserving recent gains, gauging and documenting results from U.S. investments, working to achieve higher efficiencies in U.S. funding, adhering to long-term goals, and making smart, balanced, short-term adjustments. To be successful, the Obama administration will require a strategic approach, and must give highest priority to selecting the very best, most competent and respected policy leadership in both Washington and in U.S. missions in Africa.

## **The elements of a smart U.S. approach to Africa**

The chapters in this volume cover in depth a range of key Africa policy areas: aid and trade; energy; crisis diplomacy; security engagement; public health; China in Africa;

democratization and governance; and climate change, demographics and food insecurity. In each, the author was asked to review the major developments in that sector since 2001, critique the major Bush policy approaches and impacts, and propose specific priority policy initiatives for the new administration.

Across these diverse chapters, there are five core elements that should underpin a smart U.S. approach to Africa.

The new administration should:

**Be strategic, openly acknowledge the gravity of the global economic crisis, and align rhetoric with reality.** High expectations and grave fiscal constraints may create a gap between rhetorical assurances and actual resources and attention. The new administration should guard against this tendency. Rather than a proliferation of new programs or commitment to structural reform of foreign aid, the new administration should outline early a limited set of strategic priorities. In our view these should include: fix AFRICOM's rationale and place it coherently within a balanced U.S. foreign policy strategy; sustain critical health commitments, improve their efficiency and better link them to long term development; create a new multilateral diplomacy that better addresses Africa's chronic violent crises; promote a renewal of ethical governance in Africa; and establish rural development as a priority. These priorities should be set within a reaffirmation of U.S. national interests in Africa: promotion of human dignity and democratic norms, economic growth and alleviation of poverty, stability and security. These priorities should be cast as a continuation of success in pursuing smart power in Africa.

The new administration should demonstrate that it is serious about investing in its core African interests while signaling it is poised to reengage at a higher level on other important priorities when the economic crisis has subsided. Presidential leadership will be the *sine qua non* to drive forward an activist engagement on Africa, win continued support from the American people and Congress, build on the successes and institutional legacies of the Bush administration, and preserve bipartisan cooperation on Africa.

**Create effective, robust U.S. diplomatic capacities.** Diplomacy should be the strongest leg of U.S. government engagement in Africa—but today it decidedly is not. At present, the Africa Bureau at the Department of State and its counterpart bureau in USAID are woefully deficient in financial, leadership, and human resources. Today the Africa Bureau cannot effectively manage the multiple challenges confronting U.S. policymakers and exert leadership over a fragmented, stovepiped set of institutional power centers. The bureau is 30 percent under strength, underpowered, and overstretched. Embassies are far too often fortresses separated on security grounds from the very societies which they are charged with understanding. Special focused recruitment and retention programs are required if the hollowing out of capacity at the State Department and USAID is to be reversed and a cadre of seasoned Africanists is to be cultivated and empowered to lead.

**Forge a new multilateral diplomacy.** As U.S. leverage on the continent diminishes there is need to engage creatively with other partner countries, with the African Union, the European Union, and with the United Nations. Strengthening and coordinating better with UN institutions and the EU should be a priority. Forging common ground within the Security Council will be essential, particularly on new emerging threats such as narcotics and piracy, on long-standing common priorities like African peacekeeping, and on divisive complex crises like DRC, Sudan, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. This will require sustained commitments, leadership, and restraint. The administration should place special emphasis on building collaboration with China in security, development, and conflict resolution.

**Reinvigorate governance and accountability.** Virtually every U.S. interest in Africa will best be served by partnerships with participatory, capable, and accountable African governments. Reprioritizing democracy will require a rebalancing of the U.S. approach, particularly with strategic partners or individual leaders who have enjoyed U.S. support. It will require a comprehensive approach towards energy security that shifts from a predominant emphasis on oil to one that integrates governance, transparency, and anti-corruption measures. It will require a counterterrorism and security approach that adequately acknowledges and supports the centrality of participatory government and human rights. It will require sustained investments in institutions of countervailing power: namely, parliaments, civil society and media. And it will require a move away from the uncritical embrace of autocrats.

**Push hard to strengthen African agriculture.** The 2008 food crisis carries forward into 2009 and underscores the need for a comprehensive strategy on African agricultural development. It has generated an opportunity to reengage Congress and powerful U.S. constituencies on how the United States delivers food aid, on trade and protection issues, and on longer-term investments to build viable, sustainable agricultural sectors in Africa. Building agricultural capacity can serve as a path to address employment for the continent's burgeoning youth populations and to mitigate chronic food insecurity and debilitating micronutrient deficiencies. A broad U.S. approach on agriculture and food security can begin to tackle land reform, climate change and environmental stewardship, trade capacity, urban-rural linkages, and critical inputs to raise productivity.

The United States retains considerable prestige and legitimacy in Africa and can point to major concrete gains in the Bush years. The new administration has an important opportunity to build on that legacy; to harness broadening domestic interest in Africa; and to craft a balanced, "smart power" approach to Africa that gives primacy to diplomatic engagement. In that endeavor, it must draw on the capacities and experience of African and other international partners, both to address immediate crises and to collectively address longer-term challenges in which African, U.S., and global interests are at stake.