A New U.S. Policy Approach Toward Africa

By 'Dapo Oyewole

At no time in recent political history has America’s foreign policy featured so centrally in its domestic social and political discourse, or been such a crucial determinant of voters’ electoral decisions. This is partly because the consequences of eight years of problematic rule by George W. Bush, the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the impacts of the global financial crisis, and the ripple effects of other international challenges are now being felt hard at home. However, while much debate has taken place during and after the recent Presidential election campaign about U.S. policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, China, Russia, North Korea, Cuba and Pakistan, little has been said about Africa, apart from references to the new President’s ancestry – which will not be the basis of his foreign policy, even if it contributes to his worldview.

Thus, as President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton go through the long shopping list of foreign policy priorities that they must grapple with, it is important to highlight the fact that Africa is one continent they must not, and cannot afford to, ignore. Leaving Africa on the backburners of policy attention, as often done in times past, at this crucial juncture of change when America is redrawing its foreign policy architecture, would be a mistake which will attract formidable consequences in the near future. Africa is one region where the United States has not utilized the full range of its financial, diplomatic, and developmental capacity to create as positive an impact as it has the power to. This article thus argues that the United States needs a new policy approach towards Africa, and further highlights some key issues that have to be factored into such a policy to make it effective.

At no time since the sizzling heights of the cold war has Africa been of greater
immediate and longer-term strategic importance to America’s domestic and international interests. Whether it is in tackling terrorism, promoting democracy, ensuring global peace and stability, or even securing alternate sources of oil for America’s increasing energy needs, the United States needs Africa more today than ever. For example, as America’s domestic demand for oil continues to increase, oil needs are becoming more and more of a critical issue on the U.S. policy agenda, both as an economic security challenge and as a national security priority. Continued political instability and rising hostility in some parts of the Middle East has forced a rethink of the traditional sources of oil for the United States. Its eye is now on Africa.

Today, about eighteen percent of U.S. crude oil imports come from Africa, and this is expected to grow to twenty five percent by 2015. However, the emerging giants, China and India, also have rising oil needs as their economies continue to grow and their process of industrialization goes into higher gears. Their eyes are also on Africa’s oil. Now, depending on how strategic it is capable of being, Africa in the midst of several ‘suitors’ can play hard to get; pick the one with the most favourable deal; two-time both and play them off against one another to its own benefit or, if unprepared, could fall prey to another Packenhamian ‘Scramble for Africa’. In these scenarios, the question is how will the United States play its cards to come out on top without leaving Africa below? Does it still have the gravitos needed?

It should be noted, however, that though the United States may need Africa, it is not beholden to Africa. Africa also needs the United States with equal, or in some respects, greater urgency. For example, the United States remains one of Africa’s largest trade partners and can be one of Africa’s strongest allies in spurring economic growth and international political weight, strengthening democratic institutions, ending conflicts, tackling poverty and combating decimating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. It could shape a new relationship of beneficial reciprocity on these issues. However, this would only be the case if China’s increasing economic clout and political influence, actualized by massive investments in infrastructure building projects in Africa in exchange for access to natural resources, does not succeed in gradually diminishing or superseding U.S. influence in Africa.

Without a doubt, China’s increasing role in African affairs, and its diplomatic
and economic charm offensive in the region, is something the new U.S. government will have to think seriously about in shaping its own policy positions on a wide range of issues. It will have to decide how best to respond to the China factor. To compete or collaborate? That is the question. Either way, a policy response needs to be crafted as the Chinese model, based on a ‘meddle not’, ‘judge not’ and ‘place no conditions’ policy of so-called respect for the sovereignty of African states, seems to have gained much sway in Africa. As a result, African Heads of State are now beginning to turn East rather than West for support in meeting their development needs. Why? Because they can largely obtain unconditional aid from China instead of having straight-jacketing aid conditionalities dictated to them by Western donor nations.

African governments are fed up with the Western tune and seem to prefer the Eastern rhythm. The Chinese realised this early and now seem to be strumming the economic pulse of today’s Africa, simply by changing the music. China also realises that the votes of 53 African countries at the UN is a valuable political gain, which they would be only too happy to secure – bearing in mind that, as an ally, China’s veto power on the UN Security Council can also be very useful to African countries in pushing their own agendas as well. This political barter system, if played out fully, will to a degree shift the power alignments at the UN’s most important decision-making body, the Security Council, in China and possibly Africa’s favor. China and Africa seem to be cementing a mutually rewarding economic and diplomatic quid pro quo arrangement that meets both their needs. Will America be able to do the same? Will America be able to feel the new rhythm on the continent? Will it change its diplomatic dance to suit the new beat? Its ability to do this or to play a different tune will, to a great degree, determine the extent of future U.S. economic and political influence in Africa.

Africa today is not the same as it was a decade ago. Much has changed in its politics, its polities, its economies and its societies. The region is fast democratizing, albeit with many challenges. Civil society is more active, visible and audible, though it is still stifled in some places. The region’s economies, though largely incomparable to those of the West, have some of the fastest growth rates in the world and some segments of African societies are increasingly becoming more globalized in their activities, practices and orientation – though many more are left out.

While corruption, conflict, instability and disease are still rife in some places, accountability, peace, stability and progress exist in others. The continent is extremely diverse, and applying the ‘one size fits all’ approach, either in analysis or in policy implementation, often fails. However, today, one
common thread can be noted running through the social pulse and policy direction of most African countries, and that is the hunger not for aid and pity, but for trade and dignity. There is a keen desire within civil society for effective and functional democracies. Africans are hungry for development, not through the pedantic (largely failed) approaches rammed down African throats by international development regimes, but for development on their own terms with Africa at the steering wheel, determining its own speed and direction.

For the United States to remain influential in Africa or to enhance its influence in the region, it will need to listen more to Africa and engage the progressive side of Africa, realizing that business cannot continue as usual if we are to see ‘change we can believe in’ in U.S.-Africa relations. It will need to go beyond paternalism and opportunism and beyond the traditional framework of aid, charity and humanitarian assistance. The United States should no longer use its wealth as a bargaining chip to instruct or pressurize African countries to do its bidding. What is needed is a new paradigm of partnership based on shared dialogue in dealing with mutually identified and agreed challenges, to produce collective benefits both domestically and internationally, for Americans, citizens of respective African countries, and the world.

The United States must start listening more and say more in the language of soft power. There are many strategic objectives it wants to pursue, but the chances of success are much higher if it listens and negotiates more through meaningful dialogue and not by bullying, megaphone diplomacy or sabre-rattling. It must step back from pushing a clearly resistant and reluctant Africa into accepting its plans for establishing an AFRICA COMMAND (AFRICOM) on African soil. This only fuels suspicion and resentment and creates fertile ground for anti-American groups to whip up sentiment that can result in negative actions against American interests. There are many other strategies that would be much more effective in helping to strengthen the security sector and maintain peace and security on the continent without a fully fledged U.S. military base on African soil. The funds earmarked for establishing AFRICOM would be put to much better use by providing training, equipment and added enabling capacity for African Union troops to actualize Rapid Reaction Brigades that can be effectively deployed to conflict flash points like Darfur, Congo, Northern Uganda, Somalia — or even in tackling pirates in the Somali coast. If the United States listened to Africans,
building trust and confidence first by demonstrating a real commitment to bolstering the capacity of Africa’s own security forces, Africans may become less suspicious and less resistant to the idea of AFRICOM.

Demonstrating greater interest and leadership, through decisive action, whilst working with the UN, the African Union and other international and domestic stakeholders must be at the forefront of the U.S. peace and security policy agenda in Africa in resolving conflicts in Africa. If it can do this with an effective blend of diplomacy, consensus building and a temperate dose of assertiveness, it will win more support in the region for some of its own strategic interests. For example, it is an open secret that the United States has become shy when it comes to conflict intervention in Africa. After the fiasco in Somalia and the failure to intervene in Rwanda, the United States has remained in a somewhat paralytic quandary in terms of how to effectively contribute and participate in conflict prevention and peace keeping operations on the continent.

However, if the United States is to be seen as a true partner for maintaining peace and security in Africa in its foreign policy ‘makeover’, it needs to exorcise the ghost of Somalia that still haunts it and learn from the failures in Rwanda. It needs to show leadership. Today, as what the United States calls “genocide” in Darfur rages on, and as the conflict that has killed nearly five and a half million people in the Congo stares the world squarely in the face, America, like many other international and domestic actors, seems unable to develop an effective strategy to decisively intervene and help to end these conflicts. The United States must work with the African Union and other international actors to resolve these conflicts before they conflagrate further. Peace in Africa can only ensure greater peace and security for America. Zimbabwe also remains a global headache. However, with a fragile but hopeful power sharing deal, things may begin to turn around. The United States should ensure that, in concert with other global actors, it monitors and continues to pressure the Zimbabwean government to do right by its people. Where possible, the United States must help to strengthen civil society and assist with humanitarian relief for those who have fallen victim to President Mugabe’s disastrous policies. The United States cannot do everything that will resolve these conflicts, but it cannot do nothing either. Act it must, but what it must not do is to act unilaterally.

The United States must delineate foreign policy aims, science, and religion when attempting to deal with the issue of HIV/AIDS. While tackling the pandemic remains the highest point of George W. Bush’s legacy in Africa through his President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), a major
adjustment needs to be made if this is to built on in the Obama administra-
tion: the U.S. must stop supplanting science with selective morality by
preaching sexual abstinence in Africa as a foreign policy position based on
the outgoing President’s religious beliefs. George W. Bush’s administration
withdrew support for family planning clinics and, in some instances, initia-
tives that provided condoms and other forms of contraception, and instead
pushed for sexual abstinence as a primary strategy for ending the spread of
HIV/AIDS. While the principle can be understood on a moral level, what
cannot be understood is making foreign policy a tool for shaping or dictating
sexual habits in other parts of the world. Preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS,
malaria, and tuberculosis in Africa must remain at the forefront of U.S. global
health priorities. This is in the health, economic and security interests of both
America and Africa. Investing in campaigns for safer sexual behaviour may
be welcome but a clear distinction needs to be made between a president’s
religious beliefs and the country’s foreign policy.

The age of pity is over. Africans do not want the world to see their continent
as one characterised mainly by kwashiorkor-ridden children with begging
bowls or emaciated adults waiting to be saved by the west. It is a continent
with people who are willing to work hard to earn a living and a private
sector that is dynamic and innovative, but disabled by lack of, or limited,
infrastucture that is made all the more inadequate by the digital divide. As
a result, economic productivity is not as high as it could be and employment
levels are low. Because of corruption, poor governance and limited foreign
investment, fifty years after independence the continent still lacks the infra-
structure necessary for increasing economic productivity and performance.
The United States must consider developing more innovative ways to meet
Africa at its point of need, while still achieving its own goals. These can be
mutually complimentary and, perhaps, a few pages can be borrowed from
the Chinese approach in this regard.

If the United States truly wants to develop a successful new policy approach
towards Africa, it will need a combination of new policy lenses, fresh minds,
innovative ideas and restructured institutions. USAID, the American face
of development aid on the continent, must be strengthened financially and
in terms of human resources, and allowed to function as an autonomous
development agency separate from the State Department – similar to how
the UK’s Department for International Development is separate from the
Foreign and Commonwealth Office. This would allow people on the ground
to distinguish between U.S. development support as an international obliga-
tion and development support as tool for pursuing foreign policy objectives.
Many African leaders had lost confidence in the Bush administration’s ability
to delineate the two. A revamped, autonomous, and development-focused USAID could become a public diplomacy tool for repositioning America in Africa and healing hearts and minds internationally.

The Department of African Affairs — one of the youngest and smallest in the State Department — also needs attention if U.S.-Africa policy is to change for the better. For robust U.S. foreign policy translation and implementation in Africa, this Department needs added capacity, both in numbers and resources. The Department needs ‘pracademic’ eggheads who balance practical field experience with academic theory and whose historical knowledge provides a background, not a template, for analyzing and understanding contemporary Africa in its complexity.

At this crucial juncture, which could signal the redrawing of U.S. foreign policy architecture under the Obama Presidency, the United States must review and redefine its interests in, and its policy approach towards, Africa. President Obama’s ‘wind of change’ must blow away what has otherwise mostly been a disjointed array of undefined, knee-jerk, paternalistic, opportunistic and ad-hoc interventions and instead develop clear, holistic, robust, respectful, and principled strategies for engaging a continent that is encumbered by myriad challenges — yet pregnant with multifarious opportunities. If trends of better governance, economic growth, and political stability that are emerging in some parts of the continent continue, then we can confidently say that change is gradually coming to Africa. If the United States wants to be a catalyst of this process and continue to be influential and supported in the region, it must position itself as reliable partner, as a facilitator and not an instructor, in making that change happen in Africa. If it does not, China will.

President Obama inferred during his campaign that he believes that Africa’s challenges need to be tackled in a manner that addresses both the symptoms and the root causes of some of the continent’s social, political and economic problems. If this is at the core of his chosen approach, then he is heading in the right direction. But as the African saying goes: ‘You cannot shave a man’s head in his absence’. As such, the United States must ensure that in restructuring and redefining its relationship and policy approach towards Africa, it does so in a manner that ensures that the views, voices, priorities and aspirations of today’s Africans are reflected in its new Africa policy. It is the only way a new Africa policy will yield positive results in both regions and bring effective and constructive change in U.S.-Africa relations. Change we can build on.

-Carol Gallo served as lead editor for this article