

## A BARACK OBAMA PRESIDENCY Implications for US-Africa Relations\*

Francis A. Kornegay

Democratic Party nominee for President of the United States (US), Illinois Senator Barack Obama has enjoyed a commanding strategic advantage in the Electoral College and appeared headed toward victory on 4 November 2008. In anticipation of his possible victory, it is important to speculate on what a Democratic victory in November would mean for US-Africa relations. Obama's campaign thus far provides little indication that Africa policy would undergo major change. Furthermore, Africa has emerged as one of the least controversial areas of US foreign policy, at a time when the overwhelming geopolitical focus rests on the Middle East, Persian Gulf and South West Asia. The global war on terror has thus far been the prism with which the Bush administration has related to Africa. The brief therefore speculates on the implications of an Obama victory in terms of policy, in particular for the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and by extension, the diaspora dimension.

### Introduction

At the time of writing, the Democratic Party nominee for President of the US Barack Obama enjoyed a commanding strategic advantage in the Electoral College map of state-by-state tracking polls, and appeared headed toward victory in November. His Republican rival, Arizona Senator John McCain cannot be discounted yet, if for nothing but Obama's race. Only on 5 November 2008 will it be known whether a compelling African-American presidential candidate can actually pull off a

victory in a contest for the White House. However, it is intriguing to speculate the implications of a Democratic victory for US-Africa relations. This is not only because the Democratic Party standard bearer is of African descent, but because he is also a second generation American citizen, having well-established family and kinship roots in Kenya. This becomes more compelling given the additional possibility of an expanded Democratic Party majority in both Houses of Congress.

However, it must be said from the outset that Obama's well-publicised ancestry has not

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shed much light regarding policy terms for US-Africa relations should he be elected president. It is unknown whether or not this would result in a qualitatively new departure in US-Africa relations and whether there would be major or substantial changes in US-Africa policy. Judging from Obama's campaign thus far, there is little indication that Africa policy would undergo a substantial change.<sup>1</sup> Since the end of apartheid in South Africa and the dissipating of the southern African controversies that animated policy debate on Africa, bipartisanship has come to broadly characterise US policy toward Africa. Given the influence of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and other African-American and liberal/human rights activist constituencies, the Democratic Party inclinations tend toward greater engagement.

Otherwise, Africa has emerged as one of the least controversial areas of contestation in US foreign policy. This is at a time when, post-9/11, the overwhelming geopolitical focus of American foreign policy has centred on the Middle East, Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia, and revolves around the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Within this context, it is the global war on terror that has formed the prism through which the George W. Bush administration has largely related to Africa at the political level. This has focused mainly on Africa's northern tier, and especially in the Horn of Africa, in and around the Djibouti staging area of US troop engagement in the Persian Gulf. More recently, the focus is on collaborating with Ethiopia in fighting Islamist insurgents challenging the barely surviving Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

Indeed, where controversy has emerged, it has been on the militarising of the Africa policy as seen in America's ill-considered strategy in the Somali region. But this issue assumed a particular intensity over the establishment of AFRICOM. That this initiative was conceived and decided on bureaucratically in Washington's geostrategic security calculus without prior politico-diplomatic consultation in Africa got it off to a bad start. Now, instead of AFRICOM having its base on the continent, it resides in Stuttgart, Germany. An even bigger issue in Washington is how AFRICOM reflects the Pentagon's budget, which overshadows the resources of the US Department of State and other arms of American civilian diplomacy. In fact, this may be where a more robust policy debate on Africa emerges in the wake of the US and global financial meltdown, thereby forcing an urgent need to review both the American domestic and national security priorities. But for now, both

the Obama and McCain campaigns are, with caveats, supportive of AFRICOM.

## The Policy Framework

Considering Obama's lack of focused policy thinking on Africa, and separate from that of his campaign advisers, the only guide to Africa policy has to be taken from some of the more or less 'boiler-plate' articles and speeches that have been prepared. These provide something of an overarching policy framework for informing more regionally-tailored approaches to Africa and other areas of the world. Thus, in 'Renewing American Leadership', Obama asserts that in pursuing "effective collaboration on pressing global issues among all the major powers," this must also include the "newly emerging ones such as Brazil, India, Nigeria, and South Africa" apart from, presumably, China and Russia as well as the G8 (which includes Russia).<sup>2</sup> He adds that, with reference to these "newly emerging ones," we need to "give all of them a stake in upholding the international order" and that, "to that end, the United Nations (UN) requires far-reaching reform."<sup>3</sup> Yet, he stops short of calling for UN Security Council reform/restructuring. This reform is what India, Brazil, South Africa and Nigeria are looking for apart from what Obama does mention: management of the UN Secretariat; overextension of peacekeeping operations; eight resolutions passed by the UN Human Rights Council condemning Israel; and the absence of resolutions condemning genocide in Darfur and human rights abuses in Zimbabwe.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, considering the global financial crisis radiating out of the Wall Street collapse, much of what Obama has already boiler-plated has already been overtaken by events. The US, its European partners and Japan are now focused on the urgency of reforming the Bretton Woods institutions, already shown as outdated by the global financial meltdown amid the emergence of Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs). SWFs are indicative of the power-shift toward a post-western order as economic clout is now concentrating in the newly dubbed China-India-Middle East-Africa (CHIMEA) nexus of geoeconomic-political relationships.<sup>5</sup>

In short, a Democratic administration under Obama will have to show more than an obligatory passing acknowledgement of 'the emerging ones.' Washington needs to confront the task of adapting American foreign policy to the realpolitik of a new multipolar era. Indeed, it is part of the high expectations that the world at large has already invested in Obama as not only one who

would be America's first black president, but even more uniquely, one whose roots are in the developing Afro-Asian worlds of Kenya and Indonesia. This is a world -in its Least Developed Countries (LDC) rendition - that Obama wants to transform: "...since extremely poor societies and weak states provide optimal breeding grounds for disease, terrorism, and conflict."<sup>6</sup> According to Obama, "the US has a direct national security interest in dramatically reducing and joining with our allies in sharing more of our riches to help those most in need," to which he has put the price tag of an annual investment of US\$50 billion by 2012.<sup>7</sup>

This would be accompanied by a US\$2 billion Global Education Fund which, among other things, would be used to counter the kind of Islamic fundamentalist education emanating from Saudi-funded Madrassas in a strategy aimed at 'winning hearts and minds' in Muslim lands.<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, feeds into a much broader strategy. Obama envisions a role for deploying military force that would dovetail with aspects of his global war on poverty by participating in "stability and reconstruction operations." However, it is not clear how such deployments would address what he sees as a need to "confront mass atrocities," which is clearly a reference to humanitarian interventionism and the elusive mandate of a 'responsibility to protect.'<sup>9</sup>

### Will AFRICOM be Revisited?

In his land-mark address to the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars (WWICS) on 1 August 2007, which focused on counter-terrorism strategy, Obama articulated an integrated civilian-military approach to US missions abroad that could well fit within the AFRICOM paradigm. Under his proposed Shared Security Partnership Programme (SSPP) he would promote the establishment of Mobile Development Teams bringing together personnel from State Department, the Pentagon and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to "work with civil society and local governments to make immediate impact on people's lives, and to "turn the tide against extremism."<sup>10</sup> This, he refers to as integrating "all aspects of American military power."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the emerging strategic framework is one in which a counter-terrorism strategy is embedded in a foreign policy approach to alleviating the political and socioeconomic causes of conflict, instability and extremism in the developing world, including Africa. Hence, one of the possibilities of policy direction under an Obama administration would be an AFRICOM relaunch. This would presumably

factor the 'lessons learned' from its abortive beginning that has consigned it to being headquartered in Europe instead of Africa where it has been cold-shouldered. However, this distinct possibility, raises even larger questions; not just about Africa policy but more broadly about foreign policy/national security strategy overall during a crisis period of emergency economic recovery from the systemic financial collapse of 2008.

AFRICOM, apart from being controversial in Africa, has perhaps been even more controversial in Washington. The controversy has everything to do with the bureaucratic-institutional balance of power within the foreign policy/national security establishment between the Pentagon with its hegemonic resources and the civilian establishments in the Department of State and USAID. This is where 'the militarisation of foreign policy' has reportedly met with withering resistance from quarters of the foreign policy establishment. They are opposed to the Department of Defense's overwhelming dominance of foreign policy strategic and budget priorities and resources.

The AFRICOM controversy is particularly important, both within the African context and that of the bureaucratic politics of Washington. On the one hand it can be seen as the 'tip of an iceberg' at a very critical historical juncture in the US-Africa relations, and on the other hand, it can be seen as part of the broader political-economy of US national security considerations. Within the context of Africa's peace and security priorities, there is a need for the US to engage Africa's 'emerging powers' such as Nigeria and South Africa, along with the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) in a security dialogue. The aim will be to address Africa's urgent but inadequately addressed peacekeeping crises and how security assistance can accelerate the regionalisation of peace and security in the implementation of regional standby forces.

In addition, a security dialogue with South Africa could draw in its India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) partners on the issue of maritime security in the Indian Ocean; where there is a particular need to address the Somali piracy upsurge in the Gulf of Aden. It is questionable that this should be left up to North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Otherwise, Obama raising the issue of the UN's over-extended peacekeeping agenda can serve a useful purpose if, along with other G8 countries, there emerges a reliable burden-sharing formula for moving forward the stabilisation of the continent. To the extent that AFRICOM can more directly accommodate this African agenda as well as American security interest on the

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continent, perhaps it can make better headway under a Democratic administration headed up by Obama. However, US security interest in Africa as elsewhere in the world, must increasingly address the demands of sustainability in accommodating ‘ends and means’ during what is sure to be a period of prolonged post-meltdown economic recovery. These considerations must necessarily address the budgetary imbalance between military and civilian instruments in American statecraft which are part of the Washington controversy surrounding AFRICOM.

Two proposals that have emerged in Washington calling for an integrated national security budget conceivably address some of the concerns of State Department and USAID and their supporters in the tug-of-war over the longer-term fate of AFRICOM. The first one, put forth by left-leaning progressives at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) and the allied Foreign Policy In Focus think tank, advocates a ‘Unified Security Budget’ that would feature significant increases in spending for international diplomacy and homeland security “while reducing the current half-trillion-dollar Pentagon budget.”<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, a group of 50 retired three- and four-star generals and admirals have called for “shifting the emphasis of US foreign policy from one that relies heavily on military might to one that elevates the value of diplomacy and development.”<sup>13</sup> The second proposal, more aligned with IPS, comes from a “commission convened by congress and appointed by Bush.” It makes recommendations on foreign aid which will be unveiled as a ‘National Security Budget,’ combining Pentagon and State Department budgets while increasing the latter’s by ten percent and doubling foreign assistance levels.<sup>14</sup> The Defence Secretary Robert Gates has also been singing a tune of increasing budgetary resources for diplomacy, and this contributes to a sense of anticipatory transition to a more Democratic-friendly foreign policy/national security focus.

### National Recovery and the Diaspora Dimension

Certainly, the budget implications of the financial meltdown-induced recession would seem to reinforce these new-look national security budget initiatives while paving a way for confronting that ‘sacred cow’ called the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex. Thus, for example, there is no reason why the current proposals that have been posited cannot be folded into a more ambitious ‘Economic Emergency Recovery Budget’

process. This will fall under an ‘Economic Emergency Recovery Administration,’ presided over jointly by Congress and the White House’s Council of Economic Advisors. The aim will be to reconfigure national security budgeting in a manner that brings balance between the State Department/USAID and Pentagon budgets within the broader integrated context of restoring national budgetary balance between the military and civilian economies by reordering America’s national priorities in the interest of post-meltdown recovery. This digression from a direct focus on Africa is important in providing context to the new political and policy environment in Washington that will heavily influence US-Africa policy. To a large extent, as with most other foreign policy priorities in Washington, there are domestic constituency interests interacting with political pressures and economic imperatives that drive the policy process. What is especially intriguing about the 2008 election is how the entry of a new constituency dimension emerging out of African immigrant communities will impact the US-Africa policy process, should the Democrats expand the party’s margins in Congress as well.

Former Clinton administration National Security Council adviser on Africa and an adviser on the Obama campaign, Whitney Schneidman, has described how the campaign has reached out to African immigrant communities. It sought to reap the benefit of Obama’s own Kenyan immigrant background alongside his base within African-American constituencies. “The more than two million African immigrants in the US can be an important source of support in strengthening relations with Africa,” and an indicator of how this diaspora dimension may play out in a Democratic administration led by Obama.<sup>15</sup> This will be attempted, according to Schneidman, “through a more active dialogue with the various African diaspora communities and organizations,” in the expectation that “the US will find itself in a better position to develop its agenda and accomplish its objectives in Africa.”<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, “the diaspora community has started to organise itself into groups such as Ethiopians for Obama, Eritreans for Obama, the African Immigrant Movement for Obama and the African Diaspora for Obama,” emphasising that as far as the Horn of Africa divisions are concerned, “one thing that Ethiopians and Eritreans clearly agree on is that they want Barack Obama to be the next president of the US.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, these communities, as with other minorities such as the Arab-American community in metropolitan Detroit (in Michigan), are strategically located in key ‘battleground states.’

Thus, Schneidman continues: “Most immediately, we want those 10 000 Ethiopian-Americans in Virginia to help turn that state blue on November 4<sup>th</sup>, we want all Nigerian-Americans living in Cleveland, Akron and elsewhere to turn out the vote in their communities, we want the Somali-American community in Minneapolis to help win Minnesota.”<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion: US Policy with an East African Twist?

Virginia and Ohio are key states which voted for George W. Bush as ‘red states’ in 2004. They normally fall in the Grand Old Party (GOP) column during elections. Virginia, especially, would be an important feather in Obama’s cap. It would breach the solid Republican grip on the old ‘Confederate’ South that has defined that party’s ‘southern strategy’ since the 1960s gains of the civil rights movement transformed the position of the two-party system in that region of the country. While the potential political benefits of an organised African diaspora community first began to surface in the 2004 presidential campaign of Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, it is during the Obama campaign that the full flowering of the dimension is finding political expression.

This new Africa constituency phenomenon presents a multidimensional challenge at several levels:

- The need to solidify relations between the majority of African-Americans of slave descent and those who are more recently of immigrant descent
- The need for a creative outreach by the African-American establishment and its political institutions and cultural organisations such as the CBC in integrating African immigrant communities into the National Black Agenda
- The importance of a more considered AU strategy addressing the growing diversity of the US-African diaspora
- A more conscious US official strategy of cultivating an African diaspora linkage in formulating and implementing its objectives on the African continent.

Indeed, given Barack Obama’s Kenyan roots, that portion of the African immigrant diaspora constituency in the US from Greater East Africa, including the Horn of Africa, could be cultivated as a constructive resource in an American strategy. They could work with the countries of that region, the AU, the East African Community (EAC), the Inter-

Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD), and such regional organisations in stabilising this most volatile of regions on the continent.

Thus far, a perception that both the Democratic and Republican parties continue to view Africa through a humanitarian lens rather than a more strategic prism remains. They fail to take into account the continent’s emerging market and power status within the broader power-shift from the Euro-American West to the Afro-Asiatic East. Apart from Obama’s interest in Kenya’s continued post-crisis recovery from its violent political breakdown in early 2008, it is unclear to what extent Obama and his advisers sense the strategic importance of the greater East African region. Indeed, of the region as a whole, and the priority that the EAC is giving to its regional integration into Africa’s first political federation; one that would bring together five states into a larger political and economic community. Reinforcing this importance is the prospect of even greater interregional cooperation and integration between Eastern and Southern Africa as the EAC joins up with the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in evolving a broader tripartite integrationist agenda. Hence, East Africa, including a more creative focus on stabilising Somalia, could serve as a fitting and logical focal point for a Democratic administration to make its mark in Africa. This could be accomplished in a manner that would reinforce the AU/NEPAD integrationist objective of transforming regional economic communities on the long road to a continental union government and an African Economic Community. However, this would mean that the Democrats – including their lead constituencies among African-Americans and African diasporans of immigrant descent – would have to evolve from their conventional liberal internationalist wisdom of greater engagement with Africa toward a much more pan-Africanist and strategically conscious vision of the entire continent.

### Notes and references

- 1 Also see: ‘US Foreign Policy: Quo Vadis?’ In *Global Dialogue*, August 2008, pp 8-12, 32-33.
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- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 See: Martin Walker, ‘Indian Ocean Nexus,’ In: *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 2008, pp 21-28.
- 6 Obama 2007, p 7.

Hence, East Africa, including a more creative focus on stabilising Somalia, could serve as a fitting and logical focal point for a Democratic administration to make its mark in Africa

- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, p 3.
- 10 'The War we Need to Win,' *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama-wilsoncenter.htm>.
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- 14 *Ibid.*, p 2.
- 15 Whitney W. Schneidman, 'Obama's Three Objectives for Continent,' [http://allafrica.com/specials/us\\_election\\_2008/](http://allafrica.com/specials/us_election_2008/). Part of a larger blog treatment: "Obama's and McCain's Africa Policies: In the Campaigns' and Candidates' Own Words.'
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*





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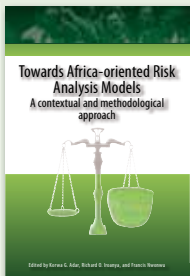
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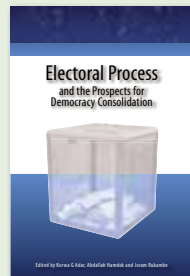
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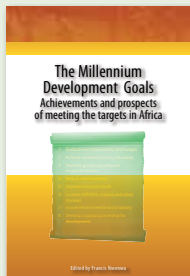
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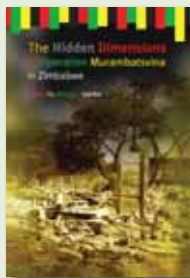
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