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## President Barack Obama and Africa's Uncompleted Journey, Part I

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By Richard Joseph

*A public meeting of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs on February 28 will consider the question, "President Obama and Sub-Saharan Africa: Just Right or Not Enough?" Several commentaries which demonstrate the increasing demand for enhancing American engagement with Africa are provided on the Council's website.<sup>[1]</sup> Africa is an ineluctable part of Mr. Obama's legacy and he brings to African affairs a unique understanding of its constraints. "With better governance," he declared in Ghana in July 2009, "Africa holds the promise of a broader base of prosperity". Millions of Africans today are constructing the pillars of that prosperity. How President Obama can engage the United States in deepening this process, in ways that are*

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*mutually beneficial, should summon forth ideas that are feasible and also consonant with his philosophy of government. In the first of a two-part essay, I will show how this debate relates to ideas for bolstering a liberal international order. In the second part, I will elaborate on specific policy priorities.[ii]*

1960 was the year of African Independence when 17 countries, about a third of the continent, pulled down the flags of their colonial powers and raised their own. The following year, on August 4, 1961, Barack Obama was born. He is not only linked to Africa as the son of a Kenyan, his life calendar and that of Africa are intertwined. On the two occasions when Mr. Obama gave formal addresses in speeches in Africa, he spoke to the heart of the dilemma of new nations that had stumbled along the path of progress. As a U.S. Senator in Nairobi, Kenya, Mr. Obama described in August 2006 how corruption corrodes the state from the inside, preventing it from bringing peace, justice, and prosperity to the citizens of Kenya and other African countries. On his return to the continent three years later as U.S. president, he declared in Ghana that enlightened leadership, democratic institutions and good governance are the keys to economic growth and prosperity. These themes are woven into the U.S. Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa issued by the White House in June 2012.

Many commentators have been critical of the level of attention devoted by the Obama Administration to Africa. In its defense, the Administration has had to cope with a prolonged economic recession, extricate the U.S. from two land wars, combat international terrorism and turmoil in the Middle East, and confront other daunting challenges. An opportunity to send a needed signal to Africa was missed, however, during the State of the Union Address on February 12. When President Obama announced the completing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and talks to create a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the European Union, he could have added a few words about the prospects for enhanced engagement with an economically resurgent sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, Africa appeared in references to combatting terrorism and al Qaeda affiliates in Somalia and Mali. It was also implied in the paragraph devoted to “the most impoverished parts of our world” where “people live on little more than a dollar a day”. The commitment to eradicate extreme poverty in two decades, and realize “the promise of an AIDS-free generation”, is well and good. But these familiar woes should have been juxtaposed with the striking economic advances in Africa and the new opportunities they represent for Africans as well as Americans.

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## Pragmatic Liberalism: A Governing Philosophy for Today's World

President Obama's second term heralds a new era. His inaugural address was anchored to a reaffirmation of the American "creed" of its founders. Before discussing its implications for the people and nations of Africa, it is worth noting the overlap with a recent publication by Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry: "Democratic Internationalism: An American Grand Strategy for a Post-exceptionalist era."<sup>[iii]</sup> According to these scholars, the capacity of the United States to shape the world in positive ways exceeds that of any other nation. The central strategy, they state, should be building a domestic and international order in which "peace, prosperity, and freedom are widely shared." The roots of American liberal internationalism lie in "social democratic ideals" and "an equity agenda". The governing approach should reflect "progressive pragmatism". While the American system involves rights and representative institutions, it is also an "experimental project of incremental adaptation and innovation."

Americans in the twentieth century evolved a "complex smart state", the authors contend, characterized by "burden-sharing, problem-solving, and mutual learning." Responding to external challenges requires adapting American values and capacities to the "post-hegemonic system of global governance." In an era of complex interdependence, the United States, according to Deudney and Ikenberry, no longer has the capacity to serve as the "sole provider of global public goods." Nevertheless, American leadership is indispensable, and the anchor of foreign policy should be the strengthening and activation of the community of democratic nations.

In his second inaugural address on January 21, President Obama linked his policy agenda in a similar way to an affirmation of the essence of America and its system of democratic government. The address began by recalling the statement in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and the inalienable rights with which they are endowed. The Republic was set on "a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time". There has been a constant balancing of "initiative and enterprise" with the need for an activist government; of the fundamental ideals of America and making them real in "today's world". Deudney and Ikenberry would be pleased with Mr. Obama's melding of the tenets of liberal democracy and social democracy, of free enterprise and social equity, when he declared: "our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it."

The inaugural address was brief on foreign policy, but what it said

reflected the pragmatic progressivism – I prefer to call it pragmatic liberalism – that President Obama advocates at home. As he stated, the United States should ensure “the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity, human dignity and justice”. He affirmed in his second inaugural address American support for defending and strengthening democracy overseas while remaining “the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe: no one has a greater share in a peaceful world than its most powerful nation”. And he advanced a view of leadership that is equally visionary and pragmatic, evoking America’s “lasting birthright” and “precious light of freedom” alongside the need to “act in our time”. President Obama is doing no less, one commentator remarked, than defining a *“21<sup>st</sup> century version of liberalism that could outlast his time in office.”* [iv]

In one paragraph of his inaugural address, President Obama began five successive sentences with the phrase, “Our journey is not complete...” They were followed by a list of the unfulfilled dimensions of America as a lawful, just and peaceful country. On his next visit to Africa, he could begin a public address with similar words and fill in the blanks with aspirations known to his audience. Mr. Obama advanced a robust view of the responsibilities of government that carried over into the State of the Union address a few weeks later. He could very well repeat to African government officials what he said in that second address: “We were sent here to make what difference we can, to secure this nation, expand opportunity, and uphold our ideals through the hard, often frustrating, but absolutely necessary work of self-government.”

## Going forward, how should President Obama construct his Africa legacy?

The first observation is that, in line with Deudney and Ikenberry, the principles, orientations and priorities to be applied should be no different from those Mr. Obama is espousing regarding the American journey. There is hardly a word in the second inaugural address that the citizens of Africa would not associate with their own aspirations. The American-African conversation should be conducted on the basis of shared values and interests. Again, following Deudney and Ikenberry, the conversation can be based on *“the pull of success, not push of power”*. Such a change in tone and focus would be welcomed by America’s interlocutors in the continent.

The second observation is that, despite the difficulties, many countries – especially in sub-Saharan Africa – are exiting a long tunnel and experiencing a “new birth” of political and economic freedom. Africa is

moving away from the era of major wars, unelected governments, and state-dominated and mismanaged economies. Since the mid-1990s, an economic upswing has persisted despite the global recession. In a few decades, Africa will be the most populous continent, and several of its economies will count among the most productive in the world. On the first appropriate occasion, President Obama should present to the American people the outlines of an **American Agenda for Africa**. Unlike the U.S. Strategy toward Africa, the Agenda would couple the best ideas within the Administration with those of diverse American constituencies including the new African diaspora.

Aaron David Miller commented that Obama's State of the Union Address "stressed fixing America's broken house, not chasing around the world to fix everyone else's."<sup>[v]</sup> Interestingly, in a conversation I had with an African graduate student at Northwestern University after the address, she stated that President Obama should not be criticized for failing to tackle Africa's problems more vigorously. "That is for our leaders to do", she remarked. I sensed that her views reflected feelings of members of her generation. They are skeptical of demands for more external assistance by governments which had often made poor use of internally-generated and externally-provided resources.

While hailing the opportunities, it is important to be frank about the challenges to be confronted. We can identify today a few fairly-constructed national entities in Africa (Cape Verde, Ghana); many undergoing major reconstruction (Guinea, Ivory Coast); some dealing with fault lines that can rupture into violent conflict (Kenya, South Africa); some with parts being constructed while others are torn down (Nigeria). Dynamic countries (Rwanda, Uganda) can be found abutting "nation-spaces" that have never known coherence and stability (Congo Kinshasa, Sudan); and countries with great resources have been derailed by their leadership (Zimbabwe). Given this diverse scenario, how should President Obama most usefully invest his authority and talents, and marshal Americans to engage with the positive trends and opportunities?

## Enhanced Engagement with Africa

The engine that will power increased prosperity and poverty reduction in Africa is the achievement of transformative and inclusive economic growth over an extended period. To make it a reality, the following is my suggested list of priorities. In the second part of this essay, I will elaborate on each of them, show how they are connected, and identify emerging policy proposals:

1. Trade and Investments

2. Strengthening Democracy
3. Developmental Governance
4. State Capacity and National Cohesion
5. Peace and Security
6. Energy, Water, and Transportation
7. Youth, Women, and the Diaspora

I will conclude by summarizing an article that examines the US-EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.<sup>[vi]</sup> What is surprising is how much the author, Philip Stephens, discusses this Partnership using the same theoretical framework as the Deudney and Ikenberry essay — and which is also reflected in President's Obama recent public addresses. According to Stephens, while the trade deal would “boost investment, growth and living standards”, “the reward is *the advance of the liberal political order* that has lately seemed in retreat.” (italics added) Furthermore, he states, the deal would “abolish tariffs, remove regulatory barriers and create an integrated marketplace.” The pull of success would be evident in the strengthening of “international norms and values”. Among them are “the rule of law, collective security, respect for human dignity and accountable government”.

An American Agenda for Africa, if it becomes a reality, will similarly include mechanisms for increasing trade and investments and building interconnected markets. But it must also be wedded to strengthening security which, according to Stephens, “resides in broad acceptance of international norms and values as well as in brute military force.” This challenge must be grasped by those who advocate enhanced American engagement in Africa. It is important to connect the emerging economic order in the continent with efforts to strengthen, as Stephens says of the Transatlantic Partnership, *the rule of law, collective security, respect for human dignity and accountable government*. Africa's uncompleted journey can be fruitfully discussed in relation to the unfolding journey of America's 44<sup>th</sup> president as well as the political and economic renewal he is championing at home and abroad.

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[i] See the list of resources at

[http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/Event/FY13/02\\_February\\_13/President\\_Obama\\_s\\_Africa\\_Policy\\_\\_Just\\_Right\\_or\\_Not\\_Enough\\_.aspx](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/files/Event/FY13/02_February_13/President_Obama_s_Africa_Policy__Just_Right_or_Not_Enough_.aspx)

[ii] This two-part essay draws on many years of policy analysis and advocacy whose central axis is the promotion of democracy, development and security in a complex and rapidly evolving continent.

For commentaries since 2008, see

[www.brookings.edu/experts/josephr.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/experts/josephr.aspx) and

[www.africaplus.wordpress.edu](http://www.africaplus.wordpress.edu).

[iii] <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/democratic-internationalism-american-grand-strategy-post-exceptionalist-era/p29417>. The following quotes are taken from this text.

[iv] Richard W. Stevenson, "In Age of Spending Cuts Making A Case for Government," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2013.

[v] Aaron David Miller, "The Avoider":

[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/12/the\\_avoider\\_obama\\_state\\_of\\_the\\_union\\_foreign\\_policy](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/12/the_avoider_obama_state_of_the_union_foreign_policy)

[vi] Philip Stephens, "Transatlantic free trade promises a bigger prize," *Financial Times*, February 15, 2013.

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