

What Can Africa Expect from a Romney Administration?

Written by Andrew C. Miller

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ANDREW C. MILLER, OCT 28 2012

The 2012 U.S. presidential debates confirmed something Africa watchers already knew: the region is at the margins of U.S. foreign policy. The candidates touched on Mali's deepening crisis and a few other issues, but sub-Saharan Africa was largely left out of the conversation. The focus on countries like China and Iran is understandable given their centrality to U.S. national interests, but it comes at the expense of understanding how the candidates, especially Mitt Romney, would approach the 800 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa. Obama's first four years in office gives a sense of what his second-term Africa policy might look like, but since Romney has not yet had to formulate a policy, his approach remains unclear.

Africans are left to wonder what to expect from a Romney presidency. With the exception of reforms to the U.S. foreign assistance regime, they should not anticipate any major shifts from the course taken by Obama. American policy toward the region is driven by global strategic priorities and limited by financial constraints—two factors that would change little by the time Romney took office.

Strategically, Romney would likely continue the Obama administration's prioritization of counterterrorism efforts. The administration's sub-Saharan Africa strategy reads, "In our approach to counterterrorism, we will continue to be guided by the President's affirmation in the National Security Strategy that he bears no greater responsibility than ensuring the safety and security of the American people." To this end, it has expanded drone bases on the continent, helped Kenya and the African Union push the militant Islamic group al-Shabaab from Somalia's south, and boosted counterterrorism training for local security forces.

Africa's terrorism problem will not have gone away by the time a presidential transition might take place. Terrorist networks have made particularly concerning inroads in West Africa. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and affiliated groups helped route the Malian military from 80 percent of the country's north and are reportedly linking up with belligerent forces elsewhere in the region. For its part, the militant Boko Haram (translating to "Western education is sinful") continues to wreak havoc in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and the fifth largest oil exporter to the United States.

Romney is unlikely to let up pressure on these groups. The Africa section of his foreign policy white paper emphasizes his intention to "weaken terrorist groups that threaten U.S. interests and those of our partners." Moreover, Romney and the Republican party are eager to regain the political ground on national security that they are perceived to have lost with Obama's killing of Osama bin Laden. AQIM's resurgence in the Sahel would present a ripe opportunity for Romney to weaken al-Qaida further and show strength on terrorism.

Beyond counterterrorism, both Obama and Romney appear willing to use force in response to mass atrocities in Africa. When Obama deployed American troops to support the hunt for Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony, Romney came out in support of the president's decision. The move suggested that Romney would maintain their presence in central Africa until Kony is captured.

Like Kony's brutality, civilian deaths in southern Sudan is another rare example in which sub-Saharan Africa has

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captured the candidates' attention. The Africa section of Romney's white paper mentions it more than any other country, in part because protecting southern Sudan's civilians has been a cause célèbre for the Republican party. Despite criticism of Obama's handling of Sudan, however, Romney and his advisors have not laid out a fundamentally different policy. Rather, they are pushing for many of the same prescriptions that the administration is already working to implement.

When it comes to foreign aid, Romney will face many of the same financial constraints that Obama has. Buoyed by a relatively strong economy, George W. Bush was able to increase U.S. assistance to sub-Saharan Africa from just more than \$1 billion when he took office to \$7 billion in 2008. Obama managed to get increases early in his term with aid peaking at \$8 billion in 2010, but ballooning federal deficits and the Republican takeover of the House has depressed assistance levels.

With U.S. national debt at \$16 trillion and counting, increases in foreign aid also don't seem likely in a Romney administration. Recognizing this reality, Romney is appropriately focused on reforming—rather than increasing—aid. In his September address at the Clinton Global Initiative, he argued that U.S. assistance should “leverage the abundant resources that can come from the private sector” and highlighted the humanitarian work of evangelical pastors like Rick Warren. The speech's focus suggests that Romney will push for free trade deals where possible and reorient humanitarian aid toward faith-based organizations as it was during the Bush administration.

There is growing consensus in the development community supporting Romney's assentation that free trade and private sector growth, not government-to-government assistance, will underpin Africa's economic growth. For example, the 2000 Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, which opened U.S. consumer markets to eligible Africa countries, significantly boosted imports from the region. Continuing to break down trade barriers as Romney proposes would bolster African economies in ways that government assistance cannot.

Romney's emphasis on faith-based groups also appears warranted. According to John Donnelly, author of a book on U.S. missionary work in Africa, American churches give more money to Africa than USAID, and hundreds of thousands of Americans take missions trips to the continent each year. Some of these groups, however, have an agenda beyond humanitarianism. Reflecting the view of such groups, the 2012 Republican National Committee platform rebukes Obama for imposing a “legalized abortion and the homosexual rights agenda” in Africa.

This brand of polemical language suggests that Romney and Obama leaving Africa out of their campaigns is not necessarily a problem. Arguably, the foreign policy rhetoric of this election season has been corrosive to U.S. relations abroad. But, ignoring Africa on the campaign trail does not mean the winner on November 6 should ignore it in the Oval Office.

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