

Four More Years: Into Africa

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Africa is probably the single most complex region of the world and arguably its most troubled. While the world concerns itself with the Syrian civil war and the dangers it poses for the Middle East, little notice is taken of the war in the Congo, a tragedy that has taken five million lives and next to which the crisis in Syria pales.

[Africa represents](#) 15 percent of the world's population, yet only 2.7 percent of its GDP, which is largely concentrated in only five of 49 sub-Saharan countries. Just two countries—South Africa and Nigeria—account for over 33 percent of the continent's economic output. Life expectancy is 50 years, and considerably less in those countries ravaged by AIDS. Hunger and malnutrition are worse than they were a decade ago.

At the same time, Africa is wealthy in oil, gas, iron, aluminum and rare metals. By 2015, countries in the Gulf of Guinea will provide the US with 25 percent of its energy needs, and Africa has at least 10 percent of the world's known oil reserves. South Africa alone has 40 percent of the earth's gold supply. The continent contains over one-third of the earth's cobalt and supplies China—the world's second largest economy—with 50 percent of that country's copper, aluminum and iron ore.

But history has stacked the deck against Africa. The slave trade and colonialism inflicted deep and lasting wounds on the region, wounds that continue to bleed out in today's world. France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal sliced up the continent without the slightest regard for its past or its people. Most of the wars that have—and are—ravaging Africa today are a direct outcome of maps drawn up in European foreign offices to delineate where and what to plunder.

But over the past decade, the world has turned upside down. Formerly the captive of the European colonial powers, China is now Africa's largest economic partner, followed closely by India and Brazil. Consumer spending is up, and the [World Bank](#) predicts that by 2015 the number of new African consumers will match Brazil's.

In short, the continent is filled with vibrant economies and enormous potential that is not going unnoticed in capitols throughout the world. "The question for executives at consumer packaged goods companies is no longer whether their firms should enter the region, but where and how" says a report by the management consultant agency A.T. Kearney. How Africa negotiates its new status in the world will not only have a profound impact on its people, but on the global community as well. For investors it is the last frontier.

The U.S. track record in Africa is a shameful one. Washington was a long-time supporter of the apartheid regime in South Africa and backed the most corrupt and reactionary leaders

on the continent, including the despicable Mobutu Sese Seko in the Congo. As part its Cold War strategy, the U.S. aided and abetted civil wars in Mozambique, Angola, and Namibia. Americans have much to answer for in the region.

Militarization

If there is a single characterization of US policy vis-à-vis Africa, it is the increasingly militarization of American diplomacy on the continent. For the first time since WW II, Washington has significant military forces in Africa, overseen by a freshly minted organization, Africom.

The US has anywhere from 12,000 to 15,000 Marines and Special Forces in Djibouti, a former French colony bordering the Red Sea. It has 100 Special Forces soldiers deployed in [Uganda](#), supposedly tracking down the Lord's Resistance Army. It actively aided [Ethiopia's 2007 invasion](#) of Somalia, including using its navy to shell a town in the country's south. It is currently [recruiting and training](#) African forces to fight the extremist Islamic organization, the Shabab, in Somalia, and conducting ["counter-terrorism" training](#) in Mali, Chad, Niger, Benin, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Gabon, Zambia, Malawi, Burkina Faso, and Mauretania.

Since much of the US military activities involves Special Forces and the CIA, it is difficult to track how widespread the involvement is. "I think it is far larger than anyone imagines," says [John Pike](#) of GlobalSecurity.org.

As a whole, US military adventures in Africa have turned out badly. The Ethiopian invasion overthrew the moderate Islamic Courts Union, elevating the Shabab from a minor player to a major headache. NATO's war on Libya—Africom's coming out party—is directly responsible for the current crisis in Mali, where Local Tuaregs and Islamic groups have seized the northern part of the country, armed with the plundered weapons' caches of Muammar el-Qaddafi. Africom's support of Uganda's attack on the Lord's Resistance Army in the Democratic Republic of the Congo resulted in the death of thousands of civilians.

While the Obama administration has put soldiers and weapons into Africa, it has largely dropped the ball on reducing poverty. In spite of the [UN's Millennium Development](#) plan adopted in 2000, sub-Saharan Africa will not reach the program's goals for reducing poverty and hunger, and improving child and maternal healthcare. Rather than increasing aid, as the plan requires, the US has either cut aid or used debt relief as a way of fulfilling its obligations.

At the same time, Washington has increased [military aid](#), including arms sales. One thing Africa does not need is any more guns and soldiers.

There are a number of initiatives that the Obama administration could take that would make a material difference in the lives of hundreds of millions of Africans.

First, it could fulfill the UN's Millennium goals by increasing its aid to 0.7 percent of its GDP, and not using debt forgiveness as part of that formula. Canceling debt is a very good idea, and allows countries to re-deploy the money they would use for debt payment to improve health and infrastructure, but as part of an overall aid package it is mixing apples and oranges.

Second, it must de-militarize its diplomacy in the region. Indeed, as Somalia and Libya illustrate, military solutions many times make bad situations worse. Behind the rubric of the “war on terror,” the US is training soldiers throughout the continent. History shows, however, that those soldiers are just as likely to overthrow their civilian governments as they are to battle “terrorists.” Amadou Sanogo, the captain who overthrew the Mali government this past March and initiated the current crisis, was trained in the U.S.

There is also the problem of who are the “terrorists.” Virtually all of the groups so designated are focused on local issues. Nigeria’s Boko Haram is certainly a lethal organization, but it is the brutality of the [Nigerian Army and police](#) that fuel its rage, not al-Qaeda. The continent’s bug-a-boo, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Meghreb, is small and scattered, and represents more a point of view than an organization. Getting involved in chasing “terrorists” in Africa could end up pitting the US against local insurgents in the Niger Delta, Berbers in the Western Sahara, and Tuaregs in Niger and Mali.

What Africa needs is aid and trade directed at creating infrastructure and jobs. Selling oil, cobalt, and gold brings in money, but not permanent jobs. That requires creating a consumption economy with an export dimension. But the US’s adherence to [“free trade”](#) torpedoes countries from constructing such modern economies.

Africans cannot currently compete with the huge—and many times subsidized industries—of the First World. Nor can they build up an agricultural infrastructure when their local farmers cannot match the subsidized prices of American corn and wheat. Because of those subsidies, US wheat sells for 40 percent below production cost, and corn for 20 percent below. In short, African needs to “protect” their industries—much as the US did in its early industrial stage—until they can establish themselves. This was the successful formula followed by Japan and South Korea.

The Carnegie Endowment and the European Commission found that “free trade” would end up destroying small scale agriculture in Africa, much as it did for corn farmers in Mexico. Since 50 percent of Africa’s GNP is in agriculture, the impact would be disastrous, driving small farmers off the land and into overcrowded cities where social services are already inadequate.

The Obama administration should also not make Africa a battleground in its competition with China. Last year US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described China’s trading practices with Africa as a [“new colonialism,”](#) a sentiment that is not widely shared on the continent. A Pew Research Center study found that Africans were consistently more positive about China’s involvement in the region than they were about the US’s.

[Jacob Zuma](#), president of South Africa, recently praised the continent’s “relationship with China,” but also said that the “current trade pattern” is unsustainable because it was not building up Africa’s industrial base. China recently pledged \$20 billion in aid for infrastructure and agriculture.

One disturbing development is a “land rush” by countries ranging from the US to Saudi Arabia to acquire agricultural land in Africa. With climate change and population growth, food, as [Der Spiegel](#) puts it, “is the new oil.” Land is plentiful in Africa, and at about one-tenth the cost in the US. Most production by foreign investors would be on an industrial scale, with its consequent depletion of the soil and degradation of the environment from pesticides and fertilizers. The Obama administration should adopt the successful “contract

farming” model, where investors supply capital and technology to small farmers, who keep ownership of their land and are guaranteed a set price for their products. This would not only elevate the efficiency of agriculture, it would provide employment for local people.

The Obama administration should also strengthen, not undermine, regional organizations. The African Union tried to find a peaceful resolution to the Libyan crisis because its members were worried that a war would spill over and destabilize countries surrounding the Sahara. The Obama administration and NATO pointedly ignored the AU’s efforts, and the organization’s predictions have proved prescient.

Lastly, the Obama administration should join with India and Brazil and lobby for permanent membership for an African country—either South Africa or Nigeria, or both— in the UN Security Council. India and Brazil should also be given permanent seats. Currently the permanent members of the Security Council are the victors of WW II: the US, Russia, China, France and Great Britain.

In 1619, a Dutch ship dropped anchor in Virginia and exchanged its cargo of Africans for food, thus initiating a trade that would rip the heart out of a continent. No one really knows how many Africans were forcibly transported to the New World, but it was certainly in the 10s of millions. To this day Africa mirrors the horror of the slave trade and the brutal colonial exploitation that followed in its wake. It is time to make amends.

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