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When Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, many Africans seemed to think that he was somehow going to be their president. Living on a continent whose political culture is all about patronage, Africans could be forgiven for thinking that a US president who boasted Kenyan roots felt like the ultimate political patron. Many in Africa wondered why they see the Chinese and the Indians being so active, but not the Americans, particularly at a time when some in the media promoted the idea that Africa was doing better economically than before, that it was the continent of the future, and therefore a good place to invest.

Yet, trade between the US and sub-Saharan Africa remains limited after considerable growth from a low statistical base. The US shale boom has cut African oil exports to the US. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) of 2000 gives exports from sub-Saharan Africa preferential access to the US markets and in 2015 was extended to 2025. Exports under this agreement increased from \$7.1bn in 2001 to \$28.4bn in 2013, but there was a 50% decline in 2014 because of the collapse in the price of oil and loss of market share. Clothes and manufacturing account for the bulk of African non-oil exports but any hope of cutting US tariffs on agriculture products to zero is unlikely to be on offer from Washington in the current political climate.

The sense of African disappointment with an aloof US foreign policy is palpable today, but American economic and security interests over the past eight years help to explain why the president's top foreign policy initiatives have focused on Asia, the Middle East and lately, Europe, rather than Africa.

The French intervened to save Mali and sent troops to other African countries in need, but South Sudan and Burundi have been left to unravel into messes few countries outside the region seem to care or be able to do anything about. Not only was Barack Obama elected on a ticket which promised military disengagement from Afghanistan and Iraq, he also had to focus on more immediate crises such as Ukraine and spent a lot of time engaging with Iran, a question of the utmost

importance in geopolitical terms for the US, Europe, Russia and the Middle East. It is also worth asking whether Congress (or for that matter the public) would have ever approved of sending troops into another foreign country where Islam is an issue. Nor is it clear that other African countries would have welcomed such a move. The days when America can call shots in one corner of Africa or another – or elsewhere in the world – are numbered.

Barack Obama's campaign promise to bring the troops back home was not just an electoral promise but reflected his realistic approach to foreign policy. The reductionist perception of his foreign policy as "Don't do stupid stuff" is too simplistic. He felt the burden of proof should be on those pushing for military intervention to demonstrate how the use of military force would help to solve a given conflict. This did not amount to isolationism but a willingness to engage in diplomacy – as happened with Iran and Russia. His policy valued diplomacy and avoided military engagement, although he did not take this option off the table in principle.

Obama's predecessor George W. Bush dedicated significant resources to HIV and malaria programmes, which have continued under his successor. The US has been effective at combating the Ebola outbreak and preventing it from becoming a pandemic. But critics point out that nothing President Obama has done can rival his predecessor's launch of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which promotes reforms ranging from better vocational training to stronger property rights. The security situation in Africa has also deteriorated under Barack Obama's presidency and jihadist threats in the Sahel have increased.

Whether Barack Obama's record on Africa will match that of his predecessor, George W. Bush, only history will tell; but it is worth remembering that the first two years of Obama's White House days were taken up with managing the fall out from the biggest financial crisis the world had witnessed since the stock market crash of 1929. It is maybe not so surprising in such circumstances that the first Afro-American president had no signature tune on Africa. One should add that Barack Obama also believed more in trade than in aid.

A further point is worth considering. The first black president needed at all costs to avoid looking like he was doing greater favours to Africa than to Asia or Latin America. Domestic politics have rules that cannot be easily broken. A former vice-president of Gambia and briefly acting president last year, Guy Scott, put it well: "Within Africa, the feeling I get is that he's a bit hamstrung. The minute he does anything for an African country that he would not do for a Pacific or Caribbean country, people are going to start shouting".

Much of the current incumbent's time has been spent on the spreading chaos in the Middle East, trying to deal with an increasingly predatory Vladimir Putin, and China. His administration's tendency to micro-manage diplomats and its heavy reliance on the National Security Council, which at times lacks the wherewithal to master the complexities of Africa, might help explain the situation. Beyond such considerations, one fundamental question is never asked: why should a president, because he is of African-American descent focus his attention

of Africa? No one would dream of suggesting that a president of European extraction focus his attention on Europe. And which continent should a woman president focus on?

Despite the disappointment some observers of Africa allegedly feel, the good will Barack Obama has been afforded across the continent is enormous: according to a Pew Research survey conducted just over a year ago between two-thirds and 82% of Africans felt the president would do the right thing. Both in style and substance that is how many in the world see this president who quite naturally advances the interests of Americans but also displays unusual sensitivity to other people's cultures. When he visited South Africa and Kenya, such sensitivity was on full display, but so was it recently in Cuba and Latin America and in Europe.

Cameron Hudson, who served as Director for African Affairs at the National Security Council from 2005 to 2009 under the Bush and Obama administrations argues that when Bush came into office there were civil wars going on in Sudan, Congo, Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and at the end of his first term there were none. The only thing that can be said about such comments is that not all of those conflicts stopped because of US action and what has happened in Sudan since partition is quite as bad as before. Maybe it was just a question of luck.

