

# America is coming to Africa: a comparison with China

By Melaku Mulualem

President Barack Obama visited some African countries in June 2013. Later, he announced that there would be an American-African summit in August of 2014 in Washington.

For this purpose he has extended invitation letters to African leaders with the exception of leaders “who do not have good relations with the US, or those whose membership had been suspended by the AU [the African Union].”

Based on the above criteria, so far 47 Heads of State have been invited to the summit to be held in Washington DC on August 5 and 6, 2014. However, leaders from Egypt, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Madagascar have not been invited. Some of the uninvited countries have also criticized the US for setting such criteria for invitation to the Summit. Basically, the purpose of the US-Africa leaders summit is to “widen trade, development and security ties between America and Africa.”

Even if Morocco is not a member of the African Union, the North African country is also invited to the summit. This shows that America’s call to the summit is not to establish relations with the continental organization-the African Union-but with countries of the continent. Thus this summit is not to be held “under the framework of the AU, but is a summit between the US and African states.” On the other hand, it seems paradoxical to invite the head of the African Union Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma (Ph.D.) to the summit.

Jay Carney, White House Spokesman, said “the president is pleased to welcome the leaders of the African continent in the capital in order to strengthen ties with one of the most dynamic regions in the world.” One can argue that the US is following the example set by China for establishing such relations with Africa. It was in 2000 that China invited African leaders to Beijing and conducted the summit. The end result of the subsequent summit was the establishment of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC.) The end result of the US-Africa summit could also be the establishment of a similar forum with Africa. At this juncture the US may develop a detailed policy towards Africa.

African leaders should make scenarios on the future relations of Africa with China and America. Particularly, they should also think of the following questions – Why the US wanted to have a summit meeting with African leaders at this time. Does America believe that FOCAC is a successful forum so that a similar forum can strengthen the US-Africa relations, or is it to compete with China in the global arena? What will be the

advantage and disadvantage of African countries in such situations? Can such situations make Africa a battleground for the two giant countries-on economic, security, political and cultural matters? Can these competitions lead to proxy wars in Africa? How can Africa get the utmost benefit from the two big countries-on trade, investment, tourism, and technology transfer? Is this a good opportunity for Africa to lobby both powers for getting seat at the Security Council? The above questions are not exhaustively listed, but they are indicatives to develop similar queries that would help to develop scenarios on the future relations of Africa-China and Africa-US.

The US and China are the first and the second largest economies in the world respectively. They have great influences in international relations. They are neither intimate friends nor fierce enemies to one another. Both countries have developed their own foreign policies towards Africa. Comparing and contrasting their policies is helpful for envisioning the possible relations of Africa with them.

Still both countries should learn one from the other in their policy towards Africa. In the following lines I will show the similarities and differences of the US and China's foreign policies towards Africa. This article also sheds light on the implementation of their policies in the continent.

Being permanent members of the Security Council, their decisions have global impact. Both compete and cooperate on various international issues. Historically both did not participate in the Scramble for Africa in the colonial period. In this period their relations with Africa were very minimal. When we see their national interests both have economic interest in Africa i.e. trade, investment and resource. Moreover, both have geo-political and diplomatic interest-to win diplomatic support from Africa in the international arena. As a result of Transatlantic Slave Trade from Africa to America, a historical link between the two peoples is more considerable than the relation between China and Africa. The presence of Afro-American people is the effect of such past links.

The volumes of trade between China-Africa and US-Africa have increased through time. African countries import from both China and the US manufactured products. China has agreed with some African countries that their products could enter China through duty free trade relations. By the same token the US has also allowed the duty free trade from least developed countries of Africa through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA.)

Both big countries also have investments in Africa. Internationally there is agreement to provide official development assistance to least developed countries. When their gross national product increases the amount of the assistance also increases accordingly. Hence, they have also increased their development assistance to African countries.

The US and China have interests to work together with Africa in controlling international terrorism. Since terrorism is a threat to all innocent human beings, both are committed to fighting terrorism. Relatively, the US is more affected by terrorist attacks than China. Some scholars underline that unlike the US, China is not a target to international

terrorists because of her non-interference policy towards the internal affairs of other countries. Others condense the terrorist attack as if it is a competition between major religions, in which case China is free from such competition. There are also other perspectives on the matter.

Both China and the US are exercising their soft power towards Africa. In a cultural aspect, both of them use volunteers who work in other countries. Starting from 1960 the US has sent the Peace Corps to different countries. China also launched Overseas Youth Volunteer Program in 2004. However, the cultural influence of the US seems more pronounced than the cultural influence of China in Africa. Particularly, the impact of Hollywood and CNN in Africa and the world at large is tremendous. Moreover there are approximately a hundred sister city relationships between the US and African cities and towns.

Regarding the soft power of the US, "products, schools, newspapers, journals, banks, movies, TV programs, novels, rock stars...culture, religious groups, ideas, NGOs, and other American institutions and values are liberally scattered over the global map." Moreover, the Voice of America (VOA,) which was established in 1942 has global impact. VOA broadcasts to Africa in ten indigenous African languages and in English, Portuguese and French languages.

On the other hand, there are many differences in the policy and the implementation of the policy of China and the US towards Africa. One of the policies of America towards Africa is supporting democracy and the strengthening of democratic institutions including free, fair, and transparent elections. However, China has no such foreign policy. China was a victim of foreign invasion in the 20th century. Because of this, China gives great value to independence and sovereignty. Thus China has the policy of adhering to independence. But we do not find such statements in the foreign policy of the US.

China has a more detailed African policy than the US. Moreover, there is a big difference in the usage of terms in their written policies towards Africa. The policy of the US towards Africa says, "supporting African economic growth and development," "supporting democracy," "strengthening of democratic institutions," "conflict prevention" and the like. These terms show that the US is on the side of supporter, and Africa is on the side of recipient of the support i.e. not mutual support. When looking at the policy of China towards Africa we find "mutual support," "common prosperity," "reciprocity" "learning from each other," "friendship" and "seeking common development." These terms of the Chinese policy towards Africa place Africa on equal footing than the policy of the US. So US should revise its policy towards Africa in better terms and phrases.

In providing aids and loans to African leaders, the US has conditions such as- level of democracy and human rights handling. Unlike the US, China provides aid and loan without such policy conditionality. Ironically, China is even giving loans to America

without policy conditionality. Regarding this issue China is saying that she is following the non-interference policy in the internal affairs of countries. On the other hand Westerners accuse China by saying that her support "may weaken African governments' motivation to pursue democratization, good governance, and transparency reforms, and adhere to universal norms of civic and human rights and the rule of law in Africa." Others say that China is not different from many African countries in handling Human Rights issues and placing democratic governance in the country.

Unlike the US, there are frequent State visits between China and African countries' leaders that win the hearts and minds of African leaders. In visiting China, African leaders also get high standards and warm welcome of Chinese president, which has made it so different from visits in the US. According to one source, "African elites are deeply appreciative of being given the red carpet treatment whenever they turn up in Beijing." Sarcastically, a writer once said that Beijing has become the Mecca and Medina to African leaders and other senior officials.

Unlike China, the US has established military command in Africa. The United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM or AFRICOM) was established by President George Bush's formal announcement on February 6, 2007. The mission statement of AFRICOM says, "Africa Command protects and defends the national security interests of the United States by strengthening the defense capabilities of African states and regional organizations..." From this mission statement we understand that the organization is established for the national interest of the US in Africa. However, China has no such military command and soldiers in Africa (probably with the exception of some Chinese soldiers under the UN Peace Keeping Missions in Africa.)

Unlike the US, China has established Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC,) which helps to have institutional relationships between Africa and China. Since 2000, FOCAC Ministerial Conferences and Summit are being held. Every three years Chinese and African leaders meet together to discuss various common and international issues. While China came to Africa with soft power (FOCAC,) the US came to Africa with hard power [AFRICOM.]

The US demands American values (neo-liberalism concepts of democracy, free trade...) to be the value of other countries too. She is trying to implement it by soft or hard power. However, China was and still is not trying to spread her own Communist ideology to other countries.

In dealing with great powers, the major focuses of African countries are economic, political and security interests. The US has more security and political interests than economic interests in Africa. On the other hand, China has more of economic and political interest in Africa than security interests. The recent call of the US to African leaders to participate in the summit shows the enhancement of economic interests of the US in Africa.

Finally, it is good to mention that both big powers can learn from each other on their policies towards Africa. The US can learn from China about the friendly terms and regular high-level diplomatic contact with African leaders. The policy of the US towards Africa focuses on the presence of democracy, good governance, human rights, resolution of conflicts, controlling of illegal transnational issues and the like. However, China lacks such policy towards Africa. In this respect China can learn from the policy of the US that may support security and smooth transition of power in Africa. China and the US have developed their foreign policies towards Africa in order to fulfill their own national interests. In comparison with their primary national interest, fulfilling the interest of Africa is secondary to both powers. Because of this Africa should develop her own scenarios and subsequent strategies in dealing with the US and China.

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