Introduction

The election of Barrack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States was greeted with much enthusiasm across Africa. Many observers saw this not only as the dawn of a new era for global politics, but also as a golden opportunity for the continent, which until then was at the periphery of America’s foreign policy. The US government often divides Africa between north and south of the Sahara for administrative convenience. The north of the Sahara is treated as an integral part of the Middle East, while the rest of the region is treated separately. This work focuses on the latter. Historically, Africa has been an afterthought for both the American populace and policy-makers in Washington. Sub-Saharan Africa is beset by countless problems, but the US African foreign policy, at best, glossed over the fundamental challenges facing the continent.

The United States became a global superpower immediately after World War II, and since then its foreign policy architecture has been designed to respond to external threats from all over the globe. Africa, however, sits at the bottom of the pile in terms of priorities. The United States was not a part of the original scramble for Africa in the 1880s and the 1890s, but it has engaged with the continent for over five decades, especially since the establishment of the State Department’s Bureau of Africa Affairs under President Eisenhower in 1958. In that time, Africa has featured less in America’s foreign policy than other regions of perceived greater interest, notably Western Europe, and later, Eastern Europe, and, more recently, Asia and the Middle East. The prolonged absence of direct US interests in the region is coupled with a tendency to view African states as the responsibility of their ex-colonial masters, and this results in a lack of attentiveness to the region.
However, the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath seemed to have triggered the US government into taking a renewed interest in Africa. In the same year, both the US State Department and the Pentagon defined Africa as a significant threat to US national security.\(^1\) Before that declaration, the US House of Representatives’ subcommittee on Africa had observed that the policy of official neglect of the continent could no longer continue. Some of Washington’s most experienced Africa policy-makers confirmed, at a bipartisan meeting, that the region was being seen in a new way.\(^2\)

The dominant themes in the US presidents’ National Security Strategy for overseas engagement include good governance, economic development, democratization, regional stability, and viability of health and environmental issues. While it is true that there are different perspectives on how the United States should engage with Africa, the questions to ask are: Does the United States fully understand the mechanics of development in Africa? Are American foreign policy objectives relevant to the needs of Africa? Is the renewed interest in Africa sustainable? Can Africa’s perspective on issues affecting the United States be accommodated? What policy priorities should the United States and Africa pursue in their relationship? This chapter is an attempt to broadly answer these questions and to introduce a model for the development of a US-Africa policy framework that delivers effective policy engagement in the future.

**US Strategy in Africa**

In order to fully understand US-Africa relations, some basic facts should be known. Economically, US trade with Africa is quite insignificant. In 1993, US imports from the continent constituted only 2 percent of its total imports.\(^3\) In 1994, Africa purchased goods and services worth $4.4 billion from the United States, again an insignificant quantity when compared to total US trade. This low level of trade is geographically concentrated and occurs with only a few countries, notably in 1994, Nigeria (12% of US-Africa trade) and South Africa (50%).\(^4\)

Nevertheless, despite its limited strategic, and apparently minimal economic, interest in Africa, the United States has begun to recognize the potential of the region with its population of over 800 million, covering about 20 percent of global land area, the vast wealth of natural resources, its ecological diversity, and its potential markets.\(^5\) As such, the US commitment to establishing a leading role in African affairs falls within the broader vision of creating a continent of free, stable, and prosperous nations acting together while respecting the dignity and rights of the individual, and adhering to the principles of national sovereignty and international law.\(^6\) Thus, US goals in Africa form part of its world-wide security policy objectives. The US policy goals in Africa include conflict prevention, management and resolution, the provision of humanitarian assistance, the promotion of democracy, creation of respect for human rights, and the promotion of sustainable and equitable development through economic reforms that encourage market-based activity.

In her speech to the African Studies Association, former assistant secretary of state, Susan Rice, summarized US policy in Africa as having several overarching goals: accelerating Africa’s involvement in the global economy, with the aim of promoting