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Much Ado About Nothing

Trump's Africa Policy and Its Consequences for Europe

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Donald Trump's Africa policy is dominated by the "War on Terror". This was also the case under Barack Obama. The essential difference lies in the rhetoric of the current incumbent, which is marked by ignorance and derogatory attitudes vis-à-vis the African continent.

Donald Trump is unpopular in Africa. US presidents are traditionally held in high esteem across the African continent. In the case of Trump, however, rejection prevails, as he is perceived as hostile and racist. In Senegal, trust in the office of the US president has decreased by 51 percentage points, in South Africa it has dropped by 34 percentage points since January 2017. Crucially, when interpreting the results of a Pew opinion poll⁴ a distinction must be made between Trump the individual, and the US as a country.

On the African continent, the United States remains emblematic of the dream that everyone stands a chance. The US continues to be the destination of choice for many of those looking to emigrate. A scholarship in the US is valued more highly than one at a university in Beijing. In the same way, American rap music and apparel communicate a certain attitude towards life for which Chinese karaoke is no match. Measured against these, not unimportant, outward appearances, Trump is inexistent: When Obama acceded to the presidency, his portrait was printed on t-shirts across the continent, and irrational "Obamania" was commonplace. Obama disappointed many of the high hopes invested in him. Yet, he gave the continent a voice; he imparted the feeling that he understood. This generated much affinity towards him and the US, despite the fact that it was not translated into increased levels of support or improved trading conditions. In fact, Obama merely continued initiatives introduced by his predecessors, and launched hardly any programmes of his own. He did, however, cushion this status quo with silver-toned speeches. Trump does not share these sensibilities, yet further pursues, in many instances, a number of Obama's approaches.

Trump's withdrawal from UN organisations and reduction in US contributions have, however, had an impact on Africa, since the United Nations fulfil regulatory functions in many parts of the continent.

Remarks – hitherto unconfirmed – made by the 45th US president referring to some African states as "shithole countries" in January 2018 led to protests and diplomatic enquiries. However, many commentators in Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe have drawn a line between this US president – who seems to be somewhat bewildered by the geography of the continent, speaking of "Nambia" rather than Namibia – and American administrative bodies, which endeavour to honour agreements, such as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), an economic agreement initiated by Bill Clinton. Clinton launched the AGOA in 2000. Its goal is to provide preferential access to the US market for some products from African states. This is the very opposite of what "America First" stands for. The AGOA was extended to 2025 under Obama.

Trump's rhetoric is what determines his relationship with Africa, and the way he is perceived. In the same way that his inclination to provoke and his aversion to diplomatic etiquette and political courtesy have perplexed the German Chancellery and the Élysée, he has also alienated politicians in Africa. In the aftermath of the US immigration ban on citizens from a range of African countries, the then-chair of the African Union Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma of South Africa, declared that the very country that once took Africans as slaves was now shutting the door in the faces of people from these very countries.

Trump is perceived as a man not even attempting to counter allegations of racism, and who, in the eyes of many observers, chiefly represents the rule of the white man. Ultimately, American Africa policy lacks “an overarching strategic vision for the region,” as authors from the German Institute of Global and Area Studies deplore.² They posit that restrictions on immigration within Trump’s “America First” policy will drive Africa further towards China and Europe.

In mid-December 2018, John Bolton, Trump’s Security Advisor, presented the Africa strategy of the Trump administration. The strategy can be broken down into three aspects: First, economic success for all involved, also to defy the Chinese. The Chinese and Russia are framed as “predators” attempting to create African dependency. Second, Trump further intends to fight Islamist terrorism and to have every single US dollar spent to serve American interests.³ Bolton made abundantly clear that this was essentially a race against Beijing, declaring, “China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing’s wishes and demands.”⁴

At the same time, Bolton announced the “Prosper Africa” initiative, which primarily aims to promote economic involvement of US companies on the African continent. The rather reserved commentaries on the new strategy by the New York Times or the Brookings Institution emphasised the salience of having a strategy in the first place, but critiqued it as overly vague and, as compared to German or European initiatives, rather limited in scope.

The inertia the US administration has displayed towards the 54 African states, bestows upon Chinese endeavours the advantage that Beijing would not even have to act in the first place for now. “It is fair to say that the United States does not currently have much of a grand strategy in Africa. Instead, it has a mishmash of African policies, some of which work well, some of which work poorly, and few of which work in concert with each other,” as an analysis in the US

political journal *The American Interest* claims, referring, however, to the Obama era as well.⁵

In point of fact, Obama also had dealings with politicians who did not live up to his lofty standards. Jon Temin, Africa director at Freedom House, called for a clear overhaul of US Africa policy: Less proximity of the State Department to the actors involved, and a rethink of prior partnerships if – as has been the case in South Sudan – there is an increasing amount of evidence pointing to gross violations of human rights. Temin points out that Obama, conversely, invited South Sudan’s president Salva Kiir to a meeting of African heads of state in 2014, despite not granting other potentates in Africa the same honour.⁶

Will the new administration do any better? In November 2018, Trump reportedly considered striking Sudan off the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Khartoum had harboured both Osama bin Laden prior to his relocating to Afghanistan, as well as “Carlos the Jackal”, the Venezuelan terrorist. The International Criminal Court has even issued an arrest warrant against Omar Hassan al-Bashir, Sudan’s long-term ruler. Trump’s rationale for such deliberations remains obscure.

Soon after Donald Trump’s inauguration in January 2017, the New York Times published a paper outlining questions the Trump Administration had put to the Pentagon and the State Department in order to understand contemporary Africa policies. The paper implies a simultaneous drive to challenge everything, on the one hand, and gross ignorance on the other. Is the US losing to China in Africa? Why should the US be spending nine billion US Dollars on development aid for Africa annually, and are those funds not mostly misappropriated?⁷ Detractors had, however, lamented the “low level of coherence in security, economic and development policies” even prior to Trump’s taking office.⁸

Reuben Brigety, Obama’s US ambassador to the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa, has strongly

criticised Trump’s Africa policy. To him, the fact that it took one and a half years to appoint a Secretary of State for Africa speaks of ignorance vis-à-vis Africa. He has also criticised “diplomatic blunders”, such as when the Rwandan president Paul Kagame was not given an appointment with the US administration during his visit to Washington in March 2017; apparently, in the general confusion, nobody felt responsible for Africa.⁹

Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, on the other hand, identified advantages for Africa in Trump’s National Security Strategy in early 2017: reforms were to be encouraged and cooperation with “promising nations” was to be fostered.¹⁰ German academia was astonished as authors wrote in a study by the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) declare that Africa not being a matter Washington concerns itself with yet is a blessing, since policy shifts would impact upon the lives of over a billion of Africans.¹¹ However, the challenges pertaining to matters of migration, population growth and counter-terrorism in Africa are so grave that they cannot possibly be tackled by the Europeans and Chinese alone; the US do play a key role.

US government inactivity has even been criticised by those schools of thought which can be regarded as well-disposed towards Republican government. The director of the CSIS’s Africa programme has criticised the US for being disheartened vis-à-vis Africa. He outlines that since 2010, more than 150 new embassies have been opened in Sub-Saharan Africa by Arab and Asian states hoping to do business with Africa.¹² Africa experts, such as those from the Brookings Institution, are alarmed at “summit diplomacy” with Africa pursued in particular by the EU, and here especially by Angela Merkel’s government in Germany, as well as by the Chinese.¹³

Shifting Rhetoric

Hardly any country in the Western hemisphere has historically had such strained relations with

Africa as the United States. Even the former colonial powers – the UK, France, and Belgium – do not appear to be as affected by the legacy of the slave trade. This might be grounded in the fact that all recognised freedoms and opportunities in the US notwithstanding, the aftermath of racism remains evident in the US, in contrast to the European colonial powers. Since the 1990s, virtually all US presidents have been highly sensitive to this issue. In Ghana and Senegal today, one would not be unlikely to encounter groups of African American tourists tracing the tracks of their ancestors in West Africa. In the past decades, every US president has had their photo taken on the slave island of Gorée, just off the coast of Senegal’s capital Dakar, at the stone gate through which hundreds of thousands of African slaves were hustled onto America-bound ships. In the 1990s, American ambassadors in Africa, such as Smith Hempstone, the legendary conservative diplomat and journalist in Nairobi, claimed that the US, following the end of the Cold War, would want to see the blessings of democracy and the separation of powers implemented across Africa.

This has changed. Trump’s statements on black athletes protesting against racial discrimination during the playing of the anthem, defaming them as “sons of bitches”, are met with incomprehension in Nairobi’s sports bars.

Trump’s ambivalent stance on democracy might also be read as tolerating local undemocratic governments.

The South African comedian Trevor Noah has labelled Donald Trump the “perfect African president”, simply happening to be in office on the wrong continent. Noah identified commonalities between Trump and African dictators, portraying Trump as badly prepared and attempting to bend the law. Policies less concerned with democratic values than interests

might please many an African potentate, but even they cannot disregard Trump's rhetoric aiming to sideline Africa. Paul Kagame, the

Rwandan president, did not shy away from conflict with the Trump administration by banning the import of American second-hand clothing



Place of longing: On the African continent, the United States remains emblematic of the dream that everyone stands a chance. Source: © Carlo Allegri, Reuters.

to his country – with the understandable argument that this would hamper the development of Rwanda’s nascent textile industry. In return,

tariff-free access of Rwandan products to the US market was suspended.

And what are the implications of Trump’s disdain for the press and the separation of powers for those who campaign for democratisation and strong civil societies in Africa? The Trump presidency “might dishearten Africa’s democrats and boost the continent’s autocrats”, as John Stremlau of Wits University Johannesburg writes. He points to the danger arising from Trump’s use of fake news and the manner in which he twists the truth, quoting the Ugandan journalist, Charles Onyango-Obbo, who writes critically and ironically, “Trump’s genius lies in him grasping what guerrilla leaders internalised years ago: do exactly what your opponent deems impossible or inconceivable so that he will have no plan to defend himself.”¹⁴

The disappointed champions of democracy and the separation of powers in Africa at the best of times joke about a man whose indifference to the continent appears to manifest itself in the fact that it took one and a half years and two US Secretaries of State to even decide to appoint a director for the Africa Desk with the State Department in the first place. It was only in July 2018 that diplomat Tibor Nagy was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Nagy is the erstwhile ambassador to Guinea and Ethiopia and is now tasked with shaping American policy towards the African continent.

Trump himself has denied the reported “shithole” statement in January 2018. Crucially, though, all observers consider such statements possible. The tremendous number of rhetorical tweets and demands for clarification included those put forward by South Africa’s head of government, Cyril Ramaphosa, the Senegalese head of state, Macky Sall, and the Foreign Office of Botswana.

Trump sends his own people to Africa, such as the then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, whom he fired while Tillerson was on a trip to Africa in March 2018. Later that year, he then sent his wife Melania who expressed her doubts as



to her husband ever having referred to African countries as “shitholes”. As her husband’s envoy, Melania Trump visited Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, and Egypt in October 2018. The media particularly remarked on her sartorial choices reminiscent of the tropical clothing of the colonial era. Melania Trump emphasised that the people in Africa had warmly welcomed her on this trip. “We both love Africa. Africa is so beautiful.”¹⁵

Germany’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper quoted John Stremlau of Johannesburg’s Wits University as saying that conflicts of interests, such as those Trump is experiencing from his own business interest and the national interest are well-known in Africa. Contempt for institutions, the subordinate role of women, as well as disdain for freedom of expression, also find their counterparts in African potentates.¹⁶

Military Interests

The US would have preferred to stay out of Africa militarily after the Cold War. However, a vacuum was created after the end of the East-West conflict, which had been fought with great vigour on the continent. The first failing state was Somalia; all the attacks and terrorist threats that were to follow were entirely unforeseeable in the early 1990s.

In 1992 in Somalia, then-president George H. W. Bush wanted to defeat hunger and bring peace, even though the strategic importance of the country on the Horn of Africa had considerably decreased owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the East-West conflict. Bill Clinton inherited the Somalia engagement. When, in 1993, 13 US soldiers were killed in Mogadishu, the doctrine emerged that never again should an American soldier die on African soil. Bringing this trauma into office with him, Clinton refused to use military means to counter the Rwandan genocide, which started on 6 April 1994. Clinton would later apologise to the Rwandan people for this; in hindsight, his decision to stand idly by and watch the murder of one million people within 100 days appears lowly and motivated by domestic politics.

After Black Hawk Down, the shooting down of an American helicopter in Mogadishu, claiming 13 lives, the Americans would once again be traumatised when, on 7 August 1998, terrorists affiliated with the al-Qaeda network attacked US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, killing a large number of Americans and locals. In retrospect, these attacks are seen as precursors and exercises for the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001.

In Africa, the US army is operating mostly autonomously and is mostly tasked with countering terrorism.

The growing threat of terrorism from Islamist groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, Mali, and Niger led to the creation of AFRICOM under US president Barack Obama in February 2007. Mission control for military interventions in Africa is headquartered at Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany. Numerous drone attacks are, apparently, also controlled from there. In September 2008, Air Forces Africa and the Seventeenth Air Force, serving as AFRICOM’s air force, were set up in Ramstein.¹⁷

The core of American Africa policy is the drone, political scientist Richard Joseph (Northwestern University, Evanston) sarcastically noted.¹⁸ The drones programme, in operation since 2014, reportedly uses bases in Ethiopia, Niger, Kenya, and Djibouti.¹⁹ Indeed, attacking al-Shabaab targets in Somalia appears to be one of the central aims of US military policy in Africa. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the devastating September 2013 attack on the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi, as well as for the attack on the DusitD2 hotel in Kenya’s capital in January 2019. In 2018 alone, over 30 US airstrikes on al-Shabaab targets were executed in Somalia.²⁰





Pith helmet: It is not only Donald Trump himself who has offended many people in Africa over the last two years.
Source: © Carlo Allegri, Reuters.

Military cooperation with German and other European armies appears to be virtually non-existent. At a hearing at the US House of Representatives in March 2018, the AFRICOM commander, Thomas Waldhauser, declared that he finds that there is only very marginal cooperation in Africa, if at all.²¹

In the ten years since AFRICOM was established, US commandos have been active in Africa, including in Kenya, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Mauritania, and Niger. However, the general public in the US only became aware of this in October 2017, when four American soldiers were ambushed and killed in the village of

Tongo-Tongo in Niger. In the US, the debate was soon dominated by a discussion surrounding the president's poorly-worded expressions of sympathy for one of the young widows. Trump reportedly told her that her fallen husband must have known what he signed up for when he had enlisted with special forces. Officially, the soldiers had only been deployed to the Sahel country for training purposes. Germany, too, maintains close ties with this country. Notwithstanding, they were obviously killed in combat, which they – to make matters worse – were allegedly insufficiently equipped for.

Covertly, several hundred Green Berets, Navy SEALs, and Marine Raiders appear to have

stayed in Niger. The country serves as a transit destination for Europe-bound refugees, but is also increasingly exposed to Islamist terrorism, with terrorists benefitting from the fact that borders with Mali and Libya are hard to monitor. As the magazine *Politico* has established, the boundaries of operations in these countries are fluid between training and counter-terrorism.²² In mid-November 2018, the Pentagon declared that about ten per cent of the 7,200 soldiers of the Africa Command would be withdrawn over “the next several years”.²³ According to unconfirmed reports, this is scheduled for the next three years. Observers suggest that this withdrawal is also a reaction to the death of the four US soldiers in Niger in 2017.

Racing the Chinese

Military contacts between American and Chinese soldiers can only occur in Djibouti, where the People’s Republic of China has opened its first naval base beyond its own borders. Reportedly, US pilots were blinded by the Chinese using lasers in May 2018. The head of AFRICOM, General Waldhauser, has however assessed China’s involvement in Africa in a positive light. About 2,600 Chinese blue helmets serve on UN missions, for instance in Mali, South Sudan, and Côte d’Ivoire. The US, on the other hand, has officially only dispatched 68 blue helmets to the continent.²⁴

Economic competition is less about sales markets which might be lost to the Chinese, but rather about access to African raw materials. US dependency on imports, such as platinum, manganese and chromium (the largest reserves of which can be found in South Africa) or coltan (80 per cent of reserves located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) is dramatic. The US imports more crude oil from Africa than from the Middle East.²⁵ The Americans will find it difficult to win the economic race against the Chinese if the considerable US direct investment and military cooperation are not complemented by relevant political measures – agreements, conferences, declarations, and visits. In 2017, US trade volume with Africa

totalled 39 billion US dollars; yet, at 170 billion US dollars, China’s was more than four times as big.²⁶ The US is only Africa’s third most important trading partner, after China and Europe.

The entirely underdeveloped intra-African market is overly dependent upon exports, including to the US. Less than 20 per cent of African trade is between African states.²⁷ For this very reason, and unlike Europe, Africa has difficulty in speaking with one united voice at negotiations.

Moving Forward

Africa is three and a half times the size of the United States. In a speech in January 2017, Chris Coons, a Democratic US Senator, pointed Trump to the challenges and opportunities Africa provides: the continent offers great economic potential; its population is set to double within the next 30 years; Africa’s role within the global economy will increase; and the continent must take action to counter terrorism and jihadi threats.²⁸ Trump’s half-knowledge on Africa can be dangerous, for instance when he speaks of “mass killings” of white farmers in South Africa (as he did in August 2018) – this patchy understanding is grounded not in intelligence service reports, but on the reporting of Fox News.

Current US policies vis-à-vis Africa imply that Europe and Germany will have to take on more responsibility promoting democracy in Africa.

The fact that Trump attacks the press and attempts to influence the judiciary through his tweets has, if not an imitation effect, then a suggestive one – that some cherished principles do not have to be honoured. Said values, however, are frequently precisely those which institutions such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation hope to promote in African civil societies.

So, what do these US policies towards Africa imply for Europe and for Germany? Obama was similarly indifferent to Europe's struggles with African migration. What will have a greater impact is that the promotion of democracy in Africa – a task hitherto shouldered by the US and Europe together – might increasingly become a European matter. Europe, and Germany in particular, has been much more proactive than the US, through a range of measures to strengthen small and medium-sized businesses, the Marshall Plan with Africa, the Compacts with Africa, and reform partnerships with selected states. Simultaneously, the rhetoric employed has been stripped of much ideology, increasingly referring to German and European economic interests.

Europe must act in greater unison given both American indifference and Chinese expansionist aspirations – this point cannot be emphasised enough.

Africa and Europe will both probably come to terms with this US president and his Africa policy. Ideally, Europe will succeed in furthering its Africa policy with recourse to smaller means than the Americans or Chinese. Besides, Trump's Africa policies cannot last longer than eight years. That is a manageable time-scale, especially in Africa.

– translated from German –

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