

Obama hosts Africa summit amid deepening global crises

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The “US Africa Leaders Summit” convened in Washington Monday amid the deepening crises in Gaza, Ukraine and Iraq. The Obama administration has invited some 50 African heads of state and government to the US capital as part of an increasingly desperate bid to compete, particularly with the rising power of China, in the scramble for African markets and resources.

China’s two-way trade with Africa last year stood at \$170 billion. It outstripped the US five years ago and now boasts a volume of trade that is more than double that of the US, which has been in decline in recent years. For the first quarter of 2014, total trade between the US and sub-Saharan Africa totaled \$11.9 billion, a 27 percent decline from the same period in 2013.

China’s trade with Africa has increased 17-fold from just \$10 billion in 2000. The European Union, including the continent’s old colonial powers such as France, Britain and Belgium, remains Africa’s largest trading partner, with a total two-way trade of \$200 billion in 2013.

Fully 80 percent of China’s trade with Africa has been in raw materials as the country seeks to lock up supplies of energy and other strategic materials.

With a 5.8 percent growth rate—based in large measure on the rise in commodity prices—Africa’s overall economy is growing faster than that of Latin America, while it includes six of the ten fastest growing national economies.

During his first significant trip to Africa, organized only last year, Obama said, “Our goal is not to counter China; our goal is not to contain China.” In recent weeks US officials have also heatedly denied that the summit in Washington has anything to do with the US attempting to compete with Chinese influence in Africa. The fact is, however, that China has held five

such summits since the first one convened in Beijing in 2000.

Beijing’s strategic interest in the continent found expression last year when, shortly after his inauguration, President Xi Jinping made a multi-stop tour of Africa his first overseas trip. Since then, China has disbursed some \$10 billion in loans to Africa, half of the \$20 billion pledged by 2015. According to the Chinese government, the loans are financing the development of infrastructure, manufacturing and agriculture, with only 20 percent going to the energy sector, which along with other extractive industries have been seen as Beijing’s main interest.

The Obama administration is not expected to compete with such outlays. US officials have warned that there will be little in the way of “deliverables” coming out of the summit, which is focused more on organizing meetings between African officials and US corporate executives from companies ranging from General Electric to WalMart. There are reports that some African leaders have taken offense that Obama will not meet with any of them individually.

The *Pretoria News*, for example, reported “critics have made other unfavourable comparisons between the US summit and China’s Forum for China-Africa Co-operation. (Focac). One of these criticisms is that Obama evidently has no intention of making a big declaration with the African leaders at the end of the summit, including announcements of large dollops of US money into African projects. The other significant difference with the Chinese model that has been underlined is that Obama has not scheduled any one-on-one meetings with individual African leaders as Beijing does. This has evidently offended some African leaders.”

In advance of the summit, the US administration has

highlighted plans to announce a paltry \$1 billion in business deals for the continent, a boost in funding for peacekeeping operations and enhanced aid programs involving food and power that are tied to US agricultural and energy interests.

Also high on the agenda is Obama's pledge to push for Congressional approval of a renewal of the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA), a trade pact that offers most African countries duty-free access to US markets but mainly benefits US companies. It is set to expire at the end of September.

Washington clearly hopes to offset China's growing economic power in Africa by military means. Seven years after launching its African Command (AFRICOM), the US military now deploys approximately 5,000 troops in some 38 countries across the continent at any one time and is involved in multiple interventions, military training missions and exercises.

In its 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the Pentagon makes clear that Africa is an area of strategic concern, declaring that its "potential for rapidly developing threats, particularly in fragile states, including violent public protests and terrorist attacks, could pose acute challenges to US interests."

Much of these supposed threats are themselves the product of previous US military interventions, particularly in Libya, where the overthrow of the Gaddafi government plunged both that country and neighboring Mali into chaos and sent stockpiles of arms to Islamist insurgents as far south as Nigeria.

Similarly, the US orchestration and backing of an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 led to the growth of the Islamist al-Shabaab movement and the spread of Islamist unrest into neighboring Kenya.

Meanwhile, US Special Forces troops have been sent into highly promoted operations such as the hunt for the Central African warlord Joseph Kony and the search for the schoolgirls abducted by the Boko Haram group in Nigeria.

Even in this area, however, China is beginning to take unprecedented moves in asserting its military influence. Beijing sent 170 armed troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali recently, dispensing with its previous policy of "no troops on foreign soil." It has also provided military assistance to African Union

peacekeeping forces.

Three African countries—Eritrea, Sudan and Zimbabwe—were not invited to the summit because, US State Department officials said, they were not in "good standing" with Washington.

While the shunning of these three governments was portrayed as a US stand in defense of "human rights," the reality is that Washington invited a number of leaders who, while carrying out systematic repression, are more closely aligned with US foreign policy and interests on the continent.

These include Equatorial Guinea's president Teodoro Obiang Nguema, the longest-ruling non-monarch in the world, who is notorious for the jailing and torturing of political opponents.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni is expected to attend, in the wake of pushing through legislation known as the "kill the gays" law, which first called for the death penalty for homosexuals, later changed to life in prison. Museveni, whose regime is a close military partner in US interventions in Africa, backed the law—which has been temporarily blocked by the Ugandan high court—in open defiance of pleas from the Obama White House. The Ugandan regime has also shot down scores of anti-government demonstrators.

Human rights groups have noted that the three-day conference has scheduled no session on human rights, though a whole host of other topics are being dealt with, all with the evident aim of promoting US economic interests on the continent. US national security adviser Susan Rice, who forged close ties to Museveni and several other of the continent's more repressive regimes during her tenure as senior director for African affairs under the Clinton administration, dismissed these concerns.

"You can speak very plainly and very compellingly about things like corruption and female genital mutilation and mistreatment of women without being finger-wagging or condescending or offensive," Rice said.



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