

Barack Obama “Discovered” Africa for America

By Melaku Muluaem K.

The US-Africa Summit was conducted in August 2014 for three days in Washington DC. It was the first such summit organized between America and Africa. President Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States took the initiative to hold the Summit. Fifty African Heads of State and government officials had been invited. The theme of the summit was “Investing in the Next Generation”. During the Summit leaders had discussed peace and security, trade, investment, health, energy, good governance, women and youth.

There are many reasons for the US to conduct the summit at this time. We can see that on an individual level, domestic level and systemic level of analysis.

On the individual level of analysis the role of President Obama comes forward. Moreover John Kerry, US Secretary of State, and Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield who leads the Department of State’s Bureau of African Affairs played a great role in organizing the Summit. While president Obama thanked Kerry for his great work, the latter also thanked Thomas-Greenfield for her great achievement. On the following lines I will focus on the role of the president.

Unlike the former American presidents, Barack Obama gave special focus to trade and investment between Africa and America. In September 2009, at the UN General Assembly, President Obama hosted a lunch with 26 African Heads of State and discussed common issues. In 2013 he visited Africa. Such a visit helps America to see the potential of Africa on the ground. These natural and human resources are good opportunities for America. In natural resources, Africa has oil, gas, iron ore, gold and various rare metals. In human resources aspect Africa has a big number of youths who are considered as work forces for the continent.

President Barack Obama is the first black president of America. His root is in Kenya. In the presidential elections he could get large vote from African-Americans. It is also natural to be curious towards one's own root. After elected president he chose to visit Ghana instead of Kenya to show he's interested in Africa as a whole.

By 2014, President Obama called a US-Africa Summit, which was the first of its kind. The Summit and other business meetings between America and Africa have stimulated the American business community to realize the opportunity Africa can provide to their companies. They have also realized that out of the top ten fast growing economies, Africa is home to six of them. Exaggerating this historical Summit, I would say Barack Obama has "discovered" Africa for the American business community and the people at large. The discovery is not the discovery of the African continent, rather the resources and the potential of Africa to be widely known by the American business community. The president has also signed an executive order for "encouraging US companies to trade with and invest in Africa".

At a domestic level of analysis, the role of African-Americans who constituted 13 percent of the American population comes forward. In the 2012 elections out of registered African-Americans voters 93 percent voted for Barack Obama. This can have an influence on the president to look at Africa seriously.

The American business community needs more market for their products. Since the economy of Africa is growing, nowadays, there are more consumers in Africa than before. Africa represents more than 14 percent of the world population. The large population of the continent is big market opportunity for the products of American companies. This situation and the economic development of Africa also attract American investors to come to the continent.

America needs more energy for her economy. On the other hand, Africa has the capacity to provide enormous oil to America. Because of security problems in

the Middle East that affect the oil interest of the US in the area, Africa's oil is being taken as a good alternative of energy security. Leaving aside North Africa, in the Sub Saharan Africa region there is oil in Nigeria, Angola, Chad, Equatorial Guinea and in East Africa regions.

The US imports one-fifth of her oil from Africa. It is estimated that by 2015 America will get 25 percent of her energy needs from Africa. Nigeria's oil export to the US covers 40 percent of her oil exports to different countries. In 2006 President George W. Bush said that by 2025 America will replace her 75 percent oil import from the Middle East by other regions and would make the importance of the Middle East to be a matter of history. Because of this strategic interest the United States has been increasingly turning to Africa to meet its energy requirements.

Regarding the systemic level of analysis, the status of Africa comes forward. During the Cold War period the main policy of the US towards Africa was preventing them from falling under Communist domination and minimizing the influence of the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War the US focused on Africa shifted away from ideology issues. The establishment of African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2000 shows the shift from ideology to economy and was soon followed by security issues. Because of Al-Qaeda the security interest of the US enhanced much more than before.

The September 11, 2001 attack of Al-Qaeda against the US is a turning point in the foreign policy of Bush's Administration. After this event Africa was taken as one of strategically important areas in fighting back international terrorism. As many countries in the world, many African countries had also shown support to the so-called Global War on Terror. This support and sympathy of African leaders contributed to the better cooperation between the US and Africa. The establishment of Africa Command (AFRICOM) has a direct relationship with security issues of America.

Currently, Africa's economy is growing at an average of 5 percent. As mentioned above, this is a good opportunity for America and other developed countries. China, India, Japan, Turkey and others have already started boosting trade and investment relations with African countries. They have established strategic partnerships with Africa. These partnerships include the Africa-Turkey Partnership, Africa-Europe Partnership, Africa-South America partnership, Africa-India Forum Summit, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) with Japan. So far America hasn't established a similar partnership with Africa. Thus the US-Africa Summit may develop into establishing partnerships. Africa will accept the future partnership between America and Africa saying, "Better Late than Never."

Melaku Mulualem is training department head at the Ethiopian International Institute for Peace and Development (EIIPD). He can be reached at melakumulu@yahoo.com.

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