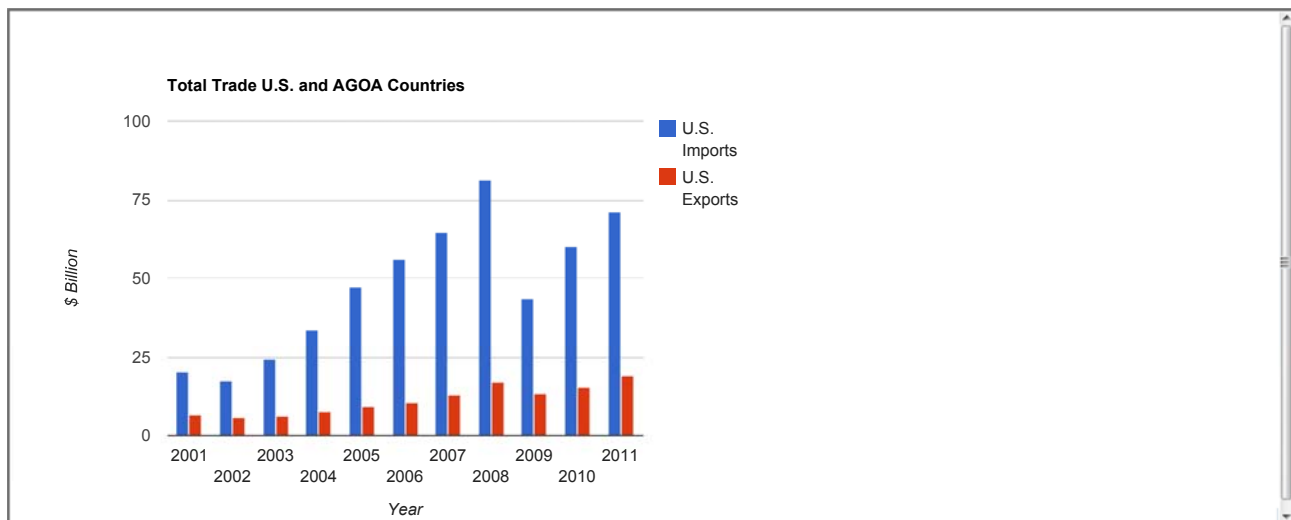


Obama's Overdue Trip to Africa

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It has been much noted that President Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan, has made just one visit to Africa as president – a one-day stop to Ghana in 2009. Some Africans have expressed disappointment in what they see as the president's lack of attention, complaining that on his watch, there has been no new American initiative comparable to [President George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief \(PEPFAR\)](#). Despite such criticism, the president's June 26-July 3 trip to Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania is likely to be warmly welcomed across the continent, which by and large remains pro-American.

There are three core themes of Obama's trip. The first deals with economic development, trade, and investment; the second with democracy and democratic institution building; and the third with Africa's youth. It is no surprise that the White House is emphasizing African economic development and U.S.-African trade and investment. The president will be accompanied by new U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman and numerous American CEOs. He will also participate in a business leaders' forum in Tanzania.



Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce ([African Growth and Opportunity Act](#))

There is also a China dimension to the trade push, if not overt. Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes [said on June 21](#): "There are other countries getting in the game. If the United States is not leading in Africa, we're going to fall behind in a very important region in the world." (China's trade with Africa was nearly U.S. \$200 billion last year, while U.S. trade totaled only about \$95 billion.)

The choice of countries on this trip allows the president to make a mark in each of sub-Saharan Africa's major regions.

The White House says the president will reach out to African youth, notably at a speech at the University of Cape Town. His [Young African Leaders Initiative](#) has been an important illustration of his approach to Africa. The initiative draws young leaders from across Africa together in high-profile forums, as well as mentoring partnerships and youth programs across sub-Saharan Africa to encourage democratic institution building and economic growth. The initiative also aims to strengthen U.S.-Africa ties.

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The president's trip will include symbolic steps like the visit to the "Door of No Return" near Dakar, a memorial to the victims of the Atlantic slave trade; and Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela spent eighteen of his twenty-seven years in prison. The White House announced it will defer to Mandela's family as to whether the president may meet with the ailing icon of the African liberation movement. The latest reports indicate that the 94-year-old Mandela's condition is critical. Should he die during President Obama's Africa trip, that is likely to overshadow everything else.

Africa has not been a major foreign policy preoccupation of the Obama administration, which was more concerned with ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and currently faces challenges in Syria, North Korea, Iran, and the "pivot" to Asia. But Africa matters. Aside from the potential for expanded economic ties, there are more than fifty independent states in sub-Saharan Africa, and they can be an important bloc in one-country-one vote institutions such as the UN General Assembly and the World Trade Organization.

U.S. security interests are potentially challenged by jihadist Islam, especially in West Africa and the Horn of Africa. The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has also been active in the hunt for Joseph Kony in central Africa, as well as training programs for African troops, including those deployed to Somalia against [al-Shabaab](#). Obama recently authorized the establishment of a drone base in Niamey, Niger. Illicit trade routes across the Sahel are a growing concern for U.S. security and drug enforcement, especially with the evidence of increased ties to South American drug cartels and north African terrorist groups. The terrain and lack of infrastructure, like roads, however, makes intelligence gathering and monitoring difficult.

The administration has also repeatedly emphasized support for governance, democracy, and rule of law on the continent. And economic development in Africa remains a concern. Despite the increasing "Africa rising" narrative, the continent still contributes only about 3 percent to international trade, and American interests—like Chinese—mostly involve extraction of resources.

So, a presidential trip to Africa is due, if not overdue.

The countries to visit were carefully chosen. The three largest by population—Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—all have serious governance and security issues, and none is a model of the rule of law. Kenya is an important ally, as well as the country of the president's father. But its president and vice president are under indictment by the International Criminal Court.

By contrast, Senegal has recently conducted successful elections, with the opposition winning the presidency. In Tanzania, the gulf between the government and its citizens for a long time has been less than in most African countries, an indicator of good governance, and it is the venue of an important trade and investment conference that Obama will attend along with former president Bush.

South Africa, the economic powerhouse of the continent, is also characterized by democracy, free and fair elections, and the rule of law. First Lady Michelle Obama made a visit there last year. People-to-people relations are close, but there is an edge to the official relationship, exacerbated by the United States not involving South Africa in the intervention in Libya, but instead turning to U.S. allies in the Middle East. The president's visit to South Africa may warm up official bilateral ties.

Parts of the U.S. media and blogosphere are critical of the cost of the trip, estimated to be in the range of [U.S. \\$60 to \\$100 million](#). Especially with the U.S. budget sequester and the cutting of some benefits for the U.S. poor, the sum is seen as unconscionable. Africa's huge size and poorly developed infrastructure (except in South Africa) probably exacerbate the cost. However, the real bottom line is that security surrounding presidential travel drives up the costs.

Is it worth it? Yes. President Obama's trip to Africa will affirm to African and American audiences that the United States recognizes the continent's importance. Closer official bilateral ties with Senegal, Tanzania, and South Africa could also pay dividends in the shorter term on issues ranging from trade liberalization to terrorism.