You can almost hear the whoosh as a continent draws its breath, waiting to cheer the inauguration of a Kenyan-American President of the United States. The symbolism is impossible to miss: Africa has arrived at the heart of American power.

But what does this mean for Ugandans, Kenyans, Senegalese, for Africans?

There is good news and bad news for Africa in the coming of Barack Obama. The good news is that existing relationships and aid programmes will remain.

The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief was renewed and augmented in July 2008 so that between 2009 and 2013 the Plan could spend up to $48 billion fighting AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, with much of this money spent in Africa.

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) was amended in December 2006 so that access to US markets and incentives for US investment in Africa would remain in effect until 2012. Official US direct aid to African countries is expected to top $8 billion by 2010. The new President has not proposed reductions in any of these programmes.

Indeed, he has committed to further increases in funding for them and to expansions of efforts to trade fairly, combat poverty, boost agriculture, cancel debt and help small businesses grow.

The bad news is that the context in which all of this will happen is hardening. Persistent violence in Somalia, Sudan, Congo and Zimbabwe and concerns about stability in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria’s oil delta and the Sahel – and the impacts of these on US interests – caused the US to create a dedicated command structure for Africa within its military in February 2007.

Africom, the US military Africa Command, is a $392 million a year effort which presently manages its affairs from Stuttgart in Germany, There is significant pressure within the military establishment to re-locate the Command to an African country, an effort which has thus far proved unsuccessful.
Barack Obama supports the Africa Command and is committed to its success.

The creation of Africom and the push to locate it in Africa have raised questions about the militarisation of US foreign policy towards Africa, a trend which if proved true recalls the spectre of the Cold War and stokes fears of neo-colonialism. African countries run the risk of having development policies subsumed in US efforts to combat terrorism and to ensure its access to oil, which is fast becoming a viable engine of economic growth there and a US strategic interest.

Far from allaying these concerns, Barack Obama appears unresponsive to them, judging by his policy pronouncements to date.

This means that Africa is likely to remain an object of US policy and not a partner in it, despite propaganda on both sides about the mutual benefits of cooperation. Benefits, material and otherwise, will accrue to the US and to African countries which engage constructively with it, but the power relationships involved will not change. The requirements of national security and the imperatives of a struggling economy will leave little room for big changes in US foreign policy towards Africa, especially in the short term.

Even if such flexibility existed, fundamentally changing US policy would demand fundamental changes in America’s perceptions of its role in Africa, something which does not fall to one person only.

The President of the United States is foremost the defender of US interests. Africa runs strong in Barack Obama, but his first responsibility is to the American people, so Africans wishing for a sea change in US policy will be disappointed. In pronouncing the oath of office, he will promise to ‘preserve, protect and defend’ the United States, yet this does not mean that the relationship between the US and African countries cannot improve. Opportunities exist to re-orient efforts to bring real self-determination to people across the continent, and it is here that the new president may bring the greatest hope.

There will not be an outbreak of democracy in Africa once Barack Obama is installed in the White House. But if he lives up to his promise to focus attention on corrupt and unaccountable governments there, then he could spark efforts at reform in more than one country.

If there is democratic change in Uganda, for example, it will come about because the people here forced it, not because Barack Obama willed it. The new American President may or may not give certain African heads of government a telling off, depending on the circumstances and
Obama is good and bad news for Africa

Written by By Micheal Madill
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The US is unlikely to intervene anywhere in Africa in the cause of democratic regime change, if it threatens US interests and the stability of existing policy. It may through diplomacy encourage governments to reform. It may through the manipulation of aid coerce some policy or action.

Direct military intervention is unthinkable.

If democratic change comes it will be a domestic effort.

At the end of the day the US will provide inspiration but little direct material support to reform efforts in countries that are more or less stable and not openly hostile, which description fits most countries on the continent.

Still, this inspiration is powerful. Thanks to twenty-first century media and growing footprint of internet and wireless communication across Africa, the sights and sounds and emotions of Barack Obama’s rise to the pinnacle of American politics are available to anyone with a television set, radio, computer or mobile phone.

His campaign is probably the best documented example of how to force your way over the barriers of discrimination and into the seat of power. Its strategy was publicly and exhaustively debated. Even its fundraising machine, the engine of the juggernaut, is no secret.

The pieces and processes are there if reformers wish to emulate Barack Obama’s attempt at a peaceful overturning of the status quo.

And though they may have the tacit support of the President, the success of such efforts is ultimately in the hands of people in Africa.

Barack Obama is a symbol of hope, but he cannot change the world alone.

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