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## THE WHITE HOUSE LOOKS TO AFRICA

The White House turns its focus to Africa this month as President Obama, now entering the twilight of his presidency, prepares to host the newly-elected Nigerian president in the Oval Office, followed by a fourth and likely final trip to sub-Saharan Africa, with stops scheduled in [Kenya](#) and [Ethiopia](#). Obama's efforts are a signal of Africa's growing strategic importance to the United States across a multitude of shared interests both in Africa and on the global stage, from counterterrorism to development to trade. Anchor events include meetings with leaders from Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia; a stop at the July 25-26 Global Entrepreneurship Summit (GES) in Nairobi; and a speech before the African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa. Obama will look to consolidate his legacy in Africa by building on momentum from last year's historic [U.S. – Africa Leaders Summit](#) in Washington, which the White House will frame as a deepening of well-established partnerships and initiatives. For many Kenyans, though, the trip is personal, viewed as a homecoming by a man they claim as their own and who last visited as a state senator in 2006. Meanwhile, sceptics of Obama's Africa policies, who have suggested that his focus on Africa comes too late in his presidency to have the desired impact, are questioning the president's decision to visit Kenya and Ethiopia, both of which struggle to uphold democratic freedoms, in lieu of a stop in regional powerhouse Nigeria in the wake of its historic election. Africa-watchers agree that this is one of Obama's final opportunities to permanently shift the nature of U.S. – Africa relations from their traditional focus on unilateral aid toward concrete partnerships with an increasingly vibrant economic region. His success in addressing these challenges will influence perceptions of Obama's legacy in Africa and the course of U.S. – Africa relations even after Obama leaves office. Below, Albright Stonebridge Group outlines what to expect:

### *Why Africa; why now?*

Obama's upcoming trip, taken in the fourth quarter of his presidency, follows three previous trips to the region: a stop in Ghana in 2009 that set the tone for U.S. engagement during his [landmark speech](#) on "mutual responsibility and mutual respect;" extended 2013 [visits](#) to democratic touchstones and close partners South Africa, Tanzania, and Senegal; and a return to South Africa in 2013 for the Nelson Mandela [memorial](#). His July meetings come just one year after the 2014 U.S. – Africa Leaders Summit, the first of its kind in the United States, in which some 50 African leaders visited Washington for three days of events, including the [U.S. – Africa Business Forum](#), which resulted in \$33 billion in public-private partnerships. Though Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia may be imperfect allies, President Obama's upcoming engagement will endeavor to expand important security, trade, and development initiatives, while also pushing African leaders to embrace democratic principles and human rights reform. Obama's plans signify an effort to build on the four priority areas in his 2012 [U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa](#): strengthening democratic institutions; spurring economic growth, trade, and investment; advancing peace and security; and promoting opportunity and development. Obama will look to accelerate his cornerstone initiatives such as [Power Africa](#), [Trade Africa](#), [Feed the Future](#), and

the [Young African Leaders Initiative \(YALI\)](#), and peace and security diplomacy in fragile states, including Somalia and South Sudan, to secure his legacy of a maturing U.S. partnership with the increasingly significant region.

***What is the [Global Entrepreneurship Summit \(GES\)](#)?***

Launched in 2009, GES brings together entrepreneurs and investors from around the world to showcase innovative projects, exchange ideas, and spur economic opportunity, with a focus on women and young people. This year's summit will be the first in sub-Saharan Africa, where over 10 million young African youth enter the labor market each year, and an upcoming generation of entrepreneurs are leapfrogging infrastructure constraints by embracing new technology. Kenya, East Africa's largest economy, is the heart of the African tech innovation sector and a fitting location. With over 1,000 participants, the Summit will convene leading multinationals, tech start-ups, and entrepreneurs at all stages of business development. Africa's established and budding entrepreneurs will make up the majority of attendees, and will have the opportunity to mix with international business moguls. President Obama is expected to attend, joined by Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker. As co-host, the Kenyans will also have a strong showing, led by President Uhuru Kenyatta.

***What about Nigeria?***

Nigeria, Africa's largest economy and home to over 170 million people, is a political and economic heavyweight in the region. Nigeria has long been an ally for the United States in West Africa, though the partnership grew strained under President Goodluck Jonathan. Obama's decision not to travel to Nigeria during his tenure has been the subject of debate, and the July 20 meeting in the Oval Office with President Muhammadu Buhari is viewed as a vital opportunity to reset the relationship. Buhari was inaugurated on May 29, 2015, following an [historic election](#) that marked the first time Nigerians have voted to oust an incumbent president in the country's 16 years as a democracy. The United States now has an opportunity to capitalize on Nigeria's momentum for change by engaging early with Buhari, who ran on a reform platform, to chart a new course for U.S. – Nigeria relations. Buhari is under pressure to deliver on his campaign promises to fight corruption, tackle the terrorist group Boko Haram, invest in healthcare and education, and get the Nigerian economy—stalled by the global fall in oil prices—back on track. Buhari and Obama can be expected to discuss U.S. support for the military, economic, and political reforms necessary to unlock Nigeria's full potential as a global leader.

***Why is Kenya the cornerstone?***

President Obama remains wildly popular in Kenya, the birthplace of his father, though many Kenyans have grown disgruntled waiting for their favored son to return. His absence was purposeful—bilateral relations cooled following the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s indictment of now-President Uhuru Kenyatta for alleged war crimes during Kenya's 2007-8 post-election violence that brought the nation to the brink of civil war. The ICC dropped its charges against Kenyatta last December, opening the door for Obama to re-engage.

The July visit signals a full return to normalized relations, reaffirming Kenya's role as a key, if controversial, U.S. counterterrorism ally and commercial partner. Regional peace and security issues will be paramount in talks between Presidents Obama and Kenyatta, with significant focus towards resolving ongoing challenges in Somalia and South Sudan. In both countries, the United

States and Kenya have made significant investments in strengthening institutions and countering violence and civil unrest. A [July 13 State Department warning](#) of possible terrorist attacks at GES highlighted Kenya's tense security environment. Major attacks by the Somali militant group al-Shabaab have threatened Kenya's stability: Kenya suffered the worst terrorist attack since the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi last April, when gunmen laid siege to a university in eastern Kenya, leaving nearly 150 dead. The attack followed the 2013 siege of the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi that left 67 dead and renewed fears of al-Shabaab's strength in Kenya. But amid ongoing security cooperation between the United States and Kenya to counter violent extremism across East Africa, there are real concerns about Kenyan security forces' human rights record, most notably with regard to treatment of ethnic Muslim Somalis, many of whom have sought refuge in Kenya; and Obama is likely to push Kenyatta for improvements.

### ***Why Ethiopia now?***

The inclusion of Ethiopia on President Obama's agenda—the first time a sitting American president has visited—is a signal of the country's growing commercial and security importance in a volatile region. Ethiopia is home to Africa's second largest population and the region's fifth largest economy, the result of sustained high growth rates, projected to be 8.5% this year. The Ethiopian government has taken measures to liberalize its economy and welcomed foreign capital, though its leaders have been criticized for employing an increasingly autocratic approach to governance. It is home to the AU, a regional body with the stated goal of working towards democracy, human rights, and development across the continent. Obama is expected to meet with AU Chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and give a broad, touchstone speech on the future of U.S. – Africa relations, reiterating support for the AU's vision of an integrated, prosperous and peaceful continent. Obama's efforts are intended to warm historically tense relations, especially on issues related to foreign intervention in Africa's home-grown conflicts, and reinvigorate the formal [U.S. – AU dialogue](#) to advance cooperation on everything from health capacity building in the wake of the Ebola crisis to regional economic integration.

### ***What about the critics?***

Both the Ethiopian and Kenyan governments have been heavily criticized for restrictions on political space and alleged human rights violations. Despite the ICC's dismissal of its previous charges against Kenyatta, many critics question Kenya's commitment to human rights and democracy. In Ethiopia's 2015 elections, the ruling party and its coalition took every seat in parliament, and nine journalists were arrested during the election, fueling outcries that the government has largely eliminated means of public dissent. Critics contend that Obama's trip undermines his stated commitment to supporting American values in the region. Africa-watchers expect that the President will highlight the need to strengthen democratic institutions and uphold human rights when he meets with African leaders, and hold a civil society event to underscore the same. Nonetheless, the trip signals Obama's willingness to actively engage and partner with these administrations despite differences, as he might elsewhere in the world.

### ***Will the president's efforts lead to more business opportunities in Africa?***

It isn't coincidental that Obama has chosen to meet with leaders from three of Africa's largest and fastest growing economies, where opportunities for U.S. business interests abound. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to enjoy steady growth estimated at 4.4%, well above the global

average for 2015. But the popular [Africa Rising](#) narrative is not ubiquitous and strong headwinds remain: South Africa's economy has fallen stagnant amid a power crisis; Angola and Nigeria suffered serious setbacks following the global drop in oil prices; and the Ebola outbreak severely disrupted economic activity in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Growing the U.S. commercial footprint in Africa is vital to the region's success, and the Obama administration is increasingly championing interest from American companies who want to capitalize on the region's growth trajectory and rapidly expanding consumer class, driven by an exploding population and swift urbanization. To do so, Obama has sought to transform trade ties through the establishment of the U.S. – Africa Business Forum and the [Presidential Advisory Council on Doing Business in Africa](#), the expansion of Power and Trade Africa initiatives to reduce regional barriers to growth, and the recent renewal of the cornerstone trade framework in Africa, the African Growth and Opportunity Act ([AGOA](#)). As China and India intensify their economic relationships with Africa—both countries lead the United States in overall trade there—President Obama's direct engagement with the continent will be a critical opportunity to both leverage public-private partnerships and solidify bilateral commercial relationships at the highest levels of government.