

# The President of Africa

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**W**ith his flamboyant fashion sense and Amazonian female bodyguards, it is sometimes difficult to take Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi seriously on the world stage. Yet the Libyan strongman's recent selection as chairman of the African Union, which caps a lengthy diplomatic push on the continent, demonstrates that his country's international rehabilitation has been very effective indeed. No impulsive whim -- there is a clear purpose to Libya's assertive foreign policy on the continent, with distinct implications for the United States. Qaddafi sees himself as a symbolic and de facto leader of Africa. But if U.S. President Barack Obama does not want Qaddafi to undermine counterterrorism and human rights initiatives in the region, he would do well to keep watch of the mercurial Libyan leader's continental ambitions.

The colonel's self-proclaimed betrothal to Africa has been a relatively recent affair. Although he has ruled Libya since 1969, it was only a decade ago that he unveiled his plan for a "United States of Africa." Up to that point, Qaddafi expended his considerable energies touting Libya's Arab heritage and pursuing Arab unity. Disappointed again and again, Qaddafi promised, "If the revolution does not believe in Arab unity, it will not be a revolution, and I will work for another revolution." He soon proclaimed his conversion explicitly: "We Libyans are Africans."

Since then, Qaddafi has renewed relations with the United States, transforming Libya from a terrorism-supporting state responsible for the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 to a reluctant U.S. ally, much to the delight of many in Washington.

But the United States should tread carefully where Qaddafi and his African ambitions are concerned. In recent years, a confident Libya has channeled its oil wealth into a cocktail of pan-African ideology, assertiveness, and petrodollar diplomacy, his brand of which counters the interests of the United States. Qaddafi's anticolonial rhetoric, for a start, hasn't gone away. As recently as this month, Qaddafi alleged that "Western powers . . . and companies . . . continue sucking Africa's blood."

Qaddafi's "Africa for the Africans" mantra (which often places Qaddafi at the apex of that continent) also translates into real opposition to specific U.S. policies. Of particular concern to Washington is Qaddafi's hostility toward the establishment of an African base to Africom, the Pentagon's new African military command. Qaddafi has urged others to echo his opposition: In 2007, the 28-member states of CEN-SAD (the Community of Sahel-Saharan States), a regional economic community funded mostly by Libya, issued a communiqué stating that it "flatly refuses the installation of any military command or any foreign armed presence."

Tripoli's African sovereignty prism has also led it to support the more unsavory regimes on the continent, including Zimbabwe and Sudan. Libya fought against both the U.S.- supported sanctions against Zimbabwe and last year's U.N. arms embargo. In Darfur, though Libya acted as a mediator and has provided an aid corridor, Qaddafi has also played down the conflict, claiming it is unnecessarily politicized because "there are superpowers who are interested in oil."

Libya's sidelining of human rights in regional diplomacy also threatens to undercut U.S. efforts to improve governance. Qaddafi promotes his idiosyncratic model of "direct democracy," which in practice offers little representation, bars political opposition, and squashes free speech and basic human rights. He has suggested to other African leaders that "multiparty democracy is [a] sham." CEN-SAD, for example, defends unsavory leaders such as Omar al-Bashir of Sudan.

Behind Qaddafi's postured wackiness lie consequences -- and fundamental conflicts with U.S. interests on the continent he intends to lead. Qaddafi is antagonistic to the U.S. political and economic presence in Africa. Although his intemperate rhetoric does not always translate into action, Tripoli's statements are unhelpful, and Libya's oil wealth enables it to undercut some of Washington's endeavors in the region. So indeed, the United States must remain wary of the continuing Libyan-U.S. rapprochement. Libya's leader may seem eccentric, but Qaddafi is no joke.

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