What would Romney win mean for Africa?

By Jason Warner, Special to CNN

Editor's note: Jason Warner is a Ph.D. student in African Studies and Government at Harvard University. The views expressed are his own.

Last week’s final U.S. presidential debate, on foreign policy, included only passing reference to two sub-Saharan African countries – Somalia and Mali. But while the outcome of Tuesday’s poll will more likely hinge on the performance of the American economy than on any foreign policy issue, many with an interest in the continent are still wondering: what would a Mitt Romney presidency mean for Africa?

Given the paucity of insight offered up by the two candidates in the debates, it’s probably wise to start with Romney’s stated goals on his campaign website.

After a prosaically accurate introduction, Romney’s Africa platform first details “Obama’s Failures,” noting that “After holding great expectations for the Obama administration, our African partners have been deeply disappointed.” To be sure, Obamania was pervasive in Africa, not only because of the president’s familial lineage in Kenya, but also due to the symbolism of a black man becoming the leader of the world’s most powerful country. With that in mind, it’s hardly surprising Obama’s 2009 visit to Ghana has been hailed by many as historic.

But African praise has waned as Obama’s tenure has progressed. Conservative Christian and Muslim groups across the continent, for example, have been angered at the administration’s bold pro-gay rights platform given that homosexuality is widely considered a cultural and religious taboo across much of the continent (indeed it is illegal in many African states). In addition, the Obama administration has come in for criticism for increasing the U.S. footprint on the continent, whether it be American backing for the Western intervention in Libya, or the growing opposition to the use of unmanned drones in Somalia and the claims of secret U.S. bases in Ethiopia and the Seychelles. Writes one commentator from the state-sponsored Herald newspaper in Zimbabwe: “There is indeed nothing that the ordinary African or revolutionary Africa has gained from Obama, except backlash for failing to support gay rights, to observe Eurocentric and American ethnocentric values of democracy, good governance and accountability.”

The Romney campaign for its part is critical of the Obama administration over the continued presence of Al-Shebab terrorists in Somalia, as well as its
alleged failure to capitalize on South Sudan’s independence in the face of an encroaching Chinese presence. None of these complaints, of course, can be laid solely at the door of the Obama administration, and none do much to shed light on what a Romney presidency would do differently. Romney’s campaign site also lays out a broad, two-pronged approach to the continent: 1) improving economic ties and the rule of law and 2) leading on security and human rights.

The first is the Romney campaign’s strongest and least controversial plank: “Africa’s road to stability and prosperity lies through a robust private sector economy, increased trade, and good governance.” However, while deeper commercial ties with the U.S. might be beneficial, such free market talk is regarded with healthy doses of skepticism on the continent. After all, memories of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (a preferential trade agreement signed between the United States and Africa in 2000) still linger: an estimated 80 percent of that trade volume is comprised of primary products like gas and oil, with negligible trade coming from manufactured goods.

Still, given that a private-sector-or-bust President Romney would no doubt be looking to international markets to boost domestic growth, Africa could very likely see the emergence of even deeper trade agreements with the United States, particularly to counter China’s considerable presence there. (Whether these would ultimately be beneficial or detrimental for Africa remains to be seen).

On security and human rights, the Romney campaign apparently sees Sudan as the central country of interest in a broader Africa policy. “Mitt Romney will lead on the issue of Sudan’s ongoing atrocities,” the site says, castigating the government of Omar al-Bashir for “continuing a legacy of violence and genocide” and using rebel groups to undermine the new state of South Sudan.

The site adds: “Governor Romney is committed to protecting innocents from war crimes and other atrocities…and achieving a sustainable peace for all who live in Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan.”

But this focus on Sudan is a risky, and arguably confusing, choice. To be sure, Sudan continues to feature in current U.S. Africa policy, not least because of the important role that the U.S. played in facilitating the breakaway of South Sudan from Sudan in July 2011, and its attempts at cross-border mediation since then. But this makes it all the stranger that he appears to have chosen this as his go-to “Africa issue.” Romney was likely lucky to be able to avoid discussing Sudan in the debate: even for the most experienced policy makers, Sudan is a complicated, messy, and deeply challenging place, with overlapping issues such as Khartoum’s alleged
genocide in Darfur; its nearly 30 year civil war with what is now South Sudan; its historic connections with al-Qaeda; and its ever-tumultuous relationships with the International Criminal Court and other African states. It simply is not clear how a Romney presidency would be able to achieve distinguishable gains in Sudan over the Obama government.

Equally interesting are the omissions in the Romney Africa platform. While he gives a passing nod to “extremism in the Sahara,” Romney makes no specific mention of some of the biggest security threats on the continent, particularly al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb as well as Boko Haram (Nigeria), Ansar Dine (Mali), M23 (Democratic Republic of Congo), and the Lord’s Resistance Army (Uganda, Central African Republic, and Democratic Republic of Congo). Also lacking is any reference to the cornerstone public health programs like the President’s Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief, or economic development and governance programs such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

This said, although Romney’s Africa platform is overall well-reasoned, it’s difficult to see how a Romney government would really differentiate itself from President Obama. For better or for worse, Romney brings no specialized knowledge of the continent to the table, and he will therefore be forced to rely heavily on the State Department, Department of Defense, and voices from Washington think tanks to inform his Africa policy.

In short, a Romney win will mean little for Africa, even though, despite its fleeting appearance at the debates, Africa may be destined to play a bigger role in U.S. foreign policy considerations.