Trust Deficit: Historical Obstacles Hamper U.S. Relations in Africa

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U.S. prioritization of Europe in Africa dilutes the U.S. brand and undermines U.S. standing among Africans who have come to see the United States as an extension of the former colonial powers.

U.S. relations with African countries are defined through great power competition optics. Seen from Washington, Paris, or London, this competition has come to mean the struggle for hegemony between the United States, China, and Russia.

This competition, which is reminiscent of the Cold War, has focused in great measure on Africa because of the growing strategic importance of the continent. Africa’s natural resources, rare earth mineral reserves, forests, rivers, and youths are critical for the future of the world. Consequently, Africa is the target of a new scramble for resources. It is often described as the continent of the future, but whose future is it?

While the hegemonic powers seek to defeat each other in this quasi-zero-sum scramble, Africans see the competition as a positive development. Seen from African capitals from Cairo to Abuja to Kinshasa, Addis Ababa, and Pretoria, great power competition provides Africa with much-needed options and choices.

As such, African countries and leaders welcome the competition, but they are not interested in the ideologies underpinning it in Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. Rather, they seek to maximize the opportunities that the competition affords regardless of who offers them.

The United States, however, has not fully recognized and appreciated this African perspective. In Africa, the United States needs to overcome a few structural obstacles and chart a new course.

**The Old Colonial Posture**

Compared to old European powers, the United States, China, and Russia share a significant advantage in Africa. None maintained a colony on the continent. But while China and Russia have successfully exploited their noncolonial status in Africa, the United States has not. For historical reasons, the United States works in close partnership with former colonial powers, which is a problem for the United States in Africa.

Sixty years after most African countries achieved their independence, U.S. policymakers still view
Africa primarily through the same European colonial lens they did in 1945. The default U.S. position on Africa is to either defer to Europeans or outsource its engagement to former colonial powers. Not only do Africans resent this treatment, which de facto ignores their sovereignty and independence, it undermines the possibility of strong relations and partnerships between the United States and these countries.

It has been evident for a while now that Europeans do not understand Africa given the fast-changing dynamics on the ground. Recent events in the Sahel and former French colonies underscore Europe’s disconnect from the realities of the continent. For instance, for years, France failed to appreciate the regional and national dynamics and growing public discontent against its Africa policy, which remained colonial, exploitative, and paternalistic in nature. Anti-France sentiment and France’s failure to change course effectively created room for a string of coups d’état and for Russia and its portfolio of mercenary outfits, such as the Wagner Group, to gain a foothold in Mali and the Central African Republic, former French spheres of influence and control. The United States is now scrambling to chart a course of engagement in that space.

U.S. prioritization of Europe in Africa dilutes the U.S. brand and undermines U.S. standing among Africans who have come to see the United States as an extension of the former colonial powers. Notwithstanding the fact that Africa has 54 countries, deference to Europe is a serious obstacle to the conception of a needed, mutually beneficial, and comprehensive U.S.-Africa policy. Nowhere else in the world does the United States prioritize former colonial powers over independent, sovereign states. African countries want closer ties with the United States; if the United States is not receptive, they will go elsewhere. China, Russia, India, Turkey, and other non-Western middle powers are strengthening their partnerships with African countries across all sectors.

**Lingering Cold War Mindset: United States vs. Them**

The Cold War left a negative legacy, defined by wars, dictatorships, and economic underdevelopment. Africans fought and distrusted each other over foreign ideologies. In the end, the politics and economics of the Cold War set African countries back decades. They have been struggling since to catch up with the rest of the world.

The African economies that have posted an acceptable performance did so after the Cold War. The great power competition offers an opportunity to catch up, and they welcome assistance and support from any quarter.

Yet, the United States approaches this round of competition in a fashion reminiscent of the Cold War. In the past, U.S. foreign policy was about defeating communists and their allies and preserving the hegemonic status of the United States. Today, it is about denying China and Russia access, protecting the homeland by fighting terrorists in Africa, and asking Africans to pick sides. As in the past, this approach mostly focuses on short-term U.S. security concerns but does not promote sustainable relations with Africans; it makes Africans suspicious of U.S. motivations. They see major commitments to security and humanitarian programs, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), by far outweigh private sector and foreign direct investment.

What these countries seek but do not receive from the United States is massive investment in sectors that bolster human security. China, Turkey, India, and other U.S. competitors have committed tremendous financial capital in Africa, which serves as the foundation of their strong partnerships with Africans.

In Asia, U.S. Cold War policy enabled the emergence of strong partnerships with South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand, countries that faced great governance challenges but benefited from sustained U.S. engagement. However, this policy did not enable the emergence of any such partnership in Africa. The current approach to great power competition, which focuses on denying China and Russia access, does not promise a better outcome.

**Values and Cultural Wars**

In a world of diverse, competing value ecosystems, U.S. insistence on African countries adopting Amer-
ican values often leads to adversarial relations and counterproductive outcomes. The United States exports its cultural wars to Africa, giving them prominence in diplomatic relations and branding them as the defense and promotion of universal values. Africans see this approach as overreach, bullying, and lack of respect for their values. The United States overestimates its influence and demands too much for too little in return; it talks too much and promises a lot but does not meet expectations. Consequently, Africans are more comfortable with other partners that do not impose their values on them.

The United States would do better in Africa by designing a dynamic and flexible policy that is free of European colonial legacy. Such a policy must be less prescriptive and more attentive to the needs and conditions of African countries and promote mutually beneficial bilateral relations.

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