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"Rethinking U.S.-Africa Strategy"

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Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:
Senior Fellow and Director, Africa Program, CSIS

Judd Devermont
Senior Adviser (non-resident), CSIS

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Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Welcome to Into Africa. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. I'm a senior fellow and the director of the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is a podcast where we talk everything, Africa, politics, economics, security, and culture. Welcome. Africa I like to say remains critical to world affairs, not just because it is Africa, but because of all the characteristics, the offerings of the continent. It's the hard mineral resources, but to me it's not about mineral resource it's about human resources. The demographics are pretty telling.

Median age, I never stopped saying this is 19 years old. When you compare it to places like Germany, it's 49. So it's a 30 year gap, which means all kinds of things, right? It means maybe lack of experience, but it also mean potential. And I always say that the way we in the West engage Africa, sometime we miss where the potential is because we are so caught on security dynamics, uh, Russia, Wagner, China competition. But I think our target audience is actually those 12 years old who are on the continent. Those kid who are on Huawei phone, but they're not listening to radio by Beijing.

They're not necessarily listening to Russia today, but they know everything about Kim and Kroy Kardashian. Those kids, they know about 50 Cent. In fact, the motto is Get Rich or Die Trying. In other words, it's a way to simply say they want the same things that we want. Access to education, access to unemployment, a little saving and good life. So Africa, because of what Aja said is also important to the United States and to discuss the role of Africa and how the US can engage effectively with this continent is Judd Devermont who is an operating partner for innovation at Kupanda Capital.

He served on the US National Security Council, a special assistant to President Joe Biden, senior director for African Affairs. But for me, of course Judd is a friend, is also my predecessor in this job at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. My pleasure. Judd, good afternoon and welcome to CSIS.

Judd Devermont: Mvemba, thank you so much. Just obviously elephant in the room, it's a little weird to be on this podcast and be not the one doing the interviewing, but the interviewee. But I'm so happy to be here and just wanted to say that watching from the sidelines watching and listening to this podcast, I'm just so happy and impressed with what you've done with the program and the podcast. So thank you for having me.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Well thank you for coming. You, uh, actually initiated this podcast. You've been on different sides of the aisle. We'll say you've been in the think tank, you've been at the CIA, you've been at the White House, you've gone back to the White House, you're back on the side. Now you are a non-resident, senior advisor to the Africa program here, which is great for us. Where you stand today, how do you see Africa? Where do you see the changes will be coming from and what are some of the challenges that the world will, will have to grapple with in its engagement with Africa?

Judd Devermont: Thanks Mvemba. It's extraordinarily important question and my views on Africa in terms of its importance haven't changed. Whether I was sitting here at CSIS or in my current role at Kupanda Capital or when I was in the White House or when I was in the intelligence community and that is that Africa is critical to our shared future full stop period. Uh, the reasons that you mentioned for sure that this is the youngest and fastest growing continent in the world. Um, because of some of the resources that it has, not just critical minerals but the fact that if we're going to really address the climate challenge, Africa has to be part of the way we think about that solution.

But we're in a moment right now the way the National Security strategy talks about it, it's a competition for what's next and Africa's gonna cast the deciding vote on the key issues of the day. And if we're going to have a durable new world order, an international system that works for everyone, Africans have to be at the table, have to be at the most consequential decisions. So I still believe that firmly it's been a through line for my work here at CSIS and it continues to today. I would say that I think we're in a really interesting inflection point. Certainly President Biden talks about an inflection point globally, but what I'm talking about is Africans are questioning, they're questioning the international system.

They're questioning incumbents who have been in power for 30 plus years or more. We saw that in the ANC losing its majority at the election back in May. Africans are questioning the post-colonial relationships they've had. And so it's a really interesting moment, which means there'll be some volatility as this is being worked out. But it's always good to question. And the question is how do we manage legitimate, genuine questions about what the state of the world should be and how Africa moves forward with some stability, predictability, and kind of ever moving the ball forward.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: You raise a lot of point there competition, what should be next inflection point, everlasting and everlasting, uh, dictators in power questioning the colonial system. Part of the reason I'm excited to have you here today, it's because of the various perspectives that you have seen wearing different hats. Can you contrast a little bit how you saw the world before you came to CSIS? You came around the, just as we're entering COVID, the pandemic time, but the world was still moving here or frozen a little bit, but then you went back to the policymaking world during that time.
So if we're talking about kind of three periods here, one is the pre COVID, then you came here overlapped with COVID, then you went back to the policy world. Have there been changes that you saw at that time that will fit into the point you just raised?

Judd Devermont: I think so. Let me start with my viewpoint when I got to CSIS, which in some respects only became more firm in my mind at CSIS and then when I got to government, in fact it was even more significant than I anticipated, which is that, and I'm gonna talk a little bit about US African relations to kind of paint this picture, but it's that for the last 30 years, the US and the African continent and its people have had a relationship and have delivered I think very positive outcomes for both sides. It has been a bipartisan approach, incredible initiatives passed by Congress, by President Clinton, embraced by President Bush.

President Bush announces new programs like PEPFAR embraced by President Obama and so on and so forth. And I think that those were remarkable and I think we have a lot to be proud of. But when I got here, it was very clear to me that we needed to kind of rework the policy. And that's partly because being at a think tank, you talked to a lot of people, you engaged with the private sector in a way that I didn't when I was in the intelligence community or other thought leaders. And what was clear to me is that Africa has changing dramatically and the world is changing dramatically. And so a set of approaches and policies that were built in the late '90s just aren't fit for purpose.

That was the conviction that led me to write a paper here in August of 2020 called A New Policy Framework for the African Century. To your point, Mvemba about what continent's gonna matter in the 21st century. That paper ended up being, I would think one of the reasons why they hired me to write the Africa strategy. And it was really what do we need to continue to do because it continues to have value for the American people and African people and what do we need to change because the world is changing.

Part of that was again, that Africa is not just a sideshow can't be something that you compartmentalize. If we're going to solve these challenges around climate, around the pandemic, around a new world order, Africans have to be at the seat of table. And then what are the different steps that one has to take to actualize that? And we've gotta think differently about our partnerships. We have to inject more complexity. Can't just engage with Africans because you want a leader to be a model, you have to engage with African leaders because you've got business you need to accomplish.

How do we think about not letting one particular issue, whether it's geopolitical competition or counter-terrorism, drive the whole relationship? How do you take those objectives that have been evergreen, democracy and governance, peace and security, trade investment development and think of them as really catalysts, uh, to change so that Africans are more active and dynamic on these global tables. And then finally, you know, what are the policies that we need to change for a continent that's young, that is connected and increasingly urban? So that was a little bit of where I started with when I joined the administration. That's the strategy says those things.

It says in fact, continuity is not up to the task. And that we need to look at innovation and evolution. And I would say being in that seat, I'm extraordinarily proud. Maybe we can talk about all the things that we did. We certainly have changed the way we think, talk and engage with Africans and a number of initiatives that I think we'll have long-term benefit. But what I also recognized is that all of this change that I was talking about was more intense than even I expected. The pace was much faster, the scale was overwhelming.

And that's something that I try to reckon with in an article that I wrote for foreign affairs is when the world is changing this fast and the continent is changing this fast, what does that mean for our toolkit? How does that explain some of the challenges we see? And then what do we do next?

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: In this article that you refer to is Africa needs more American involvement, not less is in past periods of turmoil Washington can help. So this article has gone a lot of interest in Washington and you write, I write every time we write, you know, you expect various reactions. You get people love it and say this was great. It tells me everything I didn't know about Africa. And somebody who says, ah, we didn't learn much there. Why do we need more American involvement in Africa? So let kind of start there. Why to those guys who or ladies who say, I read the piece but I was expecting more.

Do we really need more American involvement in Africa? The people who say African should be mature enough to start their own course, what do we need more? I also understand sometime titles are picked by editors. So I don't even know if you picked the title or not, but since you are here, we rather hear directly from you.

Judd Devermont: Well rather than sort of go back and forth on why that title you've written for foreign affairs, I'm very grateful that foreign affairs wanted to publish the article. Let's start with the, the feedback is excellent and I don't mean excellent because it's complimentary. I mean it's excellent because that's how we get to better understandings of each other. The feedback, whether I was in policy or here, you know, sometimes you have to have some humility, but overall durable change starts from disagreement.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: I like you always say that.

Judd Devermont: I always say that. Sorry.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: That’s your quote to you.

Judd Devermont: That's my quote.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Okay. I always like, I like that. You know, durable change

Judd Devermont: I say, I say durable solutions start from disagreement. Uh, and so I love the feedback and it's a good question, right? What is the role of America in a multipolar world? Now I will tell you that in my experience on the continent when I was the senior director for Africa is to a person, the request was for more, more engagement, more training, more presence, more showing up. So I didn't get the pushback on that. But the genesis of the article is important. I mentioned that almost the intensity, the scale, the pace was so significant and beyond my expectations.

And I was sitting at my desk Mvemba in August of 2023. Uh, the Albanese coup had just happened. The Niger coup happened in July. The Civil War in Sudan had broke out in April. And let's be honest, I was in kind of of a low point. This was, didn't feel like a great moment for Africa. And I said to myself, well is this the worst it's ever been? And if it's not, how did we get out of it? And so that sort of took me on sort of this piece I wrote and I had been talking to people about for several months is that in the '90s we were in this moment where it's often thought about as this sort of end of history moment, a triumphant moment of unipolar and that the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union is over.
And in Africa there were some incredible moments, right? The dismantling of apartheid independence for Namibia, the end of the Civil War in Mozambique, the introduction of multiparty democracy. But there was some pretty massive dislocation, destruction and conflicts during that same period. The Civil Wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Black Hawk Down the Rwandan genocide, the Congo Wars, the estimates are six to 7 million people died through that period. So let's sort of clock it at '89 into 2003. We ended up coming out of that with a new strategy on how we engage with Africa. And I wanted to kind of explore what that was and I wanted to see like are there parallels here?

So first on the parallels, I think so you know, history doesn't repeat itself, it rhymes. But here's my view is that at the end of the Cold War you saw the dismantling of a particular international system and the building of a new international system, which was a US-led rules-based order, it was required a lot of emphasis on Germany and the Soviet Union. We actually pulled a lot of resources out of Africa according to press reports. We closed embassies, consulates stations, US missions. It took us a very long time to get back to $1.2 billion for bilateral assistance. That was in '92 and it took us to 2011 to get back to that point, we stripped positions out of the State department that were focused on Africa.

Today we see a different shift, right? So we see the end of the post Cold War era and something that is still not built. Even though these are different stories, right? One is about the US and the Soviet Union not backing states anymore. And another one is the reintroduction of competition and new players. Both of them are about the intermediate period where we don't have all the rules and rules can be challenged and flaunt and, uh, there's a lot more opportunity for internal mischief and external manipulation. That's what seemed to me relevant in terms of these two points.

And w- what happened in the nineties, and I won't go for the whole article, Robert Kaplan of the Atlantic wrote of piece called the Coming Anarchy. President Clinton sent a note to the NSC and said, is this true? Very long response back, but senior director at the time, Don Steinberg, added a quote from a Christmas carol that said, are these the shadows of things that will be, or are they the shadows of things that may be only and then if the courses be departed from the ends will change. And that started a rethinking of what we were doing because the old tools weren't working and the continent was being sort of put into a vice by these historical and global forces.

And then President Bush really came in and supersized and took it to another level. President Bush was very committed to Africa and onward and so forth. And so what I wanted to say in that article, I'm getting back to the America part, uh, is that the Biden administration has done and made important investments on the continent First Summit in eight years, first state visit in 16, directing billions of dollars towards green energy and infrastructure and technology and then advocating for Africans at the seat at the table, right? So the AU is now part of the G20.

We've called for an African seat, permanent seat at the UN Security Council. We have pushed for reform of the MDBs including a third seat for the Africans at the IMF. So we're doing all of this work. If we're going to work with our African partners and others to kind of reach a new place where stability, prosperity, democracy are sort of on upswing and not on the downswing, then it's gonna take all of us. It's a global communities effort. And the US can't do it all by itself. Certainly not the what the peace advocates. But the US does have a role. It has great convening power, it has high popularity rate.

United States in Africa is more popular than the United States is in anywhere else in the world. So those are strengths. You can say that's pop culture, you could say that's the work we've done in conflict resolution. But it stands that the US can play a role. It has to do it humbly, it has to do it in conversation, it has to bring people to the table. But I think there's a role, it's not exclusively the US but we're invested in an African future that is successful.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: A lot of material there. After the collapse or the fall of the Berlin Wall, the US had an opportunity really to just from the African perspective, the Cold War did not really work well for Africans. You know, it, it left a trail of dictators, strong men supported by either side. This was the competition. US USSR competition, people had to pick side and that collapse, you know, all the points that you brought up, Black Hawk Down, all the other crises were, but for the African they, they felt like the US did not engage as much in terms of setting a new course.

It was almost like, again, this from the Africa- African per se, like the Cold War is over. Ah, we really don't need to have the business we did before now embrace democracy or sink type of thing. And so he left Africa in turmoil, not because of the US. He just, when there's a change in the world order, everybody need to find their place.

Judd Devermont: Yeah, yeah.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: I think the US was trying to find its place. If we learn any lessons from that period, that was a good what, 30 year, you know?

Judd Devermont: Yeah.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Until the way you describe it. What lessons have we learned in the US in the way we engage Africa? Because you also hear all this mumbling of Africans saying we don't want to choose size this time. You mentioned the new competition, which is much more different than the competition during the Cold War because we have another set of actors, the Gulf Arab states, Turkey, uh, China and others. So how do you contrast those two and how does the US engage in this space?

Judd Devermont: Yeah, I think we've learned a lot of lessons from the Cold War. Cold War may have led to the US defeating the USSR, but the pain and suffering uh, from many of the choices on who we ally with on the continent was quite traumatic. South Africa and Angola. And so this is where sometimes what we are doing and how it is represented comes into conflict. So I will tell you, and I've said it on the podcast when I was the host, is that Africans want a choice of partners. So when the US says we are the partners of choice, which strikingly Mvemba was very hard for me to get them to stop saying I made some progress.

If the US says we wanna be the partner of choice and the Africans are saying we want a choice of partners, that's a fundamental disconnect. So that's not my view and that's not the way we acted. Now that does not mean by the way that we aren't going to have disagreements. We're gonna have lots of disagreements all for the better. We should be engaging.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Which are the beginning of durable solutions.

Judd Devermont: Which are the beginning of durable solutions.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: (laughs). Exactly.

Judd Devermont: You know, with South Africa for example, President Ramaphosa and President Biden had very constructive conversations about their differing views on how to drill with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That was productive and that continued on between Jake Sullivan and his national security counterparts Sydney Mufamo- Mufamadi. Those are good. That also means by the way, that we can have specific concerns about what our allies and our adversaries are doing in Africa because they may affect US national security interests and they may undercut African sovereignty and we can have a conversation about that.

But never in my experience did we say choose us or choose China, choose us or choose Russia. It was always much more specific, right? Here are some things you are doing that we would love to have an American competitor to be at the table. We've gotta do some work to do that. You've gotta do some work to make sure the playing ground is fair and even. There's some things that are problematic for our national security. And so we're very clear about those things, but it was never all or nothing. Now the challenge is the all or nothing sounds really good in the media. I'll give you my favorite example.

Since 2005 we've been doing something called flintlock. We've been doing it for almost two decades. In the last two years-

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Military exercise.

Judd Devermont: It's a military exercise, thank you. In the last two years, every post or newspaper article says with Russia in the, on the horizon US trains African soldiers. So there's also a problem of the way these are things are framed and even when you talk to journalists and you say like, that's actually not what we're doing. They said, yeah, I know, but my editors like this framing. So I'm not placing blame, I'm saying that we're all culpable sometimes in the way that we talk about these issues. That's US government, that's US media. That's think tanks, that's African media, that's African governments.

And sometimes nuance doesn't sell. Nuance is harder to sort of deliver in a bullet point. But just to share that, my experience is that we recognize that Africa needs and wants partners and our point is to be the best partner we can be, but also not to shy away from things that we disagree with that other partners are doing.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Interesting you say that one crisis "is the Ukraine conflict with Russia." Um, and I think that brought to the fore a set of differences between not just the US but between the West and Africans and how those, they saw the world. So the famous vote at the UN at the general assembly emergency session where the west seemed to be caught off guard when almost half of the African continent y- the abstain or voted differently. And that led to a series of disagreement, pressure reporting the media, all the non-nuanced approach that you just mentioned. How did you experience that time? Because a lot of African leaders also complained that they still felt a lot of pressure from the US.

Judd Devermont: The great question and you know, it was very hard to stop people in the media or others who just wanted to count votes, right? Like this is a mark that US is up, this is a marker that US is down. Let me be honest. Like when many r- Africans didn't show up at the Russia Africa Summit, I was probably guilty of that as well. There's just a natural human tendency to do that. But I, I wasn't surprised by the vote. It's not different than the vote in 2014 over Crimea in terms of the breakdown.

I was very impressed that the Kenyan [inaudible 00:22:30] rep, Martin Kimani made an impassioned speech about why the Russian invasion of Ukraine is problematic. I understood some countries were gonna vote with Russia for certain reasons and most were gonna abstain. The abstain is really the more interesting part here for historical reasons or because not wanting to be as the African proverb is you know, the grasp between two elephants fighting.

And so what we did Mvemba is we talked to our bunch of our partners. We had a point of view, it wasn't always about winning the argument, it was about having the conversation. Here's how we're thinking about this. This is why we think this is problematic, why we're so forceful about sort of defending the international rules-based order. This is how we think we can best get to a solution, a just solution for Ukraine. Oftentimes we would tweak resolutions so that it would be more palatable to the Africans and make sense within the way their framework of how they think about that.

And so the votes did vary resolution to resolution and the conversations were really rich and important. And my only regret is that we didn't have those conversations as much as we could. I did it at my level. Certainly Molly Fee had at her level, Secretary Blinken, Jake Sullivan, the president, 49 countries at least in Sub-Saharan Africa. And like I'd love to keep having them and I had really fantastic conversations then inform the way that we framed other issues. But if we don't have these conversations, even if we disagree on vote one, then we're not gonna get to a durable solution. Sorry, I'm gonna like keep saying it like this is Pee's playhouse and everyone's gonna-

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: As I say, this is your quote-

Judd Devermont: Yeah.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: ... I've heard it many times, I'm going to adopt it. The other issue that you raised Judd, is while you are at the White House, we saw a series of coups and those coups have also led to kind of reality looking in the mirror and especially bring to the fore this competition of eco- value ecosystem, I'll call them. We hear a lot of value in the US. We like to talk a lot about values. Our values are this democracy and so on. And then you have a set of young military officers across the continent who decide to take core matters in their own hand and take the core slightly different.

According and I were in Mali recently and country talking about the gap between what to read in the press. And what you find on the ground is we find a bunch of things that al almost simply seem to be contradictory but not necessarily. So one we found out that the military regime is very popular. In fact, yeah, German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, which is a foundation very unbeknownst to us, they, they run the survey the same time we're in the country and the survey show that the military leaders enjoy a 99% approval rate.

Uh, it, it's pretty high. We didn't think it was that high. So if we talk about legitimacy and values, these people seem to have the people with them. It's nuance, you know, depending what, what regions you get from. But as we talk to people, they will say, we want to give the military a try. We'll see we've tried civilian government and they not produced any better, so why not try this? In fact, we were the day the elections would've, should have taken place. And we ask people that day, are you sad? No elections to AT most of them said no, we think, uh, it's okay. We didn't have election this time. We've had election many times.

So my point is value ecosystems sometime are at odd with each other but sometime necessarily are not. So how do you see this fight of values? Because there's a risk there for powers like the United States. You know, we see this in Uganda with the LGBTQ, uh, legislation and the, the backlash against Uganda then alienated a larger population of Uganda because they feel like, hey, the entire country's been punished because there's a legislation against one segment. You have done the 360 on these issues. Just kind of looking at the various dimension, how do you see this fight for values and does it help?

Judd Devermont: Well maybe we start with that humans are messy. We say certain things. We believe certain things, we say certain things and believe certain things are in contradiction to those things. And then maybe we act totally differently. Talk about polling. Again, this is recent Afro Barometer polling support for democracy is highest in Africa than anywhere else in the world. The central documents are part of the African Union, like agenda 2063 is about democracy. Now, at the same time that recent Afro barometer polling says increasingly Africans are willing to see a coup remove leaders that they don't like. That's intention, right?

What I believe is that there is a growing disaffection or questioning as I said earlier about systems and what's delivering and what's not. Coups generally, I know this sounds crazy, but coups generally are popular in Africa. In fact, you can look at the 2021 coup in Sudan. Uh, you can look at Sani Abacha in '94 and I'm just reading a book about the uh, Johnny Paul Koroma coup in Sierra Leone. Those were unpopular. Almost all the other coups are quite popular. It's a very populist, very sort of, let's just throw all the bums out and start over kind of feeling.

So I'm not surprised there were real problems, particularly in the Malian government. I think the coup reasons for the coup in Burkina and Niger are different. So we just need to engage with that honestly. We need to engage with honestly that there's a growing percentage of disaffected Democrats. That's the way in which Afro Bramer talks about it. Who haven't seen the dividends from democracy. I don't think it's a value issue, at least in this particular issue. I think it is a sense of is the thing that we talk about in the abstract, doing what we wanted to do to improve our lives.

One of the things in the strategy that I'm really proud of, it's the first time that we combined the democracy and the security sort of objectives together. And it's actually says delivering democracy and security dividends. 'Cause that's important. In the case of Burkina, you don't see security improving and 60% of Burkina Faso is overrun by extremist groups. Then you have a lot of questions about the civilian government and you also have questions about maybe the next, the military government that was eventually overthrown, uh, by Captain Chori.

So that's, that's how I think about like the tension with those things. I don't think that it is necessarily in conflict, but I think that there's real questions about what is going to be better for us in the abstract we support democracy in practice, getting rid of throwing the bums out. There's a safety valve kind of feeling to that. What we have tried to do is promote democracies that deliver and work with governments, transitional governments, military governments to get back to civilian rule, but in a way that is, is going to be more long lasting.

For example, at the end of the summit we created what's called the African Democracy and Political Transition Initiative. So this is before the coup Niger, before the coup in Gabon. And we said, you know, if a government is showing a real desire to move back, like what else can we do to help? Within the limits of the law 'cause we have legal restrictions, but you know, can we help civil society? Can we get more money for the embassy because they're short staffed? Can we give help with census taking, et cetera.

And so that's one way that we're trying to encourage progress. But here's the thing, and I'm pretty sure that if you and I talk in a year from now, I'll be right is that coups may be welcomed warmly, but disaffection sets in very quickly if these governments don't deliver, which the record is not very good. I mean, what's happening in Mali is lots of opposition and Burkina civil society is being arrested. Opposition leaders are being arrested, the media's being shut down and they're not winning. Lisa Burkina, certainly they're not winning against the extremist groups. Be some real pushback on this.

So during the post Cold War era, a successful transition meaning that like a civilian was elected, the length of the transition was on average 15 months. Academics say that if it's over two years, there ain't gonna be a transition. And the reality is we don't have a deadline for a transition in Burkina or Mali or Niger. So they've signed up to go back to the 1970s. And again, let's talk about it, but that's some of the lessons that we all have learned. You asked what lessons America has learned from the Cold War. Those are some lessons for Africans to also think about and engage on from the Cold War.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Absolutely. But I think when I talk about values, mostly it's because the discourse that comes from places like Washington, it's about values. You, you are painted a picture that is much more nuance, right? People are disaffected is not really about rejecting democracy, which is true. 'Cause even Mali people say yes, the Kanos are very popular. We just dunno how long they'll remain popular.

Judd Devermont: Right.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Because eventually is about are they going to keep the promises? Are they going to live up to governance and public services, uh, expectations of the people. But one thing was interesting, a place like Mali is that US Ambassador is very popular, right? So there's almost this gap between the focus sometime in places like Washington DC we, we place on the military leaders, you refer to this a little bit. And then the needs for society at large, civil society. And because of laws in this country and sometime we don't know exactly how to engage these people because of this law that says, well there was a coup there.

For us when we were on the ground, he was really wondering, it's like, okay, where are we losing here? Where's the US losing? Because the ambassador is very popular everywhere we went, including with the Malian military, they still spoke very highly of the ambassador, but at the same time she's limited in what she, she can do because of kind of this context. But one thing I want to come to you back to to you on this is you have worked in think tanks, you've worked in government and people always wonder what is the relationship between these think tanks and the government.

Can you talk a little bit about how that was for you to be both on the consumer side and on the provider side? This is supply and demand.

Judd Devermont: When I left the intelligence community to join the CSIS, I don't think I really knew what a think tank was. It took me a long time to kind of figure out what my role is. And just for the audience, everyth think tank is kind of different and every program is different. Like what I may need from you Mvemba, when I was a policymaker may be different from what my counterpart in Latin America looks to your counterpart. And so it's different. I thought about think tanks in a couple of ways.

First of all, it's a often a safe space to have conversations. You can bring together a lot of different actors, the civil society, you can bring together legislators, you can bring together executive branch and we can have a good conversation. And then, you know, at the end of the meeting we put back on our uniforms about who's on what side and you know, all of those things. It's an idea generator. I said earlier that I wrote a paper that essentially became the foundation of the Africa strategy. My papers that I wrote in your papers that you write, they get a real movement around the US interagency on both on the hill and in the executive branch.

'Cause you can say, well, did you see the life piece from CSIS? Some great ideas in there or making some good points. So it's just a, a way to sort of drive towards better outcomes or maybe even better initiatives or new programs. The last thing is that the think tanks is one way to have a barometer, uh, on whether you're doing all right. Now that's not the only barometer for sure. It's useful, you know, if, if a respected thought leader from a think tank says like, you know, I really do think the Kenya visit was important for all of the challenges, you know, whatever the example is.

So that role of being a interpreter of policy, that role of creating new ideas and being a, a free, an open space, safe space. Those are how I thought about it. I don't know if that's where you are. I mean, you may have a different opinion.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Well, I'm not-

Judd Devermont: (laughs).

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: ... I'm making, I'm becoming an interviewer now again. I'm not in the government. So my job is to interpret, as you say, raise the alarm or point out to certain things that we may be missing in Washington. I think the advantage that we have as analysts at the think tank, at least here when we go to the field, we get access to segment of society that official miners say not get, get access to in part because there's so many limitations. Don't go here, don't go there, don't leave the compound.

Don't, you know, even diplomats who live there don't always have access to some of the people we have access to. So we do appreciate the fact that the White House at the agencies come to us when we invite them, they do come. But we also appreciate that you can invite us. When you at the White House, we were invited a few times to tell you what we thought.

Judd Devermont: Yeah.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: What we really thought. (laughs).

Judd Devermont: Tell us why we're wrong. Tell us why we're right. Got it.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: So I just saw you, you are in a unique position, not unique because the people, different people like this in Washington, but you've had that experience of being on both sides of, of that aisle. Moving forward for the next five years, regardless of what administration comes. Where do you see the US Africa relation going?

Judd Devermont: The framing of course is that we're in a, a really, uh, intense period of sort of defining the future of Africa and the future of the world. And I believe Africans are asking really important questions and that's great. When I was in the Biden administration, we were in the beginning of a pivot. So that starts with how we think about Africa, which I think the strategy and subsequent engagement showed, but then it became about tools. So Mvemba you mentioned earlier, and you often mentioned about how young the continent is.

So we put more money into the Young African Leaders Initiative. The administration announced, 'cause I wasn't there anymore, a new initiative called the Kennedy Mboya Initiative on Education. We launched an $800 million program on tech transformation or digital transformation with Africa, which included upscaling. You know, we did some of those. The administration is in the process of how do we engage and how do we think about coups? How do we, you know, use our sanctions tool that we're required by law to use, but more effectively, how do we build infrastructure?

We have, and you've written about this, there'll be a port corridor, right? Something that is in high demand from Africans, lowest road and real density in the world. And the Americans have not been doing that for 30, but probably 60 years. How do we bring in new voices into the process, whether it's, you know, beyond the State Department and Avril Haines, the Director of National Intelligence is involved in diplomacy right now in Eastern Congo, or she has been.

How do we talk to other countries, not just the Europeans, not just France, not just the UK, but South Koreans and Japanese and Indians. How do we think about which players on the continent could be more active? Uh, you know, I think it's really interesting that Senegal was asked by ECOWAS along with Togo to try to think through the Sahelian state's readiness to departure, and are there arrangements that keeps ECOWAS whole? We'll see where that comes from.

So I think that we're in a moment where really important questions are being asked. It's a period of volatility. I don't think it's going to stop in the short term, in part because there's just not a sort of shared understanding of and rules about like what we do. So much of our old toolkit doesn't work anymore. But we're actively in the process of creating new ideas and new approaches. And that's, again, you ask what a think tank can do. Like bring it on, right? Like the more good ideas we have. I loved having a paper from CSIS or Carnegie or Brookings or Atlantic that I can say like, hey, this is a great idea. Like let's run the traps on it.

In that process, I think that we will come out with a stronger US African relationship.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: If the courses be departed from...

Judd Devermont: The ends will change.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: There we go. So on that note, thank you very much Judd Devermont for joining us. Welcome home.

Judd Devermont: Thank you.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you for listening. We want to have more conversations about Africa. Tell your friends. Subscribe to our podcast at Apple Podcast. You can also read our analysis and report at csis.org/africa. So long.

(END.)