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TRANSCRIPT

Event

The Futures Summit: A New Era of Development
Cooperation

**Keynote Speech by Nick Checker, Senior Bureau Official
for Africa, U.S. Department of State**

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Enoh T. Ebong: Let me just first introduce and say it's my great pleasure to welcome Senior Bureau Official Nick Checker to the stage to provide this keynote address. As the senior bureau official for Africa, Mr. Checker leads the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs. Prior to joining State, he served as deputy executive secretary for the National Security Council under President Trump. And from 2014 to 2025, he worked for the CIA covering conflicts in the greater Middle East and the Horn of Africa. He also worked for the agency's Office of Congressional Affairs. For his work in Afghanistan, he was awarded the intelligence Commendation Medal in 2021 and the Director's Award for Analysis in 2022. Please join me in giving a warm welcome to the stage to Senior Bureau Official Checker. (Applause.)

Nick Checker: Good morning. It's really a pleasure to be here with all of you. Thank you so much to CSIS for the invitation and for convening this conversation at such a consequential moment. So my objective here is really just to clearly and unambiguously talk about the Trump administration's very new and different approach to development, because we're not just talking about incremental reform. We're talking about a fundamental reset in how the United States approaches development.

So for decades our approach was defined by how much assistance we delivered, how quickly we could spend, and how many programs we could launch. So under this administration, that era is over. We are entering a new era, defined not by inputs but outcomes, not by aid flows but by economic growth, not by dependency but by mutually beneficial partnerships. And nowhere is that shift more important or more overdue than on the African continent.

This new approach creates targeted opportunities in Africa, particularly where American strategic and commercial interests directly align with African aspirations. So let me begin with a case for change. And let me start with a simple truth. The United States has and continues to be the most generous nation in the world. Since 1991, we have provided more than \$200 billion in foreign assistance to Africa. But that generosity has not achieved the structural transformation required for long-term economic prosperity.

Across much of Africa, we continue to see limited industrialization, narrow export base, persistent infrastructure gaps, and continued dependence on external financing for public services. This is not because we didn't spend enough. It is because the model is fundamentally wrong. For too long we treated the symptoms rather than the root causes. We measured success by dollars spent and programs launched rather than by economies transformed. We funded

programs without requiring performance, accepting commitments instead of delivering on results – insisting on delivering on results.

And when governments failed to deliver, we often responded with more assistance, not less. That is not development. That is a system that creates moral hazard, shielding poor governance from consequences, and in some cases enabling rent seeking, predation, and corruption, rather than reducing it. We've seen the failures of the status quo and previous way of thinking. In South Sudan, for instance, corruption has accelerated and the humanitarian need has increased exponentially, despite more than \$9.5 billion in U.S. assistance since 2011.

At the same time, this approach has not advanced our national interest or strengthened our partnerships. Too often relationships become one sided, defined by the United States providing and partners receiving without reciprocity. In 2023, sub-Saharan African states voted with the United States only 29 percent of the time in U.N. resolutions, despite receiving, again, billions and billions of dollars in foreign assistance. The delivery model has also been inefficient. Too much funding has been absorbed by layers of intermediaries and implementing organizations, otherwise known as the NGO industrial complex, leaving only a fraction reaching the people it was intended to help.

So the outcome should not surprise us. We built a system that reinforced dependency, crowded out private sector growth, and too often failed both the American taxpayer and our African partners.

If this model was working, we would see different results by now. We do not, and that is why we are changing it, because sustainable economic growth does not come from aid; it comes from private enterprise. It comes from companies investing capital, from workers producing goods, from infrastructure that supports markets, and from value created in that marketplace. So we're making a clear shift from aid to trade, from assistance to investment, and from dependency to partnership, and we are engaging African nations accordingly, not as aid recipients but as capable commercial partners. This means working with governments as they are, not as Washington wishes them to be, focusing on mutual economic benefit rather than unsuccessful political transformation, because Africa is not a marginal opportunity. It is the next major engine of global growth.

Africa is too important to let idealistic aspirations detract from its immense potential. Two point five billion people by 2050, that's a quarter of the world's population with a projected purchasing power of over \$16 trillion, and a tremendous human capital and abundant natural resources. This will rival the economies of our largest global

trading partners. And yet, sub-Saharan Africa remains just 1 percent of our total trade. This is not just a missed opportunity, it is a strategic and development failure because trade and investment, not aid, are what drive job creation, industrialization, innovation and technology transfer, and long-term self-reliance.

And importantly, this shift is not just driven by us. Across the continent, we consistently hear the same message from African governments, businesses, and citizens. They do not want dependency. They want investment, they want opportunity, and they want the ability to compete. As President Museveni put it, the solutions are with us. Over-reliance on foreign support undermines long-term progress.

So what does this look like in practice? We call it commercial diplomacy. It means using our diplomatic engagement in pursuit of commercial deals, infrastructure development, and real economic outcomes. It means using every tool we have – our embassies, our financing, our assistance – to advance these outcomes. It means working with countries that are committed to reform, transparency, and growth, countries that are willing to take necessary steps to attract investment and opportunities. And it means organizing our entire government around – not around programs but around outcomes. Not asking how much aid can we deliver but asking how many deals have we helped close. We've operationalized this approach through our commercial diplomacy strategy in six actions.

First, we made commercial diplomacy a core mission. U.S. ambassadors are now evaluated on results; how effectively they advocate for American businesses and how many deals they help deliver.

Second, we are driving market reforms. That means open and competitive tenders, transparent regulatory systems, and a level playing field for U.S. firms. The evidence is clear. Countries that reduce non-tariff barriers achieve stronger and more sustained economic growth.

Third, we are advancing commercially viable infrastructure, not vanity projects, not short-term fixes that fail after a decade. We are focused on durable, high-quality infrastructure and that means partnering with U.S. companies to set that global standard.

Fourth, we are redesigning diplomacy around business. We are leading diplomatic trips focused exclusively on advancing trade and investment with countries that are serious about reform and offer real opportunities, not just aspirations. And for the first time, U.S. companies are at the table, shaping the agenda and engaging directly with decision makers both on these trips and in our broader policy engagement.

Fifth, we are connecting more American companies to the opportunities in Africa. We're expanding the pipeline of opportunities, ensuring more U.S. firms are aware of and positioned to compete for these opportunities.

And, six, we are reforming our own system. For too long our tools have been too slow, too fragmented, too risk averse to compete. That is changing. We are driving faster financing, more competitive terms, greater project preparation, and tighter coordination across the interagency.

And most importantly, we are aligning these tools behind U.S. strategic priorities, not allowing them to operate in silos or serve parochial bureaucratic interests. This approach is selective and strategic. We're focusing our resources where American interests are more – are most directly advanced: in critical minerals, in strategic infrastructure, and markets that offer genuine commercial opportunities for U.S. firms.

And this is not just theoretical. Since the start of this administration, we've supported tens of billions of dollars in deals across the continent, and on track to see a 23 percent increase in U.S. exports to sub-Saharan Africa in this year. The evidence is that when diplomacy aligns with our private sector opportunities, investment follows.

This approach also defines how we think about critical minerals and energy. Africa sits at the center of the global race for critical minerals, from cobalt to copper to graphite to other rare earth elements. And these minerals are essential to the American reindustrialization and technological dominance, which are core national security priorities. Yet for too long these sectors have been dominated by opaque and often predatory investment models that extract value without building local economies.

African governments increasingly recognize this, and are seeking a different kind of partner. One that delivers transparency, job creation, skills transfer, and long-term economic value. Through a critical mineral strategy the United States is that partner. And the goal of that strategy is clear, to ensure that critical minerals from Africa increasingly flow to the United States as part of a secure and reliable supply chain.

And a key step towards this goal was the recent Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between the Democratic Republic of the Congo under the Washington Accords. That agreement reflects a fundamentally different model. Our objective is not extraction. It's value creation. That means creating the conditions for increased U.S. investment in the

sector and identifying and addressing structural factors that have inhibited investment. This will increase transparent investment, support local value addition, and secure supply chain requirements.

The result is long-term shared benefit. The DRC captures greater value from its own resources. The United States secures access to critical minerals that our industry and national security require. And together we strengthen both U.S. supply chains and African economies. This is not charity. This is a strategic partnership. And – excuse me – it is exactly what African governments are asking for.

However, none of this works without stability. And here too we are talking about a different approach. We are linking peace to economic integration because peace agreements alone rarely hold. But peace built around shared economic interest does. You see this in our work in the Great Lakes region, where we are pairing diplomacy with economic frameworks, such as the Regional Economic Integration Framework between the DRC and Rwanda to create real, sustained incentives for stability. This is how peace becomes durable.

Let me close by returning to foreign assistance, because it sits at the center of the summit. And let me be clear as well that we are not ending foreign assistance. We are ending the old model of foreign assistance. Because assistance is most effective when utilized as strategic capital. And we're going to treat it that way. That means it is targeted, conditional, time bound, and measured by results not intentions. We will no longer fund programs indefinitely without concrete outcomes. We will no longer finance failed governments. We will prioritize countries that demonstrate both the ability and willingness to help themselves, including through co-financing and reform.

And we will no longer assume that more money produces better results. It does not. Going forward, assistance will focus on one thing, advancing American safety, security, and prosperity. In practice that means creating conditions for private sector growth by reducing corruption, removing barriers to investment, and helping U.S. firms navigate those markets. Two, providing rapid, targeted support to help U.S. companies move deals forward. Three, using assistance strategically to make U.S. bids more competitive and projects more bankable. Four, financing an infrastructure that advances both economic growth and U.S. strategic interests that is built by U.S. firms. And, five, supporting private sector led solutions to humanitarian health challenges by funding those solutions directly, as we have done with companies such as Zipline.

It also means accountability, transparency, and an educated workforce. If a government is not willing to take steps necessary to grow its own

economy, we should not make that growth our responsibility. The countries that demonstrate reform and commitment will see deeper U.S. partnership. And those that do not will not, because development cannot be something we want more than our partners.

Let me close with this: Our goal is not to sustain a dependency in Africa; it is to make it unnecessary while also advancing U.S. economic interests and mutual prosperity. And that is exactly what our new model is designed to do. Thank you. (Applause.)

Ms. Ebong:

Thank you very much to Nick Checker, the senior bureau official. I think he has well set the stage for us in terms of looking at the how. I think that there is a lot that we can find in commonality – outcomes, mutual beneficial partnership, being able to do both/and. So we will look forward to exploring these themes in depth. I'm particularly looking forward to the panel with the executive branch agencies who are tasked with much of what the senior bureau official has put forward.

So I'm going to ask everyone just to hold tight for a few minutes while we do a little shift of the stage, and then we'll go into the conversation with former Representative Malinowski. Thank you.

(END.)