“Africa’s Security Challenges: A View from Congress, the Pentagon, and USAID”

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FEATURING
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Member, House Armed Services Committee; Member, Foreign Affairs and National Security Task Force, Congressional Black Caucus

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Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs

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Judd Devermont: So why don’t we get started? As I said earlier, my name is Judd Devermont. I am the director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to “Africa’s Security Challenges: A View from Congress, the Pentagon, and USAID.”

The region’s security landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation during the past two decades. The threats to the U.S. and African interests have become more diverse, diffuse, and complex. And to counter these challenges, we’ll need a new vision of engagement and partnerships, and reconceptualization of our diplomatic, development, and defense toolkit.

Let me paint a quick picture to explain what I mean.

Diverse. There are multiple and varying security threats to U.S. and African interests. Extremist groups continue to haunt many countries in the region. The 10-month civil war in Ethiopia has displaced 2 million people, has contributed to massive human rights violations, and risks the onset of famine in the northern Tigray region. The Gulf of Guinea is the world’s global hotspot for piracy. Drug trafficking is an enduring concern in West and Central – West and East Africa. And cyber criminals are operating across the region. Finally, U.S. adversaries are expanding their footprint on the continent, building naval bases, selling surveillance technology and drones, and dispatching mercenaries to conflict zones.

It is diffuse. No region is spared from the security challenges that we’re going to talk about today. The Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, Somalia, eastern DRC, and Mozambique are facing the brunt of extremist threats. Russian mercenaries are operating in Central African Republic and have been asked by the Malian government to render services in the Sahel. China has a base in Djibouti and has built, operated, or funded at least 46 commercial ports across the region – that’s according to our research here at CSIS. And of course, no country is immune from the stresses of climate change and the devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

And it’s complex. There are – these are not problems that can be solved by strongly-worded statements or sanctions alone. It’s not enough to send in peacekeepers or to proffer counterterrorism assistance. Many of these challenges are structural, springing from marginalization, poor governance, and from lack of opportunities. We can harp on the role of our adversaries, but African governments regard these countries as key trading and security partners. That’s going to require a much more nuanced approach to address China and Russia’s malign activities.

In addition, African countries are not responsible for climate change. They contribute the least amount to global CO2 emissions. So it will be difficult, if not impossible, to impose a one-size-fits-all answer to climate adaption and mitigation in sub-Saharan Africa.

So, in sum, we have to rethink and redefine how the U.S. government responds to these challenges, and how we’ll work with African and international partners to address the security threats of today and tomorrow. One argument – perhaps not revolutionary – is to stop treating these threats as separate or even specific to distinct lines of effort.
Let’s take Mali for an example. Last year, Mali’s military overthrew the elected government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, which was corrupt, indifferent to extremist threats, and have had been manipulating elections. The country’s new military leaders seemed disingenuous about a true democratic transition. They even shed the pretense of a civilian partnership by assuming full control in May. We just learned the country’s ruling junta is seeking to hire Russian mercenaries.

So the Malian case underscores that seeking to prioritize global-power competition over countering violent extremism while responding to democratic backsliding is unwise and even counterproductive. There’s significant potential for overlap and negative reinforcement, and we have to be vigilant about the linkages between these three priorities.

So another recommendation is to just broaden our view of what the military does. It is more than just a counterterrorism force. They’re the first responders when natural disasters hit; they’re force multipliers when it comes to addressing public health crises like Ebola or COVID-19. They can reinforce diplomatic messages and bring together U.S. and African communities, especially through the States Partnership Program and National Guard deployments. There was even a time – this is my favorite – there was even a time when the U.S. military contributed to African infrastructure. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built Kismayo Port in Somalia in the 1960s.

And finally, it’s imperative to expand our relationships. The U.S. has historic partnerships with the European countries like France and the United Kingdom, but between 2010 and 2015, there were 150 new embassies built across the continent. And more countries are building bases, deploying peacekeepers, signing security partnerships. How do we work with India or Japan or even the Gulf states? More importantly, how do we forge closer ties with African civil society? African judges and journalists, legislators, entrepreneurs, and activists will have a say in the state of security in their countries. And what more can we do to expand both the state-to-state and the military-to-military engagement?

So I believe we have no better opportunity than today to look at these challenges with fresh eyes and table some new recommendations. And that’s why we invited some of the – our country’s top civilian leaders in African defense policy to join us today to unpack these challenges and contribute some new ideas.

It is an honor to welcome Congressman Anthony Brown, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Chidi Blyden, and Deputy Assistant Administrator Travis Adkins here today. So I’m going to introduce each one of them before their opening remarks and then we’ll come together for a moderated panel.

Let me first start with Congressman Brown. He was elected to his first term representing Maryland’s Fourth Congressional District on November 8th, 2016, and was sworn in on January 3rd, 2017. He is currently serving his third term in Congress. Congressman Brown serves on the House Armed Services Committee and is currently the co-chair of the New Democrat Coalition National Security Task Force. And I should add that Mr. Brown is a retired colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve.

Congressman Brown, let me turn to your first.
Representative Anthony Brown (D-MD):

Hey, thanks, Judd. Want to thank you and the Africa Program at CSIS for what you’re doing to keep the conversation and the focus on Africa and to bring out important ideas and discussions around Africa.

Chidi Blyden, the dep assistant secretary, we miss you on Capitol Hill, but we’re excited for you now in your role at the Pentagon.

And Travis, certainly appreciate your work at USAID and your work at the Bureau of Africa and what you and all of your colleagues are doing around the globe.

It’s clear the African continent has become increasingly important to global security and will continue to rise in importance in coming decades. Together African countries represent approximately 16 percent of the global population, and 60 percent of Africa’s population is under the age of 25. By 2050, the population of the continent is expected to double to 2 billion people. African nations hold the second-most seats, number of seats in the United Nations Security Council and is the largest, most unified bloc at the U.N. General Assembly. So it’s not a question of if the United States should increase our engagement with our African partners but, rather, how the United States will engage to the mutual benefit with our African partners.

Robust U.S. engagement with African nations is crucial for peace and stability, democracy and the rule of law, and development, both economic and that of civil society and institutions. U.S. aid to Africa helps fight HIV/AIDS and malaria, it invests in the agriculture and financial sectors, ensures good governance and human rights, and key to these efforts are our shared-security relationships with our African partners. I’ve seen our operations in Africa firsthand during a CODEL that I took in 2019 to Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. I came away convinced that we need to be doing more to reinvigorate our networks of regional partners and allies to increase stability, secure U.S. interests, and ensure that needed development and diplomatic work can continue and will be supported by an appropriate military presence.

Our country’s adversaries and geopolitical rivals recognize the opportunity to Africa represents. China is expanding its economic and military presence on the continent. Today China is Africa’s largest trading partner. Russia has signed more than 20 bilateral military cooperation agreements with African states since 2015. Simultaneously, Africa’s future is threatened by violent extremist organizations and regional conflict from violent extremist organizations in the Sahel to Al-Shabaab in Somalia, to the humanitarian crisis that has engulfed the Tigray region in Ethiopia. These conflicts diminish fundamental human rights, weaken regional stability, and challenge hard-fought progress on the continent.

I believe strongly that it’s in our national security interest to strengthen and deepen America’s diplomatic, commercial, and military engagement with African countries. We need to review our prior policies towards the continent with a critical eye. We should build on our successes – such as PEPFAR, perhaps the most successful global health program in history – and readjust where we have failed, including instances where we’ve not enforced accountability for human rights abuses and corruption. Under President Biden, the United States is renewing its commitment to global leadership, humanitarianism, and multilateralism. And as was discussed during the CSIS Africa Series earlier this year, this is good news for Africa. And many African leaders are optimistic about the next several years of partnership building with the United States.
There is a need to demonstrate senior-level engagement with African leaders. And President Biden’s address to the 34th African Union Summit in February was a good start, as was Vice President Harris’ separate meetings with the presidents of Ghana and Zambia. The time is now to build strong foundations with our African partners. We need to truly recognize the opportunity of Africa and invest in the continent in support of African aspirations for both democratic governance and greater prosperity.

So I look forward to our discussion and thanks for having me to join you today.

Mr. Devermont: Thank you so much, sir. We’re going to turn now to Chidi Blyden. She is the deputy assistant secretary of defense for African affairs, an expert and socio-cultural advisor on Africa conflict, security, and development issues. Chidi previously served in Congress on the House Armed Services Committee. Before that, she was in the Obama administration as a special assistant to the deputy assistant secretary of defense for African affairs from 2013 to 2017. So she’s had a big promotion in the last couple of months – years. She’s also an adjunct professor at Georgetown University in the security studies program.

Chidi, let’s – why don’t we turn to you for your opening remarks?

Chidi Blyden: Well, Judd, thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of this panel. I’m glad to be able to bring the gender equity to this discussion. Congressman Brown, it’s great to see you again and have an opportunity to share a stage. And Travis, as always, the link between development and defense is tight. So I’m glad to be here to be able to share my thoughts on how we can better understand and engage African security challenges.

Judd, you alluded to this earlier, but I would have to foot-stomp that Africa is important to the U.S. politically, economically, militarily, and culturally. It has the fastest-growing economies, as you noted, populations in the world. It sits at the crossroads of international commerce, trade, and global force flow. And it watches over important sea lines of communication. Our future, security, prosperity, and ability to project power globally rests on free, open, and secure access in and around Africa. Activities of competitor states, as has already been mentioned, violent extremist organizations, instability and fragility all challenge our access.

But despite these challenges, this does not – this dynamic continent presents a number of opportunities for the U.S. to advance our interests that aligns with our mission of protecting and advancing U.S. interests, consistent with the national security strategic guidance. This guidance directs us to work cohesively as a government – that whole-of-government approach that we’ll talk about later. In Africa specifically, it directs us to continue building our partnerships and to work toward bringing an end to the deadliest conflicts, while preventing the onsets of new ones. It also directs us to help African nations combat these threats posed by climate change and violent extremism.

The opportunities before us are grounded in the investments and tools the Department of Defense uses to build partnerships across the continent. These partnerships have and will continue to enable us to support the conflict resolution efforts, combat the threats posed by violence extremism, improve the institutions of defense ministries, and strengthen democratic norms and the rule of law in close cooperation with our diplomatic and development colleagues.
Our minimal DOD investments play an outsized role in Africa and support a whole-of-government approach. I cannot stress this point enough. But we also face challenges across the continent. This includes growing insecurity in West and East Africa and political instability, democratic backsliding, communal conflicts, transregional terrorism, and illicit trafficking across multiple regions.

Since coming on board five months ago, I’ve met with over 25 of 54 African nations, and they all have mentioned their commitment and the attention that they’ve faced – attention that they place on solving these issues together.

This administration has provided a number of avenues for our engagements across all instruments of national power. That is why I’m thrilled to be part of this panel with representatives from USAID and from Congress, and for us to really dig into the issues that need the whole-of-government approach to engaging Africa.

It is imperative that DOD remains engaged in this whole-of-government effort to help our African partners foster positive trends and arrest the negative ones. I look forward to discussing these issues and other topics today. So thanks again for allowing me to be here.

Mr. Devermont: Thanks, Chidi.

So last, but not least, I want to introduce Travis Adkins, Deputy Assistant Administrator in the Bureau of Africa at USAID, who is responsible for Sudan and South Sudan. Previously, Travis was a lecturer of African and security studies at the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He also taught in the Georgetown Prison Scholars Program. Earlier in his career, Travis was a staff director of the House Subcommittee on Africa, and I’ll add here that Travis also had previously been a senior associate with the Africa program. So we’re delighted to have him back for the first time in this new role at USAID.

Travis?

Travis, I think you turned your video off.

Travis Adkins: Sorry about that, guys. Can you see me? There we go. Sorry about that, guys. Can you see me? Fantastic. Fantastic.

Mr. Devermont: We can see you. You’re good.

Mr. Adkins: I was acknowledging, Judd, the brilliance of yourself and those at CSIS who brought us together for this discussion this afternoon and, certainly, thanks to Congressman Brown, Ambassador Blyden, for their eloquent comments, and I would just come in to build on what they shared in terms of the synergies between the USG’s 3 D approach for defense, diplomacy, and development.

Of course, these synergies are apparent and powerful, and here at USAID we take, of course, the notion of security in its broadest sense, looking at what is it that makes the human being secure? How can she develop her talents? How can she improve her
ability to provide for her family? How can she exist in nations that are themselves developing and coming up out of histories of marginalization and exclusion on the global stage?

And so looking at that, of course, this symbiotic relationship between development and security, on one hand, it’s almost impossible and, certainly, if not, very challenging to conduct long-term development activities in a nation that is experiencing heightened forms of insecurity or conflict.

Of course, on the other hand, it’s very difficult to work in nations that don’t have sufficient development in their governing institutions, in their infrastructure, in their healthcare systems, and their economies, because all of these things can also be drivers of conflict.

And so with that understanding, at USAID we approach our efforts in COVID and global health, food security, climate change, and livelihoods with an eye towards these kinds of second-order impacts that stop people in their nations from being able to cultivate peace, ensure their stability, and move themselves and their nations towards prosperity.

And so while, certainly, there is a place for the discussion of kinetic forms of conflict and insecurity, and we’re here with those – Ambassador Blyden and Congressman Brown – who can speak expertly to those. There are also dire threats to the lives of perhaps even more people when we think about insecurity in the broadest sense. And so the question for me is, what is it to be free from kinetic violence if you don’t have access to electricity? What is it to be free from kinetic violence when you don’t have access to water and sanitation? What is it to be free from kinetic violence when you cannot overcome the burden of disease in your nation, when you cannot fight back against the erosive changes that come from climate change, and when you don’t have the capacity to develop your latent possibilities? And all of these things, of course, lead to drivers of certainly instability and in the worst cases conflict.

And so it’s my honor to be here this afternoon as a representative of USAID, and I can’t wait for the light that will be brought about by this conversation between the four of us. Thank you.

Mr. Devermont: Thanks, Travis. And thanks, Congressman Brown and DASD Blyden. I think those were great scene setters, and we’re going to dig right into the Q&A right now.

And, Congressman Brown, I just want to get the elephant out of the – address the elephant in the room and just get right to the heart of it, which is Afghanistan. And what are the lessons, in your mind, that we should learn and not learn about U.S. security assistance when it comes to Africa? You know, is this an opportunity, like, looking back on what happened in Afghanistan, for us to think about how do we evolve what we’re doing, or are we going to spend the next couple of years just trying to defend what we’ve done and arguing how dissimilar or similar what we’re doing in Africa is compared to what we saw in Afghanistan? How are you thinking about this? I know it’s still fresh, but we’re all grappling with this a little bit.

And certainly, we always should be learning lessons from every experience, both at home and abroad. I think we can all agree that in so many ways Afghanistan and Africa are not the same. While they do present similar challenges, the level of instability and violence inflicted by al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan was the predominant obstacle to progress; whereas in Africa, while violent extremists and transnational criminal organizations operate, the nature of the challenges we face are characterized by a more diverse set of issues and involve a lengthier history of U.S. engagement with Africa compared to Afghanistan.

You know, after the terrorist attacks in 2001, the Bush administration and the country set out to eliminate al-Qaeda and bring down Osama bin Laden. And while the full scope and length of that operation was unknown at the time, the mission was a counterterrorism operation. During the effort to track down and finally kill Osama bin Laden, almost 10 years later the United States found itself in a protracted reconstruction mission. We spent 20 years and $145 billion trying to rebuild Afghanistan – its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society – including extending rights and opportunities to girls and women. And what we experienced is that the DOD was doing everything in Afghanistan instead of the Department of State and USAID pursuing our national objectives, as is the case in Africa.

Africa presents an entirely different context and set of challenges and opportunities. First of all, the United States has a long history with Africa – some good, some very bad – and we have decades of work in and around the continent. With more than four dozen countries and an estimated 1.2 billion people, Africa encompasses a vast diversity of social, ecological, economic, political, and security issues and conditions. And this diversity, as well as the sheer size of the continent, complicates any generalizations about Africa or African countries.

Yes, a number of African countries are beset by conflicts. Islamic insurgencies, some with ties to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, have proliferated and expanded their reach in the region. Some countries face humanitarian crises and nearly all are contending with stark development challenges. So there are lessons that can be learned, most importantly that the military can be an enabler and that we need political and economic solutions led by State and USAID. We need a coherent, comprehensive strategy for Africa that incorporates the unique challenges and opportunities of each nation and region, that creates sustainable institutions, and perhaps most important that has the monitoring and evaluation to continuously ensure the desired outcomes – which must include peace and political stability, reducing conflict and crisis, upholding the rule of law and human rights, and expanding and diversifying economic opportunities and trade.

President Biden earlier this year articulated his National Security Strategy interim guidance. And when it came to Africa, the focus was on several opportunities and challenges, continuing to build partnerships in Africa, investing in civil society and strengthening longstanding political, economic, and cultural connections, partnering with dynamic and fast-growing African economies, as well as providing assistance to those countries suffering from poor governance, economic distress, health, and food insecurity, all made worse by the pandemic.

The president committed to bringing an end to the continent’s deadliest conflicts and preventing the onset of new ones, while also strengthening our commitment to development, health security, environmental sustainability, democratic process, and the
rule of law. These are all objectives best pursued by our diplomatic and economic sources of national power. And, yes, the DOD has a role, because we need to also help African nations combat the threats posed by violent extremism. Both the administration and Congress recognize that we need to support the economic and political independence of African nations in the face of undue foreign influence, particularly that posed by China and Russia.

China’s economic influence is growing in Africa. The China-Africa trade levels are nearly five times that of U.S. and Africa trade in 2019. And China is outpacing us in terms of development financing across the continent. We need to be competing with China and Russia in Africa in a way that promotes not only our national interests, but those of our partners in Africa. That does include countering VEOs. And it’s building partner militaries in Africa. I think it’s time for an African partnership initiative modeled after the European or Indo-Pacific defense initiatives, and tailored to the continent, through a whole-of-government approach, with security as a foundation.

So, yes, there are lessons to be learned from our 20-year failed reconstruction in Afghanistan – a coherent strategy, deliver and focus institutions and projects that are sustainable. We need to understand better the context. And in Africa, that begins with acknowledging that one-size-fits-all won’t work. We need to be relentless monitoring and evaluating the impact of our efforts. And perhaps most important, State and USAID should lead the effort.

Mr. Devermont: Thank you, sir.

Chidi, Congressman Brown put a lot on the table here. And they started with that we have diverse interests in Africa. And he went through sort of the top line, right? Economics, politics, global health, development. But within the DOD realm, we’re often talking about priorities such as counterterrorism, and security, capacity building, global power competition. And that’s a lot. And that’s not inclusive of everything that DOD is focused on. So I kind of teed this up in the opening, but how do you think about these different objectives? Are they separate and distinct? Are they mutually reinforcing? With, you know, a limited footprint, how do we do all the things that we need to do to advance our interests and our partners’ interests?

Ms. Blyden: Well, Judd, thanks for that question. I think, as you said, Congressman Brown was able to sort of lay out the intersection of all of these different challenges, and why it is so important that we focus on Africa. I think for us, at the Department of Defense, we are focused on what people consider the traditional sort of defense and security challenges. But I think that doesn’t leave us out from thinking about sort of what I consider to be the African security challenges. And he listed a number of those. The African security challenges are very similar to those that are the challenges of everybody else – the pandemic, the climate challenges, food insecurity, health insecurity.

And what I’ve discussed here with my team, and what we’re thinking about and thinking and trying to focus on, is how do we address African security challenges in a way that they get at U.S. defense priorities? And so where we may have to narrow down how we prioritize our effect and our inputs into getting at the kinetic threats that the VEO threats continue to bring, or getting at global competition, or great-power competition – however you want to say it – if we don’t take the time to focus on those issues, security
challenges and defense issues that are most important to our African partners and nations, we’ll have a hard time, I think, getting at ours.

With the Department of Defense, we obviously play a supporting role by looking at the threats that are most important to our African partners and that also are threats to the homeland and are challenges to our national security objectives and interests, is where we put the primary focus from our end. But we can’t do that, I think, without thinking about things in partnership. And so we spend a lot of time emphasizing our by, with, and through approach, which means that we use any and all partners who are willing and able and capable to help support the efforts of getting at African security challenges as well as getting at U.S. defense priorities.

And so that means you see traditional partners that we’ve seen with, you know, maybe former colonial powers, which may not always seem as popular, but get at the issues that our African partners are dealing with. We are working to partner with the defense sector, the U.N. development sector, the private sector, defense industry to make sure that we are using any and all possibilities to be able to get at the threat. That’s one of the reasons why this chat with us is really important, because it allows us to highlight all of the different tools that we have in the whole of government to be able to address the security challenges that we have.

And so I’ll pause there, but I think the focus on partnerships and using our partnerships in a way that addresses not just defense priorities but African security challenges will help us get at some of the security issues on the continent.

Mr. Devermont: Thanks, Chidi.

One of the things that we often say, right – we’ve said it a bunch here, right – whole of government, the three Ds – democracy – excuse me, diplomacy, development, and defense. And sometimes I don’t know if people know what that looks like on the ground, right? Like, how do we make that concrete? So, Travis, I’m going to put you on the spot, right, because there is no success – there is no pathway to reach our goals without the three Ds, as we say, but can you give us an example? Like, what does it look like when your office and Chidi’s office and AFRICOM work together? And how do you see that as sort of a hint to what the future of the relationship needs to be under this administration?

Mr. Adkins: Absolutely. Thanks for the question, Judd.

And I would just take from DASD Blyden’s point that in large part the Africa region is facing some similar challenges to the rest of the world, but the main issue is their inability or lack of capacity to meet and to overcome those challenges. And so in that effort, alongside our colleagues in defense and diplomacy, it is the policy of USAID to have civilian and military cooperation with the Department of Defense since 2015. And so to make that more clear, it’s not just something that we think is a good idea, it’s not just something that we think might be helpful; but it is, in fact, our stated policy. And the broad goal of that civilian-military cooperation between USAID and DOD is for us to attempt to maximize the positive impacts of military activities on development outcomes and to reduce or mitigate those impacts which might be negative, rather. And a critical element of that goal is to identify activities where USAID’s objectives and
interests intersect with those of DOD, always underscoring this need for frequent and transparent communication around policy and programming.

And so to give just a few examples of that, Judd, obviously, AFRICOM is the closest military partner of the Africa Bureau at USAID even though we do have an expanding and growing set of relationships across the broader Department of Defense. And so first there’s the example of USAID officers who are staffed inside of AFRICOM, and that includes a senior development advisor, a deputy development advisor, a development advisor on strategy and engagement, two humanitarian assistance advisors to the military, as well as a conflict and stabilization advisor. Also, not very many people know that AFRICOM also embeds a military advisor to USAID’s Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, which sits in the Office of Civ-Mil Cooperation.

And the priorities, I think, of those engagements are three main ones, which I think Congressman Brown also pointed to. The first is global power competition. The second is humanitarian affairs and the logistic power that the Department of Defense brings or can bring to those activities in terms of strategy, tactics, and planning to reach people in difficult contexts. And then, finally, countering of violent extremists. And so those are some of the broad parameters. These are the reasons why USAID believes this engagement is important and critical to maintain and to grow. And then those are some of the ways in which, in concrete ways, we staff each other, we communicate with one another, and we work on concert to try to get the best out of the three-D approach.

Thank you.

Mr. Devermont: Thanks, Travis.

Congressman Brown, I wonder if what Travis has been saying gives some shape to maybe the way you have been thinking about the African Partnership Initiative, right, this lash-up between AID and DOD and State. And I think we’ve all mentioned it a couple of times, right: AFRICOM is more than just a kinetic force, more than just a counterterrorism force.

Travis, one of my favorite examples is that AFRICOM has been building field hospitals for COVID-19, right? I mean, that’s a great example of a public-health initiative that the military is doing, delivering essential supplies.

So, Congressman Brown, as you think about, you know, the strength of our military and things that we need to work on to make it even more purpose-fit for the challenges of tomorrow, you know, what would you like to see the military do? And how does that – if you’re able to sort of articulate – how does that connect with your – the Partnership Initiative that you’ve been talking about?

Rep. Brown: Sure. First, let me acknowledge and commend the men and women of the U.S. military working with USAID for their efforts in Africa during this pandemic. AFRICOM supported the overall U.S. effort to provide COVID-19 assistance in 43 countries, including the delivery of nearly $500 million in medical supplies. Much of the effort to combat and contain the pandemic has been based on African partners’ ability to mobilize medical capabilities that they built over decades working in partnership with the United States to combat infectious disease. And our COVID response in Africa is yet another example of what we’ve seen over the years and how the DOD has helped set the
conditions necessary for this whole-of-government effort across Africa, particularly in dramatically reducing the impact of diseases like HIV/AIDS and Ebola.

I should note that African nations, though, have received roughly 20 million vaccine donations from the United States, yet only 2 percent of Africans have been fully vaccinated for COVID-19. African nations have the lowest vaccination rates in the world and COVID-19 infections are rapidly increasing due to the emergence of the Delta variant and the lack of vaccines. And that’s why I joined with members of the Congressional Black Caucus last month. While we acknowledged President Biden’s commitment to fight COVID, the crisis here at home and globally, we also urged the administration to donate 100 million vaccines to Africa above current donations and encourage other countries to donate an additional 100 million as quickly as possible. This is another area in which we can successfully compete with China, which by the way is selling – they’re not donating; they’re selling – much more vaccines to Africa.

So the Department of Defense cannot and must not lead the agency effort in Africa. They can’t be the lead. State and USAID need to do it. We talked about that in terms of lessons learned in Afghanistan. But certainly, the military has to be focused on security. Security operations range from ISR operations, providing that information to our partners, to force and embassy personnel protection, to direct action against VEOs throughout Africa. And perhaps one of the most significant and constructive security missions is to build the capacity of African partner forces under, as Chidi mentioned, the by, with, and through framework, which emphasizes U.S. military capabilities employed in a supporting role but not as principal participants. And to be clear, there is bipartisan support to maintain if not increase the U.S. military presence in Africa to support our diplomatic and development missions.

Now, I see some of the key strengths in military capabilities include some of these.

The International Military Education and Training Program, which provides numerous benefits to both the United States and our partners. It exposes foreign students to a professional military organization and the importance of civilian control, introduces participants to the values of democracy, human rights, and individual liberties. Many participants go on to assume key senior military roles, which enables stronger mil-to-mil relations between the United States. So whether we’re training the first woman to fly C-130s in the Nigerian air force; or students from Chad, Madagascar, and Malawi at the U.S. Navy’s Naval Small Craft Training School in Mississippi; or even the first woman from Ghana to attend our infantry officer basic leadership course at Fort Bragg; this program not only develops skills, but it also builds lasting relationships and partners.

I think another strength is the role that defense attachés provide. Nearly every U.S. embassy in Africa hosts some U.S. military personnel as part of a defense attaché office, Office of Security Cooperation, or maritime security detachment. During the previous administration, some defense attachés were withdrawn from several embassies in Africa as part of an effort to reorient resources toward global-power competition. It’s my hope and expectation that the current administration will fully restore this capability in every embassy in Africa. Our embassy military personnel are invaluable for implementing the full range of defense-cooperation activities, programs with host nations, and the training and professional development of our partners.
The Security Force Assistance Brigades provide yet another important capability in
Africa. Whether it’s maintenance training in Senegal or a situational live-fire exercise in
Djibouti, by deploying elements of the SFAB, we free up elements of conventional
forces, brigade combat teams that can now be focused on potential global-power conflict.
The SFAB in AFRICOM has taken on much of the train, advise, and assist mission,
which is an important component of global-power competition in Africa. Today the
second SFAB has deployed 20 teams on a rotational basis in Senegal, Kenya, Ghana,
Djibouti, and Tunisia.

And finally, let me speak to one other capability or authority that is a – it’s a valuable
tool, yet I believe it requires some modifications, and that’s the Section 333 global train-
and-equip authority used in Africa and elsewhere around the globe. It is the train-and-
equip authority. It’s an important tool. I saw it firsthand when I was on a CODEL to
Niger. And whether we’re building capacity for counterterrorism operations, counter-
illicit-drug-trafficking, or maritime and border security operations, I do believe it’s an
important authority for building partnership capacity. However, the DOD has relied on
Section 33 in a variety of partnerships, which are all good – Burkina Faso, Chad,
And while there are times when it’s appropriate for the DOD to have the authority, to
directly provide assistance to a partner – and I think those authorities should be limited to
when we’re in conflict or at war or fighting side by side with our partners, like in Iraq or
Afghanistan. It makes sense for the Pentagon to have those authorities. But outside of
those situations, the conflict, when we’re in competition, I think that the State
Department is fully able and should be properly resourced to oversee and manage the
bulk of U.S. security assistance programs. Security assistance is foreign aid, providing
weapons. Training and support to a foreign country is by law a foreign policy
responsibility, and I believe that to do so would demonstrate a real commitment to a
State Department-led, DOD-supported whole-of-government approach to Africa.

And finally, let me just say this: I believe that we are at a critical moment when we need
to revisit our security partnerships with Africa, and that’s why I, along with
Representatives Panetta and Austin Scott, introduced the AFRICA Act last Congress.
It’s incorporated in the ’21, the fiscal year ’21 NDAA. And the DASD promises me
we’re going to get it real soon. It requires the secretary of Defense in coordination with
the secretary of State to report on the approach to conducting security cooperation
activities in Africa, including how it identifies and prioritizes its security partnerships in
Africa, how the department’s security cooperation activities benefit other federal
departments and agencies that are operating in Africa, and a number of other questions
that will help us better shape the posture and the presence of the U.S. Department of
Defense, our military men and women who are supporting State, USAID, and other
federal agencies.

Mr. Devermont: Sir, I’m going to let Chidi respond to you offline about the status of her – (laughs) –
strategy. But you mention partnerships, and I would say I’ve been looking through all
the questions from our audience and almost all of them have to do with partnerships,
particularly in countries where we have concerns about human rights abuses or countries
that have recently undergone coups. So I’m going to throw these two hard questions at
Chidi and then Travis.

But Chidi, let’s start with the number of unconstitutional changes of power we’ve seen in
the region: two in Mali in the last two years, Chad, Guinea. We saw a failed coup
attempt in Sudan just recently. And then we have other partners, Nigeria and Ethiopia, that are in some pretty significant conflicts and then themselves have committed or been involved in – or, alleged to be involved in human rights violations. So how do we operate? How does the U.S. military and civilian partners operate in this landscape where have a couple of partners that are no longer democratic, or that are doing things that really don’t comport with our values? How are you thinking about this?

Ms. Blyden: So it’s a really good question, and something that we’re grappling with as we’re looking at new ways to sort of employ, I think, U.S. foreign policy. You know, earlier we talked a little bit about sort of the three-D approach, and why it’s so important for these things to work in tandem. It’s so that you don’t have situations like this, where you have a coup happen by a military officer who’s maybe disgruntled by a political situation that’s happening in the country, and it doesn’t sort of lend to things working together in the way that democracy and good governance should.

I think, for us, we’re looking at these different transitions, and we’re looking at the underlying sort of drivers of these issues, and we’re trying to figure out where the defense can play a role in promoting good democratic practices and being supportive of the governance and the political transitions that are happening in a way that aligns with our Department of State and, of course, our development colleagues. I think part of that, though, is going to have to be understanding what are the larger drivers of wanting change in the countries?

So from – as you just described – from Tunisia to Sudan to Guinea, the reasons for the political transitions and changes are all very different. So how do we address those things very differently, also from the United States government, to make sure that we understand what it is that our African nation partners are looking for when it comes to employing those same sort of likeminded and democratic values that we’re trying to impress upon them as part of our partnership? So as we – as we look at, I think, the transitions, I don’t necessarily look at them as negative, despite the fact that they are contentious with what our foreign policy approach is.

I do look at them as a way of us better understanding what is plaguing our African partners, whether it be from the political side or from, as Travis described earlier, the drivers of insecurity. And I think it’s incumbent upon us to continue our whole of government and three-D approach to try and address these issues in a way that I think has been maybe not traditional for what we’ve done in the past as a U.S. government.

Mr. Devermont: Travis, why don’t you talk a little bit more about a nontraditional approach, because this must be something that falls on USAID’s shoulders a lot, right? We have a number of partners that are involved in human rights abuses and indulge in corruption, which has been a big issue for both the president and Administrator Power, about addressing anticorruption. So how does AID – and I really do think that AID and State Department, as everyone said here, are really going to be the leaders here on democracy and good governance and promoting security sector engagement that is people-centric. I said in my opening remarks, where are the journalists to hold Africans to account? How are the legislators in African countries going to do oversight? What are the role for judges – military and civilian judges – to do accountability? How do you think about your role in sort of addressing the fact that some of our partners just aren’t living up to the values that we all hold to?
Mr. Adkins: Thanks for the question, Judd. It’s a powerful one. And just to start off with, one of the things we were fortunate with under the Biden administration, when you asked where are the journalists? And we have the good fortune of having one of those as the administrator of USAID, who has arrived to this position as a global voice on human rights, on a global voice that is against mass atrocity, anti-genocide, conflict prevention, and the like. So under that kind of umbrella and auspices this centrality of the human being and the wellbeing of the broadest number of people as possible in any given context is central to all of the efforts that USAID will undertake.

And so that does mean addressing issues related to governance and security, looking at ways to promote again and again civilian oversight of the security of their nations, and the security apparatuses of their nation, improving respect for human rights in the security sector and writ large, looking at issues of corruption and budget accountability in nations, as well as issues around civil service reform, which we see in Sudan – in South Sudan and in many countries across the continent in which we work.

One of the other ways that the administration has worked I think to begin to address this is by adding the administrator of USAID to the Principals Committee, bringing them back into the National Security Council, making that voice and those values and those ideals central to the deliberations of our interagency, to ensure that there is always a pushback or always a promotion and advocacy of this very human-centered approach, which you mentioned, coming out of USAID and coming out of the broader aperture of this administration across its various agencies. But certainly, from the USAID perspective, it’s where we stand.

And certainly, we believe that democracy, human rights, and governance are central in all of our partnerships. And that it should not be assumed that simply for global power competition concerns that partners can just get away with going and violating those kinds of statutes, those kinds of values, those kind of notions and ideals. Thank you.

Mr. Devermont: I’m glad you ended there, Travis, because I think that’s going to be one of the biggest challenges, is as we make global power competition a focus for the right reasons that we don’t partner with countries for the wrong reasons. And that’s a really hard balance that we failed at during the Cold War, in many instances. And we’re just going to have to be more conscientious of it and think about how do we have counters, and hold ourselves accountable too for partnerships that don’t speak to our values.

But, Congressman Brown, I want to give you the last question, which is really about – this is the hallmark, I think, of U.S. policy towards Africa. You said it’s bipartisan, but it’s also between two branches. The executive branch and the legislative branch work really well together on African issues. It’s kind of remarkable that this is the one little piece of the world where politics don’t really intrude. And so I’d like to get your thoughts on sort of how you see that relationship going forward. And then, since this is the last question, do you have any broader takeaways that you want to share before we wrap up?

Rep. Brown: Right, well, thank you very much, Judd. And I think the role of Congress and the relationship with the administration – and this is picking up a little bit where Travis was finishing his remarks – it begins by jointly agreeing, continuing to recognize that Africa
is a continent of opportunity, with some challenges, and it’s not simply a venue where
global power competition plays out. We’ve heard today that there’s a strong consensus
between Congress, the department, and USAID for a comprehensive strategy for Africa.

Congress has, and should continue to, act in a bipartisan manner, providing stability and
programs and strategies across administrations and leadership changes, working through
our Foreign Affairs in the House, Foreign Relations in the Senate committees, our
Armed Services Committees and our respective Appropriations Committees, Congress, I
believe, will continue to be actively engaged in all matters Africa. Congress funded
Africa at higher levels than the president’s budget request under President Trump. And
we might very well see the same with regards to the Biden-Harris budget request, and
what Congress ultimately decides on the fiscal ’22 defense appropriations.

Representative Bass and I led a letter requesting additional appropriations for various
operations, activities, and programs in Africa – you know, including Defense
Intelligence Agency, international security cooperation programs, increase in
department’s coordination with the embassies, and improving partner capacity. And our
letter resulted – I don’t want to think it singlehandedly did it – but it certainly – we’re
seeing as a result increases in the fiscal year ’22 House defense appropriations bill, above
the president’s budget request, of $72 million to the Army for operations within Africa
and $52 million for security cooperation programs within AFRICOM.

So Congress and the administration should learn from the successes of past
administration, whether Republican or Democrat, to continue supporting programs that
work and reforming and improving those that don’t. Programs like PEPFAR, which was
mentioned earlier – established under George W. Bush’s administration, widely viewed
as one of our greatest successes. In fact, in 2008 then-Senator Biden commented on
PEPFAR by stating that President Bush’s decision to launch this initiative was bold and
it was unexpected, and then-Senator Biden said that he believed that historians will
regard PEPFAR as President Bush’s single finest hour. Under President Obama, several
continentwide programs – whether the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is a
fantastic investment in the next generation of African leaders, or Power Africa. And
Travis mentioned, you know, just ceasing conflict may not be enough if you’re not
delivering things like electricity. And that’s the goal of Power Africa, to bring electricity
to 60 million African households by 2030. Under President Trump, many of us in
Congress were and continue to be supportive of several development initiatives
impacting Africa: Prosper Africa, which brings together multiple U.S. government
agencies, and it just got a reboot under the Biden administration in July to reinvigorate
the U.S. commitment to trade and investment across the continent. So I think there are a
number of programs that have worked well.

I mentioned earlier one program that I think needs an adjustment, and that’s Section 333.
But Congress can also lead, as we did under the Trump administration when we passed
things like the BUILD Act, which modernizes the – our development financing
capabilities in Africa.

Two areas that I would really like to see us focus where – and you, I think, Judd,
mentioned it in one of your questions or remarks – I’d like to see Congress and the
administration work on ensuring that the National Guard State Partnership Program
provides the same attention to AFRICOM that it does to other COCOMs. AFRICOM
currently has the lowest coverage by percentage of any COCOM, with only 27 percent of
the 54 nations covered. That compares with 77 percent in SOUTHCOM, 43 (percent) in EUCOM, 40 percent in CENTCOM, 36 percent in INDOPACOM. So I’d like to see greater participation. I think the National Guard brings a lot of cultural sensitivity awareness.

And they also add to my final point, which is in terms of congressional priorities in our relationship with the administration, we need to do better in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion. While there’s been a lot of attention given to the lack of diversity and inclusion in – at the DOD and bipartisan support to address this issue at the DOD, we need the Department of State and the Foreign Service to represent the diversity of our nation. The GAO released a report last year finding that only 6 percent of employees in the Foreign Service were Black. Significant disparities in promotion between White and minority employees exist in both the Civil and Foreign Service. Representative Bass has introduced and I cosponsored a bill, Represent America Abroad Act, to address these issues, and it received favorable consideration in the Foreign Affairs Committee.

So there’s a lot of work to do – to do in partnership between the administration and Congress, within the administration among all of our agencies. I look forward to the work ahead and I look forward to doing it with my partners at USAID, DOD, State, and as well as CSIS.

Mr. Devermont: Thank you so, so much, sir. And I’m so glad that you ended with diversity, equity, and inclusion because we’re not going to get our policies right towards the region without doing better on that aspect, and I don’t think we’ll be able to communicate our priorities to the broader American public if we don’t reflect the rest of America. It’s something that Travis and I were doing before he left with our – with our video series, and unfortunately it’s been on pause.

I want to thank you, DASD Blyden and DAA Travis Adkins, for joining us today. I know we’re just scratching the surface here. Africa is not a country, and I know we spoke in sort of the big Africa mostly today. There will be opportunities in the future to dig into specific challenges. Certainly, you can look at our website for analysis on the Sahel, the crisis in Ethiopia, northern Mozambique, Nigeria. We’re spending a lot of time on those in our reports and our podcasts.

And I would just add, too, here – and I think it goes back to the congressman’s point – those of you – the four of us, or five – just actually the four – you represent the U.S. government, right, and this was a U.S. government-focused discussion. We will not solve the problems if we don’t have African voices in this conversation. It’s something that we do a lot at CSIS. But we’d love to see more with the African diaspora here in America and their views. So things that I think I just want to put a marker down that are so important going forward.

Thanks to everyone for joining us. We look forward to continuing to engage with you. And have a wonderful rest of the week. Thank you.