TRANSCRIPT
Event
“U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit: What’s On The Agenda?”

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Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us this morning. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, director and senior fellow of the Africa Program here.

We are excited this week as all eyes are on Washington, D.C. This is the week of the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit. It’s the second time this is happening. The last time this happened was during the Obama years in 2014. That was eight years ago. Today we know that the first day of the event will kick off today with events on civil society and also events on peace and security forum, and so on.

We have a bunch of questions. You have a lot of questions. We will try to tackle some of those just to whet everybody’s appetite, and we’ll all be looking at what will happen on Friday when resolutions are read, and commitments are made, and programs are unveiled.

Joining me today to share this platform and discuss it is my colleague and friend, Cameron Hudson, who is a senior associate here. Welcome, Cameron.

Thank you, Mvemba. Great to be here.

So what is on the agenda of this summit?

Well, interestingly, I think, you know, one of the criticisms has been the agenda; that it has been so vast — everything from space technology, to infrastructure development, to health and education. But I actually think that’s kind of a strength of this because it shows, I think, the full breadth and scope of things that Washington cares about in Africa. And I think it really distinguishes the U.S. approach to Africa from China, from Russia, which are more narrowly focused, I think, on business deals, or arms deals, or hard security principles. Washington is really showing that it isn’t just one thing that we care about. We care about the waterfront of issues, and we’re going to talk about all of them.

I think, though, that that cuts both ways, and you hear a lot of Africans saying, well, what do you really care about, what really are the priorities? If everything is a priority, then maybe nothing is a priority. So they’re going to have to balance how they approach such a vast agenda with showing really results and real progress on any of those items.

It’s also interesting because, in the same way you say that it cuts both ways, this is I think why people struggle to say, what is the U.S. doing in Africa? You know, it’s often human rights and democracy, which are very welcome. People need that, and someone needs to push for that. And nobody does that
better than the United States, at least in pushing for it. Whether they support all the implementation, it’s another story.

Then we have humanitarian – U.S. again very present in humanitarian space. We saw this with Administrator Samantha Power on involvement with the Horn, with this pending famine. Or I don’t know if we’re already in the famine, considering famine is such a political issue.

But also the security is the AFRICOMs of the world. It’s the U.S. in the Sahel, the U.S. in the Horn.

So in the end, people wonder. They say, in Africa we ought to actually do economic development. Where is the U.S. in this? So China then takes a lead in terms of everybody knows the China Ex-Im Bank. Very few people have heard about the U.S. Ex-Im Bank, and so on.

How do we then tackle that? How does the U.S., with this plurality of interests, engage in the way there to have that presence?

Mr. Hudson: Yeah. Well, I mean, I think this is the – this is the challenge, right, and I think it goes beyond our government. It goes to our media as well, right? I mean, Africa is a problem in need of a solution, and the United States is typically leading on the solutions, whether it’s deploying peacekeepers or responding to pandemics, you know, Washington is always, I think, the lead – along with, you know, certain European partners – in trying to respond to the very real challenges that Africa has.

But I think the way that translates into sort of the popular perception here is that Africa is a problem, is that it’s at war, there’s pandemic, you know, there’s these massive challenges in need of fixing whereas, I think, with China, with other countries, it’s a land of opportunity, right? And we see – when you travel to Africa, when I travel over to Africa, you hear about not just the major Chinese, you know, infrastructure projects, it’s all the traders. It’s all the small business guys that show up and are doing export-import at a very local level. But there’s tens of thousands of these local Chinese traders who are going to Africa because it’s an opportunity and because that’s the popular perception in China.

And I think that one thing that this summit can do is focus on the opportunities, right, like we’re still going to be there providing humanitarian assistance, providing, you know, peacekeepers, trying to sort out, you know, conflicts and bring democracy. We’re still going to be committed to doing all of those things. But at the same time, we have to rebalance the kind of overall narrative and make clear that it’s not just a set of problems that need to be addressed with U.S. taxpayer money; that there are all these
opportunities for a growing middle class and for you know, sectors that are underdeveloped where U.S. businesses, and U.S. know-how and expertise can really have an impactful role.

And I think that’s the – you know, that’s the hope of this summit this week is that we can begin to rebalance this narrative. But again, the Biden administration – they can set the tone, but again, media has a lot to do with this, and I think that, you know, in our popular media here, there is this overwhelming impression that the news that we see about Africa is generally not good news.

Mr. Dizolele: And that goes quite a ways in shaping how the average American – if such person exists – (laughs) – sees Africa.

The summit will span over three days. This first day, which is today, they’re talking a lot about the civil society issues. What is the state of civil society in Africa? You just returned from the continent. What’s your sense of the power, or the strength, or weaknesses of civil society? And how can the U.S. engage in that space?

Mr. Hudson: Well, I mean, again, I think that, you know, it’s not right for us to paint Africa with a broad brush. It’s 54 countries; there’s a lot of nuance and there’s a lot of – a lot of strength and challenges. And that’s true of civil society across the board, right?

But what I would say, and what – again, I think what distinguishes Washington from, you know, what Beijing does or what Moscow does – and I said this the other day. I attended a human rights summit side event on Monday and, you know, I was asking people, if this was a summit that was happening in Beijing or Abu Dhabi or Moscow, would we be even having a human rights side event? Would we have invited civil society? And of course, the answer to that is no, right?

And so I think that that’s what’s, you know, kind of exciting about what’s going on here – is that all of these other countries that do summits, they’re really focused on that high-level government elite, and that’s really the only relationship that matters; whereas here, that’s clearly not the case. Yes, there is – you know, we’re talking about it as a leaders summit, but as you rightly point out, there’s a whole day devoted to civil society today. There are days devoted to, you know, business and investment, and so you’re going to see a whole host of, you know, U.S. government officials not just from the State Department or the Defense Department but from the Energy Department, and the Commerce Department, and Health and Human Services and, you know, the full range of kind of U.S. tools, I think, being
brought to bear. And I think that’s pretty exciting, and again, it’s something that’s very different from what you’re going to see with other countries trying to do – trying to do summits.

That didn’t quite answer your question on civil society. I think the state of civil society is strong in Africa, but I think that their faith in Washington has been eroded over the last few years. And so I think that this summit is going to have to – it’s going to have to prove to them – not just to their governments – but to the civil society that Washington is a reliable partner, you know, not just about funding, not just on talking points – because we’re good on talking points, and we’re generally pretty good on funding. We’re the only ones who are spending the amount of money that we are on civil-society strengthening. But it’s going to be talking the talk and walking the walk. And on the walking part, we’ve not been as good as we should be.

Mr. Dizolele: And that has been a challenge because the future of Africa will be equally determined by government but also by civil society. In a lot of places, the civil society is the watchdog when it comes to bad governance or inequities and other issues. So we hope there will be some kind of reset. At least I hope there will be some reset on this. I’m curious to see what this pronouncement will be on Friday, after the summit concludes.

The second day, tomorrow, will be business. It will be all about business. The Corporate Council in Africa and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce will be taking the lead on that. We are not going. We’re not business people. I wish we could have been invited. (Laughs.)

But how do you see that space, the visit? Because this is where you were talking about the Chinese traders, what China does; not only Chinese traders, but we also have thousands of Africans who fly to China regularly. If you go to a place like DRC, there’s actually a term. Musicians use this a lot. The population at large use that. They’re saying wazu. When they’re saying wazu, it means a product that is of a lower quality, right? So it just flooded the market, but there’s so many of them.

So all the young entrepreneurs – a lot of them, anyways – try to go to China to eke out a living, then they come back. So what you’re describing with a lot of Chinese all over Africa at the lower level – you know, corner shops and so on – you see a lot of that also in Africa, not probably at the same level. In terms of number, definitely a lot of them. It’s European airlines, some of its best successful lines are the line that goes to China.

So in this business space, what will we say? What is the state of the business space and the trading space between the U.S. and African countries? Let’s not say “Africa,” it’s African countries.
Mr. Hudson: Yeah. Well, I mean, if there’s one area where the United States really is in a catchup role, it’s on the business-investment front, right. I mean, the Chinese have five times the amount of investment in Africa than the United States does. There isn’t a single African country that has, as its largest trading partner, the United States. Most African countries have China as their largest trading partner.

So if those things matter, then we have a lot of catching up to do. And I think that, you know, we have made some policy choices in the last few years, the creation of this Development Finance Corporation, which is intended to kind of respond to or rival the tools that the Chinese have been using to promote trade and investment.

But again, that’s not something that the United States government is really, you know, purpose-built to do, enhance investment, right. We can create incentives for that investment to happen and we can provide risk insurance. We can, you know, provide guaranteed financing. But at the end of the day, you know, for a thousand flowers to bloom, you’re going to need to see not just U.S. government prioritizing this. You’re going to have to see, you know, interest rates for lending in African development projects go down, right. When the World Bank is charging 15 percent interest because of the risk that they see in some of these projects, then African countries are going to be forced, continue to be forced, to go to China for financing their projects and for investing.

So, you know, I think it’s – this is a much harder project, I think, than even we realize, how we incentivize U.S. companies to go in there, because there’s a whole host of structural issues with regard to capital markets and how we assess risk and how we value that risk. Then there’s the kind of, as we’ve already talked about, the popular perception of, you know, what we see as opportunity or risk in these countries. But clearly we don’t assess risk the same way that the Chinese assess risk in most African countries.

I think the thing that I’ll be excited about with respect to the development or the business day is not these, you know, big major investments. Yes, you know, Cisco is going to invest $500 million or Boeing is going to sell something. You know, we tend to focus on these big name-brand, you know, billion-dollar investments. But what would be really exciting are lots of million-dollar, $5 million, $10 million, the SME, the small and medium-size businesses that are really the fabric of those economies. When are we going to start to, you know, impact that?

Again, I think a lot of that is probably too small for the U.S. government to be getting involved in it. But if we want to begin to turn the tide it’s going to be at that level. It’s not going to be these, you know, one-off, you know, big
ExxonMobil billion-dollar LNG facilities. Those get all the attention but they are not the bread and butter that, I think, Africa is looking for for its growth.

Mr. Dizolele: And in that space we also need for the existing institutions already to start scaling up. So there’s got to be this combination of SMEs, pops, moms, young women, youth, investing, you know, kind of creating that space.

But the ones that exist – one question I always wonder why is it that USAID is such a common – it’s a household name. You ask a 10-year-old in Zimbabwe or a 15-year-old or 25-year-old in Burkina Faso or Mali, everybody knows USAID. Those of us who – in Africa, we grew up with USAID. The handshake on every product that the U.S. delivered to Africa was all that – you know, the symbol that the friendship is the partnership.

If you ask people – the young entrepreneurs – what is DFC, it’s not a household name. So, I think, as excited as I am to see what will be unveiled on Friday or throughout the week, I’m actually more excited to see if they will be talking about scaling up what already exists.

In other words, what does Power Africa do? What are the major project(s) that Power Africa has delivered? What’s the major project that Prosper Africa has delivered or has helped negotiate or so on?

So that’s what – something I always wondered. The other thing that we’ve been hearing a lot as we engage with scholars and the press and others is China the driver behind the summit. Or Russia, for that matter.

Mr. Hudson: I think the answer is yes and no. I think a lot of things are driving this summit, right. I think, certainly, China’s the elephant in the room because they have really gone in very aggressively and – and let’s be clear. Like, it’s been 20 years that China has been developing these ties. The FOCAC – the China-Africa summit – has been going on for 20 years. You know, they are not new to this game.

And so for us to just now be kind of waking up to the inroads that China has made I don’t think is – I don’t think that’s a fair assessment. I think we’ve been kind of aware of this.

I think one of the big wakeup calls for Washington was the U.N. vote on condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine back in April. I think there was a kind of assumption, maybe even a laziness, on the part of U.S. officials that, of course, Africa saw the situation the way we saw the situation, was that this was a totalitarian state attacking a democratic state.

Mr. Dizolele: Good guy, bad guy.
Mr. Hudson: Yeah. I mean, I think, for us, it was really black and white like that and I think there was a certain shock when Africans expressed a different view on that or at least a more nuanced view. And this has, I think, been a wakeup call to Washington that if you want to be the leader of the free world then you have to be able to rally the free world around these issues, and they weren't able to fully rally African states and African states expressed a lot of discomfort about having to choose, right, and that's been a theme – that's been a kind of a subplot of this whole summit and, frankly, of Biden's approach to Africa, right, which is you don't have to choose.

But clearly, we are using the summit to make the case why they should be choosing Washington as their preferred partner for business, for security, for, you know, you name it.

And so I do think that there are a number of reasons. But I also think that, you know, there is a recognition here that it's been eight years since we've had a summit, that under the Trump administration, you know, Africa was not given the attention that it needed. In fact, it was derided and insulted on many instances, and that we have a lot of work to do to get back to where we were, you know, even 10 years ago – that there has been a drift in U.S. policy and that the United States doesn't look like the same reliable partner that it once was.

And so I do think that this summit is an effort to both acknowledge that and also begin to rebuild some of the lost trust that we have with African countries.

Mr. Dizolele: So the lost trust you think is this product of the years after the collapse of the Cold War, that the U.S. has continued to – let me put it this way. My sense is the U.S. – the biggest impediment to U.S. engagement in Africa is the United States. It's not China. It's not Turkey. Africa is open for business. African – there's no single African country that I know of that says, we don't want Americans over here. We don't want your presence here. We don't want your company.

Every single one would like to see America's leadership. Not just leadership in the ways that, you know, you described the various issues, leading on peace and so on. But leadership in come work with us, be partners. Stop asking questions about Chinese and Turks. That is absolutely – so my view, and I'll be curious to hear what you think, is because of all the lenses that you've mentioned, the various perspectives that are wrong or not seeing the right, seeing clearly what is in front of us. So often businesses will say, well, there's no rule of law over there. There is no this, there is no that. The entire risk, Fitch or who is giving the rating out of New York, right?
But what is it that the Chinese are seeing that we are not seeing, obviously? Risk is risk. What is it that the Turks are seeing? So this entire notion – we spend a lot of time in a place like Washington talking about global – I mean, great-power competition. Which, frankly, I don’t see. I mean, if there’s a great-power competition in Africa, the U.S. is definitely not one of the competitors, right? So maybe if we take the exception of Djibouti, where you see the Chinese, the Americans, the French, and the Turks, yeah, that’s a very microcosmic setting, and it’s very unique to Djibouti.

But for the rest of the continent, you actually see the ascendency of Turkey, you know, and its soft power. You know, they’re building stuff. You know, they’re building roads, not just the Chinese. You go to a place like Kampala, in Uganda, you go to DRC, you go to any capital, not only you see this work, physical work that the Turks are doing, but then you see the big Turkish international schools. You know, there was a time where it was all the American international school, the French international school, the Brits. Now you have Galaxy School in places like Kampala. You go to Kinshasa, you have Ecole Internationale, TASOK, and so on. Then you have Turkish airline, which becomes, like, the big shuttle that Africans are using to get around.

So it’s my sense that with all the stuff that we’re talking about, Russia – it’s a question of Russia, what they’re doing. Why you study Russian in Africa? It’s pretty small, and there’s nothing new there. I mean, maybe the novelty is Wagner Group, but everything else that the Russians are doing, the stuff they’ve been doing over the last six years. Would you agree that the U.S. is actually primarily its own impediment in engaging with Africa? Or if so, to what extent?

**Mr. Hudson:**

Well, I mean, again, I think – I think that one of the things that this summit is trying to do is to demonstrate that we’ve actually been involved in Africa for – since the – since the Cold War ended, right? You know, the AGOA program was rolled out under Clinton, PEPFAR under Bush, the Malaria Initiative under Bush, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Prosper Africa, Power Africa. And I think we have all of these kind of signature development programs. And many of them are now coming up on 25 years old, right? I mean, AGOA, 25 years old. You know, PEPFAR coming up on 20 years. So that’s a real – you know, that’s a real staying power that has enjoyed, I think all of those programs, a lot of bipartisan support, right?

So I think that, you know, we are of – we are of two minds of Africa here in Washington. There are those who see a lot of opportunity. And there are those who just see it as problems in need of resolution. I think the interesting thing about the Chinese is if you read – so China released a strategy for Africa, not unlike the Biden administration did. They released
theirs about a year ago. But if you read that strategy, and then you hold it next to the Biden's, it looks very similar. The language that they use about partnerships is very similar.

What's interesting about China, I think, is that I think that China sees Africa the way it saw itself 30 years ago. It sees a large, developing country, continent, with huge potential, just like it was 30 years ago. It sees a growing youth population, just like it had a generation and a half ago. And so it is connecting to Africa through a shared experience, right? And so what I hear from Africans is that, you know, when we come to China for a summit, you know, everybody gets their 15 minutes with President Xi, right, and we are treated as equals. We are not talked down to; we are treated as equals. And I think that, in this day and age, that's really – that's really what Africans want, and that's where Washington has to get to.

We – I think you've said this before – we still harbor a lot of paternalism, along with the Europeans, towards Africa. We tend to look down at Africans. We tend to see it as a place where we send aid and not treat them as equals.

And so we have to be sensitive to those criticisms, and we have to be sensitive to the fact that in many cases the Chinese are getting it right. I mean, they are treating African countries with a level of respect that they have traditionally not been afforded.

We make it a big deal – and I wrote this in the piece that you and I wrote the other day, right – which is, these kinds of summits and these kinds of meetings, they can't be extraordinary. They have to just be matter of course.

They have to. I mean, if there's going to be a success in this relationship, it's that this kind of thing becomes boring. It becomes just another thing that we do on a host of things that we are doing to engage in the continent, right. The fact that it is so extraordinary is actually part of the problem, I think.

Mr. Dizolele: Correct. And the problem goes back – of course, President Obama, when he hosted the summit in 2014, could have hosted a summit in 2015. He could have hosted another one in 2016.

I'm still wondering why that didn't happen, and I hope, for me, that come Friday we'll hear that there'll be another summit next year. And it's going to be in Africa. I want to hear that the president will be visiting Africa, and I'm not too eager to hear what new programs will be unveiled.

I'm actually interested in seeing how we consolidate what we already have, and how we make it work. What are you thinking?
Mr. Hudson: Yeah, I mean I think that’s right. I mean, I would have liked to see a little more – and I think the Africans would have liked to see a little bit more focus on outcomes – not just the flashy announcements of a new big investment, but I would have liked to see, you know, let’s pull President Sisi and Prime Minister Abe aside, and let’s see if we can spend a little time on the GERD – on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Let’s – you know, let’s pull Kagame and Tshisekedi together and do a little sidebar conversation, and say, hey, guys, we’re watching, you know, we’re involved in this. I would have liked to see a little bit more focus on some of the kind of big challenges right now. Obviously, there’s lots of opportunities, and that’s the tone of the overall summit.

But I think the other thing – again, I keep going back to this thing with China. I think one of the things that distinguishes us is that we do solve problems. We are trying to mediate peace. We are trying to get in the middle of the conflict in Ethiopia and bring peace to Tigray.

China’s not doing that. They’re not putting any kind of political skin in the game. Yes, they’re doing these big investments and everybody carries a Huawei phone around – and that’s a huge kind of, you know soft power win for them – but at the end of the day, we do things that China doesn’t do. And we can continue to do them well, and we should play to those – you know, play to those strengths.

Mr. Dizolele: And I think Africans have been thirsting for more U.S. leadership – both leadership and partnership. I think one of the weaknesses that the United States has is this fit and start.

We'll be involved until there’s a coup then we pull out, and then we'll come again unless you don’t behave, and so on. And that’s a waste. It’s a waste of opportunity. It’s a lack – it’s just a loss in so many ways. Lack of consistency, I think, also contributes to that trust deficit, I think.

Mr. Hudson: Yeah, but that’s also – I mean, in fairness that’s the nature of our system, right. I mean I’m already hearing from Africans who are saying, well, this is great you’re doing all this, but, hey, Trump’s running for president, so how do we know that in two years’ time we’re not going to be, you know, whiplashed again and forgotten about?

Mr. Dizolele: Right. Exactly.

Mr. Hudson: You know, the benefit of, you know, a communist dictatorship is that their president stays in power for a lot longer, and he doesn’t have to run for
reelection. So you could have consistency from China because they make a 100-year plan, and they have presidents, you know, that spend –

Mr. Dizolele: But it’s not just China, the French have consistent engagement in the way they see their own interests. Africans don’t always like it.

Mr. Hudson: That’s not a good thing – that’s not a good thing, though, for France. (Laughs.)

Mr. Dizolele: No, I know. Africans don’t always like it – (laughter) – but I’m just saying other countries – it’s not just the dictatorships, right.

Mr. Hudson: That’s true.

Mr. Dizolele: China is – we can call them dictatorship, whatever they are – France is supposed to be a democracy. Not when they come to Africa. They have the same consistent system that Africans don’t like, they don’t want anything to do with.

Mr. Hudson: Yeah.

Mr. Dizolele: But it’s consistent. It doesn’t matter if it’s a socialist in power or some conservative. It doesn’t matter.

We have a couple of questions from the audience. One is African leaders are going to present their problems for U.S. president to provide solutions. The second one is surely none of this – political, security, business, humanitarian – is going to work optimally until the U.S. visa process for Africans becomes more efficient and effective. Is that on the agenda?

Mr. Hudson: Well, I’ll take the second one first.

Mr. Dizolele: (Laughs.)

Mr. Hudson: And maybe you can take the first one. You can answer that question.

You know, I think, on the visa question, I’m really very frustrated on the visa question, because it’s most acute in Africa. You know, the fact that there are countries right now where you’ve got to wait 18 months to get a visa appointment, that’s outrageous.

Mr. Dizolele: The appointment.

Mr. Hudson: Right, the appointment. It’s outrageous. And I heard that they had to create a special process just for this summit, right, to bypass the normal process, because otherwise nobody would have been able to get a visa to come to this
country. And so when we talk about, you know, business, I was talking to a friend who has a number of businesses in Africa who says, you know, we try to do a meeting and you need somebody to get on a plane and come for a meeting and they can’t do it. They just can’t do it.

So I’m very frustrated when I hear U.S. officials, when I hear Africa officials say, oh, that’s a consular issue; I don’t really work on that, right. This has to – if what we’re saying is Africa matters, then it has to go all the way to the top and these problems have to get resolved, you know, at the top. And you’ve got to get Tony Blinken involved. You have to get people involved. If the Africa Bureau says, oh, that’s above our pay grade, then you need to elevate that, because this is a real impediment to our relationship. It’s insulting to Africans who can’t get that visa. And they’re not going to wait around for a year and a half to get a student visa to go study. They’re just going to go study somewhere else, right.

Mr. Dizolele: Exactly.

Mr. Huudson: And then the knock-on effect of that is only going to be felt a generation from now, right. But it’s going to be there, and we’re going to pay the price. And so if we don’t take this problem seriously, then, you know, then we’re going to lose out.

Mr. Dizolele: Very good. On the first question, are Africans’ leaders going to present the problem for U.S. – I don’t think Africans will be presenting the problem for the U.S. to solve. I do expect that Africans will come with – the various African leaders will bring their own agendas and ask some of the tough questions, their own priorities, because I think this is part of the challenge. I get the impression that the Chinese listen to the African leaders and say, Mr. President, you’re doing such a good job. What else do you need? How can we help you to do a better job? America, I have the impression that that doesn’t quite listen that way in the way that what are your top priorities and how can we help, whatever that form it takes. But that conversation needs to be held.

So I expect that Africans leaders, as they come here, it’s a two-way relationship. It’s not the U.S. dictating. It’s a summit. That’s what – they’re trying to get to know each other better. That’s the point. Come, let’s talk. So I hope they will have a robust agenda of their own as they come and will present this. The challenge may be what you were saying earlier. If they’re not getting bilaterals, then where do you present those talks? You revert back to presenting them to the ambassador or to the deputy assistant secretary of this or that, which doesn’t rise to the level where a president would like to be considered.
Mr. Hudson: Yeah. No, I mean, I think there’s some challenges with the summit. I was talking to a journalist yesterday who said, hey, what’s the summit hotel? Where can I go and hang out in the lobby and see the Rwandans and the Congolese mixing, you know, in the bar and everything? I said, well, you know, there’s 50 delegations. There’s not one hotel. There’s – you know, but that’s what we’re looking for. We’re looking for, like, how these delegations are all going to mix and how we’re going to mix with them, not just in these kind of structured settings where everybody’s reading from their prepared remarks, right. I don’t think that that’s going to achieve the kind of feeling that we want, right.

And again, I say this – Washington’s not good at summits. It’s not kind of – it’s not in our diplomatic repertoire, this kind of summitry. It’s very Chinese. And so we’re kind of – we’re adopting it because it’s been adopted now by a number of other countries. But I don’t think that summitry is something that Washington is really, you know, set up to do particularly well.

Mr. Dizolele: Maybe the U.S. doesn’t have to do it every year. Maybe they can do every five years. You just have some level of consistency; maybe every three years, you know, depend – I believe that every country has its own competitive advantages. And the U.S. has. China does. So does Turkey and everybody else. So we should leverage and/or set. If we don’t want to have a summit every year, that’s fine. Let’s say every two years, every five, whatever it is. But there got to be consistency in the way we are engaging with African leaders.

Mr. Hudson: Well, and it feels a little bit like feast or famine right now under the Biden administration because, you know, he’s been in office going on two years now. He’s really only met with two African heads of state thus far, right, South Africa and Kenya.

Mr. Dizolele: At the White House.

Mr. Hudson: At the White House, right. Two. That’s behind where Trump was. That’s where – that’s where – that’s behind where Obama was, where Bush was, right? So he’s not keeping up with what his predecessors did. He’s gone now to the United Nations General Assembly twice. Traditionally, that’s a place where you can touch these guys because they’re all there as well, right? He didn’t do –

Mr. Dizolele: That’s your tell, where you go in meetings. (Laughs.)

Mr. Hudson: Yeah. And you know, you’ve got all the heads of state there already, and he didn’t use either of those opportunities to meet with groups of African heads of states bilaterally or collectively. And so those are missed opportunities, right? We are far behind. He’s not picking up the phone with any great
regularity, you know, for diplomatic conversations with Africans. And so we've gone from this, like, famine of – (laughs) – of engagement to now having everybody here in this intense three days. And so, you know, I think some consistency in the relationship and avoiding these kind of like valleys and troughs – let's just have a kind of consistent level of engagement – I think that would send a much more powerful message that we are reliable partners.

Mr. Dizolele: Good. So reliability is an issue.

A question here; I think you already answered this. President Biden, according to reports, is not having any bilateral discussion with any African head of state. Why?

Then: How does the Biden administration reconcile inviting leaders with a history of fraudulent elections to D.C., such as the long-term president of Equatorial Guinea?

Mr. Hudson: Yeah, that's a good one. Listen, I think that, you know, in the language that the Biden administration used, they're trying to be inclusive, right? What I would say is that we as a country have complicated relationships with all countries. And there are things that those countries – that we can see eye to eye on and there are other things that we can't see eye to eye on. And the question is: Do we – you know, do we relegate that country because there are things that we disagree on strongly?

Like, Equatorial Guinea is a – is a great example, right? So this is a country that has a very large, multibillion-dollar U.S. investment in the liquified natural gas by Exxon. But it's also a country where this president has a – you know, a 40-year, you know, term of office.

Mr. Dizolele: I think now it's 43 now. I think it's – yeah.

Mr. Hudson: Right, and he just won the election by 99.7 percent, right?

Mr. Dizolele: (Laughs.)

Mr. Hudson: And where human rights is – you know, is a catastrophic problem, right? And so, you know, I think the answer that they would give is, you know, we have a varied agenda with a place like Equatorial Guinea and we cannot afford to not talk to them. Even if we're not going to make progress on something like democracy, we have other things on the agenda that we have to continue to talk to them about. For example, they are talking to the Chinese about opening a naval base in Equatorial Guinea, which would be the very first Chinese base in the Atlantic, right, which would present a huge strategic challenge to the United States.
And so I think we have to be cognizant of the fact that there isn't just one thing that drives our relationship with these countries. These are not kind of monolithic relationships. We have, you know, really diverse relations with all of these countries. And we have to take the good with the bad, and we have to try to work and advance all of these issues simultaneously. That's hard to do. You know, I'm sympathetic to that.

I think the challenge, though, is when you come out with rhetoric that says democracy and human rights is going to be my number-one driver, it's going to be the thing that I prioritize the most. Then you create an expectation that you're actually going to prioritize it, right? And so then you've got to be much better about how you message on a case like Equatorial Guinea. And here I think Washington is not particularly good at explaining, you know, its motives behind these –

Mr. Dizolele: But it also poses a challenge for countries that need more of U.S. engagement, like Mali where there's been coup – coups, actually, in the case of Mali – or Guinea, or Burkina Faso. So by “disengaging,” quote/unquote, from those countries, we are not helping the situation.

Mr. Hudson: Yeah.

Mr. Dizolele: So by leaving Burkina Faso under sanction, or whatever it is the situation – I don't know if they suspended like Mali – but the relationship is not the best. Well, that leaves room for, whether the Wagner Group or somebody else, to go in there. Whereas, if we continue engaging with them in a place like Guinea, that also change.

So we're coming up to the end of our program. You have not shared what you're expecting from this summit. I said I thought – I wondered – what, come Friday, what does it look like?

Mr. Hudson: That's a great question. Again, I think that – I don't think we're going to be seeing these new announcements about a signature development program, right? I think any new money is going to be recycled money, repackaged money. There's no new funding bill that I'm aware of going through Congress. So any big new announcements on development assistance is likely just existing development assistance that's being, you know, repackaged.

So I'm not going to focus so much on those announcements and deliverables, as much as I would like to have seen some of that. My hope is that these Africans do not leave this summit saying: We flew across the ocean for that?

Mr. Dizolele: In the middle of the winter. (Laughs.)
Mr. Hudson: Yeah. (Laughs.)

Mr. Dizolele: Thirty-one degrees.

Mr. Hudson: We flew here for that? They have to get – it's not about whether Cameron Hudson feels like it was a successful summit. It's about whether these 50 African heads of state and their delegations and their ministers, who have taken a week out of their lives to come here and spent tens of millions of dollars of their taxpayers' money to do it, whether they feel like it was time well-spent, and whether they feel like they have a real partner in Washington, and whether they feel like Washington is a power that can lead the world.

If they feel like that, then it doesn’t matter what was announced because it will have been a success. I don't know that we'll get a clear answer to that on Friday, but that's certainly my hope. Is that people feel like Washington was genuine and sincere in this invitation and in this outreach, and that they come away thinking that the sins of the past, of the recent past, are forgotten. And let's forge ahead with, you know, a new dynamism in this relationship.

Mr. Dizolele: Yeah. Africans have long memories, so we'll see if that works. (Laughter.) And the summit is just a summit. It's one event in time. And we hope the full summit will bring that to bear.

Thank you for joining me today, Cameron. This has been great, just getting a sense of what we should expect. To the audience listening to us, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us. Hopefully, we made some sense. And please join us at a future event. Have a good day.

(END)