

ON THE HORIZON

A Seat at the Table: *African Leadership in a Post-Covid-19 World*

By Judd Devermont | July 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic will be a history-altering event. But where will it take us? In “On the Horizon,” a new CSIS series, our scholars offer their insights into the fundamental changes we might anticipate for our future social and economic world.

African governments are fed up with the state of the world. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, African leaders have given voice to long-standing grievances about the region’s status in global affairs and the treatment of its citizens in China—and, more recently, the treatment of Black people in the United States. With [more than 200,000](#) confirmed cases of Covid-19, an impending continental recession, and international anti-racism protests, African governments are reassessing their roles in the international system. In the coming months, African leaders will almost certainly demand a bigger say on global issues in multilateral forums and more equitable ties with existing partners as well as step up as standard-bearers for multilateralism in an increasingly fragmented world. If the United States wants to repair and revive its links to the region in this new reality, it will need to rethink its approach to developing and sustaining its partnerships.

The Clapback

African leaders and civil society are chastising their important trading and security partners for real and perceived slights during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. While far from unprecedented, African admonishments of foreign partners have rarely been as forceful, sustained, or public. These rebukes are setting the stage for a recalibration of Africa’s ties with China, the United States, and other foreign governments.

- African leadership is pushing back against China. Nigerian and Ghanaian officials have dressed down Chinese diplomats for the [racist treatment](#) of

Africans in Guangzhou. Oby Ezekwesili, a former World Bank vice president and cabinet minister in Nigeria, blasted China for mismanaging the outbreak and demanded Beijing pay “[damages and liability compensation](#).” In mid-May, the African Group backed a [EU-drafted resolution](#) calling for an independent inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.

- African leaders [slammed](#) President Donald Trump for negative tweets about the World Health Organization director-general (and former Ethiopian government minister) Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as well as a U.S. decision to [freeze personal protective equipment \(PPE\) shipments](#). There also is an uproar over the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minnesota, prompting Ghanaian president Nana Akufo-Addo to [tweet](#) that “it cannot be right that in the 21st century the U.S., this great bastion of democracy, continues to grapple with the problem of systemic racism.”

With Friends Like These

In response to Covid-19, the region’s governments are tapping into public frustration about the virus’s foreign origins, the shallowness of the international response, and overbearing public health guidance from countries that are failing to curb their own outbreaks. African officials probably are becoming more confrontational because they fear a failure to push back (and deflect attention from the current crisis) will heighten domestic public anger in the wake of the disease’s mounting death toll and economic devastation.

- Ghanaian finance minister Ken Ofori-Atta, in an op-ed for the Financial Times in April, [questioned](#) the “unbalanced nature of the global architecture” and said his country has the “strange and eerie feeling of apocalypse”; he also [called](#) on China to “come on stronger” regarding debt relief at virtual event at the Center for Global Development. Ofori-Atta [cut](#) the country’s growth rate forecast to the lowest in 37 years due to the pandemic; the continent will [enter a recession](#) for the first time in more than two decades, according to the World Bank.
- President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa [conceded](#) that the pandemic and resulting lockdown measures have “evoked a lot of anger and opposition” in his country. Many Africans have bristled under Western-style lockdowns, which are viewed as inappropriate in an African context. While overall crime is down, there have been [reports](#) of looting at South African retail stores and riots in [Kenya](#), [Mozambique](#), and Sierra Leone. In fact, according to the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Database, there were 567 acts of unrest related to Covid-19 in sub-Saharan Africa between February 19 and May 16.
- Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta [groused](#) that this is a “crisis that was not

created on the African continent.” Index cases across the continent have been traced to expatriates or Africans transiting Belgium, China, France, Germany, Italy, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, United States, and United Arab Emirates. When the news broke, there was an uptick in xenophobia against Chinese citizens in [Kenya](#) and elsewhere. It has since spread to attacks on foreign nationals in [Cameroon](#) and [Ethiopia](#) and on UN staff in the [Central African Republic](#) and [South Sudan](#).

Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed [insisted](#) that life-and-death supplies, including PPE, testing kits, and ventilators, be fairly distributed, “not hoarded by the rich and few.” The region has received significant cash infusions from external governments and the private sector, but access to medical supplies remains woefully inadequate. The region has tested far less people than other regions. John Nkengasong, head of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) in early June [shared](#) that there have been about 1,700 tests per 1 million people, compared to 37,000 tests per 1 million in Italy and 30,000 per 1 million in Britain.

International Response to Covid-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa

Foreign governments, as well as their foundations and private sectors, have sent funding, supplies, and doctors to sub-Saharan African countries. The maps below showcase where—but not what—each international donor has provided assistance. Some countries have announced general support to the continent and the African Union; these are not included.

■ Countries that received donations ■ Countries that did not receive donations ■ No data collected

CHINA



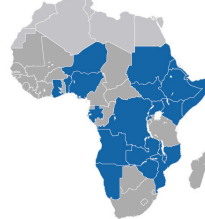
China has also supported Cape Verde, Comoros, Mauritius, Sao Tome, and Seychelles, not pictured

UNITED STATES



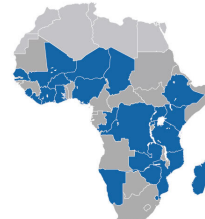
The United States has also supported Mauritius and Seychelles, not pictured

EUROPEAN UNION



The European Union has also supported Mauritius, not pictured

INDIA



India has also supported Comoros, Mauritius, and Seychelles, not pictured

FRANCE



France has also supported Comoros, Mauritius, and Seychelles, not pictured

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES



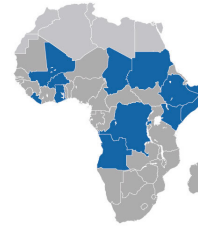
The United Arab Emirates has also supported Comoros and Seychelles, not pictured

TURKEY



Turkey has also supported Comoros, not pictured

QATAR



SOUTH KOREA



CUBA



Cuba has also supported Cape Verde, not pictured

UNITED KINGDOM



RUSSIA



Source: Open-source internet, government websites, DevEx

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We're Not Gonna Take it

The region's governments, consequently, are setting down new markers for their foreign relationships, bluntly saying what they expect and what they will accept from bilateral partners and multilateral institutions. This hard-nosed approach has been most evidenced with regard to economic relief and foreign health proscriptions.

- Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni [didn't mince words](#): the region's "external friends, if they are friends at all, should cancel all the multilateral and bilateral loans," he said. There is a consensus that the G20's [moratorium](#) on bilateral government debt repayments has been insufficient and that China's [evasive position](#) on debt relief is unacceptable. African governments also are asking a reduction in their commercial debt while preserving their current [credit ratings](#).
- Ramaphosa, who is also currently chair of the African Union (AU), [boasted](#) that "the challenge of this pandemic has shown how Africa is able to work together to solve its own problems." The region's leaders have contrasted what they perceive as a mishandling of the pandemic by the United States and Europe with the record of African health ministries and institutions, including the Africa CDC. It has also underpinned public anger when a Chinese state-owned company [dispatched](#) doctors to Nigeria—where there is a proud medical professional class—or when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo chided South Africa for accepting [Cuban medical support](#).

Africa's New Map

This new assertiveness is unlikely to fade. As Ivoirian president Alassane Ouattara [concluded](#), "there's been a selfishness on the part of industrialized nations for decades." Former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, for example, denounced what he described as U.S. efforts to [ridicule](#) African institutions, in response to a U.S. attempt to probe Akinwumi Adesina, the current African Development Bank president.

While there is little scope to trigger a major overhaul of bilateral relations—in part due to deep structural economic and security ties—the region's leaders will levy new demands for access to and input on key global debates. They will also seek to deepen their partnerships with countries they judge to be responsive, respectful, and competent.

- **Beyond Covid-19-specific issues.** African governments probably will weigh in on a range of topics in a post-Covid-19 world, not just global health policy and economic assistance. As Professor Harsh Pant of King's College London [told](#) *Nikkei Asian Review*, "Covid-19 may have brought the middle power moment in international politics," providing an opening for South Africa and other leading countries in the Global South to step up. African leaders will expect a seat at the table on issues such as climate change, internet governance, and

trade. Kenya has made waves on [blue economy priorities](#), and Gabon already has distinguished itself as a [leader](#) on climate change and environment issues, calling on world leaders to declare a [global climate emergency](#) at the United Nations in 2019. The region's leaders, moreover, will ramp up pressure to [remove sanctions](#) on Sudan and Zimbabwe.

- **Toward multilateralism.** Africans almost certainly will renew their commitment to regional integration and multilateralism. While the Covid-19 outbreak [postponed](#) the next phase of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), there is a new urgency to remove trade barriers and increase intra-regional trade. Not only do many business leaders and observers regard economic integration as a long overdue remedy to many of the continent's economic woes, but they argue that it is essential to [accelerate](#) continental manufacturing, e-commerce, and digitization to reduce an overreliance on Chinese production and imports. Similarly, this united approach underlined Ramaphosa's decision to assemble an all-star team—including Donald Kaberuka, Trevor Manuel, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and Tidjane Thiam—to press the G20, the European Union, and other international financial institutions to deliver “concrete support,” including a stimulus package, to assist the region's fragile economies.
- **Over existing alliances.** Africans will likely reevaluate their foreign ties in the wake of Covid-19. While Europe, China, and the United States will endure as key trade and security partners, the region may reconsider how much they want to emulate these countries and accede to their requests. According to forthcoming Afrobarometer polling in 10 African countries, only 33 percent of respondents in 2019-20 saw the United States as a model, whereas 22 percent regard China as a model, a result which matches [past surveys](#). Recently, Nigerian and Kenyan officials have started to loudly question Chinese corruption and presence in their countries. Africans also may become disillusioned with Russia's renewed courtship of the region following reports that Moscow was unable to respond to requests for help from countries such as [Sierra Leone](#). Finally, the aftermath of the virus may deepen ties and admiration for other East Asian countries, including [South Korea](#), [Singapore](#), and [Vietnam](#); in May, the Nigerian electoral commission chairman said he is [eyeing](#) Seoul for best practices to proceed with elections during the pandemic.

Reinvigorating U.S. Leadership

While African governments are demanding a different relationship with the international community, there are opportunities for the United States to restore its leadership and renew its partnership with African counterparts. Below are five recommendations to support African governments during the pandemic and reestablish strong ties in a post-Covid-19 world.

African Responses Range from Effuse to Subdued

Some responses to foreign partners have been enthusiastic and welcoming (left), while others have been diplomatic and matter-of-fact (right). While tweets certainly do not define the bilateral relationship, they do offer a window into how African governments are currently thinking about their foreign partners.

Abiy Ahmed Ali @AbiyAhmedAli · Apr 13
Grateful to the #UAE government for the support of 15tonnes worth of #COVID19 prevention medical supplies, including PPE gears and masks. Appreciating my brother @MohamedBinZayed for showing solidarity with #Ethiopia and the continent at large.

Abiy Ahmed Ali @AbiyAhmedAli · Mar 30
The #RepublicofKorea is an example of successful #COVID19 containment. I spoke with President Moon Jae-In @TheBlueHouseEng on lessons learnt that #Ethiopia can adapt & how the Republic of Korea can support in the provision of essential medical supplies required at this juncture.

Paul Kagame @PaulKagame · Mar 20
Thank you @JackMa and @foundation_ma for your generous donation of test kits delivered in Kigali today. This is a huge shot in the arm and a much needed contribution in our work to stop the spread of #Coronavirus. I know the people of Rwanda join me in gratitude

Paul Kagame @PaulKagame · Apr 25
I just had a good conversation with President @realDonaldTrump. We discussed our good relationship, and the support he personally, and his administration are extending to Rwanda to combat the #COVID19 pandemic. This was much appreciated.

Cyril Ramaphosa #StaySafe @CyrilRamaphosa · Apr 27
The theme for this year's #FreedomDay is: "Solidarity and the triumph of the human spirit in challenging times". It is fitting that on this day we should welcome Cuban health experts who have arrived in our country to support our efforts to curb the spread of #COVID19.

Cyril Ramaphosa #StaySafe @CyrilRamaphosa · Apr 4
I spoke to President Vladimir Putin and asked for technical expertise on infection control, supply of lifesaving equipment for mobile testing & infection control. South Africa has a long friendship with Russia & they have supported China, Italy & US in the fight against #COVID19

Source: Tweets by Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed, Rwandan president Paul Kagame, and South African president Cyril Ramaphosa, compiled by the author

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- **Steer the global response.** The U.S. failure to lead the global response to Covid-19 has undercut coordination and precluded opportunities to establish a division of labor between Africa's external partners. It has also fueled a wasteful geopolitical competition between the United States and China, which has tainted the image of both countries. It is not too late to step up and support (or at least not block) contributions from foreign governments including Cuba, India, South Korea, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and European states. This type of multilateral approach, led by the United States, was a [hallmark of the response to Ebola](#) in West Africa in 2014-15.
- **Collaborate on economic relief.** The United States should commit itself to working with public and private lenders to address the region's economic woes. Specifically, U.S. government should pressure China to grant some debt relief—in coordination with other donors. Africa's external partners consider [low-interest loans](#) or something akin to the [Brady Bond](#), where Eurobonds would be swapped for concessional debt. There also is growing pressure for [special drawing rights](#) allocations issued by the International Monetary Fund to enable African governments to salvage their economies. While there are advantages and disadvantages to each option, perceptions of a lack of U.S. leadership, and in some cases opposition to solutions, have harmed Washington's reputation. An indication

that the United States is willing to share its concerns openly and explore creative solutions, or make compromises, would be well received at the negotiating table.

- **Tread lightly on Chinese critiques.** The United States needs to focus on its support to African partners, restraining its impulse to attack China. African leaders and publics are aware of China's failings, including its mismanagement of the virus in Wuhan and racism in Guangzhou. When U.S. officials imply that China "[set fire to the village](#)" by introducing Covid-19, it does not score points for the United States. Even references to discrimination in Guangzhou are problematic, especially when African leaders see similar acts of racism in the United States. AU Commission chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, for instance, issued a [statement](#) rejecting the "continuing discriminatory practices against Black citizens of the United States of America" following the murder of George Floyd.
- **Talk up the U.S. private sector and foundations.** The United States could do more to amplify how U.S. companies and foundations, whose efforts are being underappreciated by African publics, are assisting in the Covid-19 response. A [recent study](#) suggests that approximately half of Chinese aid-like donations globally have been provided through corporations rather than government agencies or philanthropic organizations. The U.S. government as well as various U.S. chambers of commerce at least have started to promote private sector donations. The U.S. Embassy in South Africa, for example, is showcasing private sector engagements through the "[All-of-America](#)" initiative. Similarly, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) [announced](#) that it will invest up to \$2 billion to support private sector investment in public health resilience in developing countries with an emphasis on Africa.
- **Applaud and learn from African successes.** The United States—at the cabinet or subcabinet level—should do more to hail African responses to the pandemic as many have for responses by New Zealand and South Korea. Many of the region's leaders have listened to health professionals, communicated effectively and frequently with their publics, and drawn on best practices from the campaigns against Ebola, HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis. Senegal, for example, is developing [\\$1 Covid-19 testing kit](#), and Mauritius seemingly has [tamed its Covid-19 outbreak](#). There is an opportunity to champion Africa's response as well as embrace lessons learned from the region's experiences in managing infectious diseases. This open approach, which privileges dialogue and mutual respect, has the potential to take the sting out of past insults and [derogatory U.S. rhetoric](#) about the continent.

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