



A New U.S. Policy Framework for the African Century

By Judd Devermont

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THE ISSUE

- **U.S. policy toward Africa is in need of a facelift—in both substance and strategic vision—to keep up with the continent’s shifting demographics and growing influence on the world stage.** Africans will be integral to addressing some of the world’s thorniest problems. The continent holds three nonpermanent seats at the UN Security Council, and it represents the largest and most unified bloc at the UN General Assembly.
- **A revitalized relationship with African countries must prioritize engagement with African counterparts because there are strategic issues on the table.** It has to levy real carrots and sticks, not just deploy moralistic arguments about a policy outcome.
- **The United States should expand its diplomatic partners and repertoire,** investing in cities, deepening its ties with regional bodies, elevating its private sector, and working alongside other external actors.
- **The United States should revamp its public diplomacy and communication with both African and U.S. audiences.** By reimagining its soft power, as well as tapping behavioral economists, advertising professionals, and pollsters, the United States has a real opportunity to connect with the next generation of African leaders and advance its objectives in the region and the wider world.

U.S. policy toward Africa has been mired in old thinking for too long. A combination of factors including low prioritization, an insular community of specialists, and deference to “bipartisan consensus” has resulted in policies and practices locked in amber. To be sure, continuity and consistency have their merits, but they also act as brakes on creativity, innovation, and fresh thinking. This policy drift leaves the United States ill-equipped for new challenges and discontinuities—such as a global pandemic, for example. It valorizes a decades-old playbook and reflexively dismisses recommendations that veer from the script. Major U.S. policy initiatives,

including the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGO), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the U.S.-African Leaders Summit, and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) are exceptions to the rule and point to the potential for new policy breakthroughs.

The longstanding U.S. goals to advance democracy and governance; peace and security; trade and investment; and development in Africa remain valid. However, it is the pursuit of these objectives that has become unfocused and anachronistic. Over the decades, U.S. policy toward the region has become too encompassing, overstuffed with sub-objectives, and fixated with inputs,

not outcomes. Moreover, it persistently treats Africa as a “region apart,” divorced from developments in other areas of the world. U.S. policy priorities toward Africa are almost exclusively about local issues on the continent and are often oblivious to Africa’s sway in the international system. A new policy framework must see African expertise and influence as a critical part of a broader U.S. approach to tackling global challenges.

THE CASE FOR A FRESH START

A new approach has to start with the facts. It is foolhardy to continue with the same policies when the region is undergoing significant change. Africa is becoming more populous, youthful, urban, mobile, educated, and networked.¹ These demographic transformations, as well as emerging political, economic, and security trends, are increasing Africa’s significance to U.S. national interests.

- **Power in Numbers:** Africa’s population is expected to roughly double to two billion by the middle of this century, and Nigeria will surpass the United States as the third-largest country in the world. The continent will become increasingly connected to the world as mobile phones and the internet become more accessible, and as its global diaspora becomes more influential. Africans will be integral to addressing some of the world’s thorniest problems. The continent holds three nonpermanent seats at the UN Security Council, and it represents the largest and most unified bloc at the UN General Assembly. African positions on Israel and Palestine have the potential to lend credibility to a settlement or enable further intransigence.² African attitudes toward Chinese human rights abuses will either hand Beijing a blank check or hasten global condemnation.³ African states will either help sustain North Korea through arms sales or weaken the rogue regime by severing ties.⁴
- **Ripple Effects:** What happens in Africa does not stop at the water’s edge. Africa’s setbacks and advances are reshaping how the world works. When piracy surged off the Horn of Africa in 2009, it triggered multinational counter-piracy deployments and spurred the shipping industry to adopt new protocols.⁵ When the migration crisis deepened in Africa, it remade European politics and contributed to the electoral success of xenophobic, ultranationalist parties.⁶ When Ebola reared its head in 2013, it served as a catalyst for the establishment of a new global health security architecture.⁷ This

dynamic also is true for positive developments. Mobile money, pioneered in Kenya, is now used worldwide, and African cultural exports, including pop music, literature, and fashion, are transforming the global entertainment industry.

- **A Crowded Landscape:** U.S. allies and adversaries are showing renewed interest in the region. They see openings for trade and investment as well as growing threats from terrorism, criminality, epidemics, and irregular migration. These countries believe that Africa is increasingly important to a wide range of economic, security, and political goals. And it is not just China; foreign governments have opened more than 150 new embassies in Africa since 2010, and at least 65 countries have increased their trade with the region between 2010 and 2017.⁸ Many of Africa’s partners have opened military bases in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and on the Indian Ocean. They regularly convene summits with the region, including Japan’s Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) and the recent Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, to advance their agendas.

A FIT-FOR-PURPOSE PLAYBOOK

U.S. policy has to stay ahead of the curve, not lag behind, if it wants to remain influential. The current policy framework and tool kit have to evolve—or at least submit to serious scrutiny to validate what works and discard what is no longer effective. While recent polling indicates that African views continue to tilt positively toward the United States, relations have hit a rough patch in the past four years.⁹ From travel bans and proposed budget cuts to derogatory statements made by senior U.S. officials, many African leaders and publics have deplored what they regard as a neglectful, mean-spirited, and China-obsessed U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, no U.S. president since John F. Kennedy has met with fewer African leaders in the Oval Office during his first term than President Donald Trump.

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THE GREAT DEBATE

Over the course of five CSIS debates on U.S.-Africa policy, in-person and virtual audiences voted on key points raised by the debaters. Below are audience responses to eight statements on democracy, economic growth, human rights, and great power competition.

The United States is moving too slowly in its policy toward Africa, playing catch up with other countries.



African democracies infringe on human rights as much as autocracies.



The U.S. military should allow Africans to decide what their priorities should be.



There is no strong support from Africans for another superpower rivalry being waged on the continent.



Concerns for human rights are essential for effective counterinsurgency operations in Africa.



The United States should worry less about Chinese engagement in Africa.



Democracy fosters economic growth in Africa.



The United States over-militarizes its approach to foreign policy in Africa.



Since the end of the Cold War, most U.S. administrations have promoted democracy and governance; peace and security; trade and investment; and development. While these priority areas remain important, their strategic significance to broader U.S. goals has become undervalued. The policy process, including its implementation and communication, has consequently become stale and the purview of lower-ranking officials. As long as U.S. interests in Africa are viewed parochially, U.S. activities will remain under-resourced and underwhelming. In this context, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) hosted five debates to challenge conventional thinking and elicit new ideas on U.S. priorities and policies toward the region. This effort informed responses to three overarching questions:

1. *What principles should underpin U.S. partnerships with the region?*
2. *With whom and where should the United States work to advance its interests in Africa?*
3. *How should the United States communicate its policies to U.S. and African audiences?*

PURSuing U.S. GOALS IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

A new U.S. policy must see Africa's progress and setbacks in a global context, tearing down Washington's siloed approach to the region. It is time to marshal new arguments about Africa's significance, refresh tired U.S. programmatic and diplomatic gambits, and focus on the global implications of U.S. engagement in Africa.

The case for elevating U.S. engagement in Africa is more than just altruism or charity. Governments with a free press, independent courts, functional legislatures, and a respect for human rights are more likely to cancel corrupt or unsound deals with countries such as Russia and China.¹⁰ A region with durable health infrastructure is more apt to slow the spread of infectious diseases and epidemics, such as Ebola and Covid-19, obviating the need for emergency supplementals and economic bailouts. A continent—at peace with itself—is more willing to deploy troops to fight wars abroad, as some African countries did in the Korean War in the early-1950s and the Gulf War in the early-1990s.¹¹ Plus, a proactive approach to these issues is less costly than responding to a smoldering conflict; some studies say, for example, that activities aimed at preventing violence save at least two dollars for every dollar invested, while more recent estimates put the ratio at sixteen to one, according to the U.S. Institute of Peace.¹²

A POTENTIAL ALLY TO ADVANCE DEMOCRACY, FREE TRADE, AND MULTILATERALISM

The continent remains optimistic about democracy, open borders, and multilateralism, pointing to its potential as a key partner in international arenas. African commitment to these values presents an opportunity to support U.S. global interests. The Gambia, for example, despite its small population of two million and its 7,000-mile distance from South Asia, filed a lawsuit at the International Court of Justice in 2019, alleging that Myanmar had committed genocide against the Rohingya.¹³

- Africans are committed to democratic principles, despite the global drift to authoritarianism. Almost 70 percent of Africans say democracy is their preferred type of government, according to an Afrobarometer poll.¹⁴ Since 2015, there have been 34 peaceful transfers of power from one leader to another.
- African governments are bullish about open borders and free trade, diverging from world counterparts who erect barriers and impose tariffs. Fifty-three out of 54 countries, as well as Western Sahara, signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, which has the potential to unite a market of more than 1.2 billion people and has a combined GDP of more than \$3.4 trillion, which would be the fifth-largest economy in the world, larger than India's nominal GDP.¹⁵
- African states are proponents of multilateralism, standing in contrast to the Trump administration's impulse to "go it alone." The African Union (AU), regional economic communities, and ad hoc security coalitions, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, have banded together to tackle extremist threats in the Horn of Africa and West Africa. Furthermore, African leaders have defended democratic transitions in The Gambia and condemned faulty election processes in Burundi, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, and Lesotho.

FORMING REAL PARTNERSHIPS

A revitalized relationship with African countries must prioritize engagement with African counterparts because there are strategic issues on the table, not just because U.S. policymakers favor specific leaders or pet issues. It has to acknowledge that Africa encompasses North African countries, not just 49 sub-Saharan states originally grouped together by a misguided bureaucratic decision. It has to bring real carrots and sticks to the table, not just deploy moralistic arguments about a policy outcome. In other words, U.S. policy has to extend the same courtesies to African counterparts as it does to Latin American, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian countries.

- **Personal Diplomacy:** The United States should use the president and its ambassadors more effectively to shape policy outcomes. President Kennedy bucked the bureaucracy's conservatism, insisting that he could influence Soviet-leaning leaders such as Sekou Toure of Guinea and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.¹⁶ President Reagan welcomed USSR-backed Mozambican President Samora Machel to the White House because, as one U.S. official said, you cannot advance your interests through "quarantine."¹⁷ In recent administrations, however, the president's involvement has become a prize for winsome heads of state instead of a pressure point to sway wary counterparts. The president is the U.S. government's top problem-solver, best positioned to break impasses and secure support for strategic initiatives. Similarly, U.S. ambassadors are the president's representatives in-country, not just chief consular officers and building managers. National Security Council (NSC) micromanagement and the post-Benghazi "new normal" mentality has clipped the wings of U.S. officials abroad, constraining diplomats from overseeing real breakthroughs as former ambassadors Edward Perkins and Princeton Lyman did in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸
- **Reunite the Continent:** The United States should approach the continent as a single region, dismantling the artificial divide between North and sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, the State Department, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the NSC split the region into two, while the Pentagon assigns responsibility for the entire continent, except Egypt, to one policy shop and Africa Command. This mismatch across

government bodies is counterproductive, requiring two different sets of policymakers for continent-wide decisions. It also does not reflect how many Africans see themselves and how they form regional blocs at multilateral forums; Chidi Odinkalu, a Nigerian human rights lawyer and activist, called the artificial separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa an act of “cartographic vandalism” at a CSIS debate. The division of the continent dates back to 1974 when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger moved Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to the bureau of Near Eastern Affairs to address “structural anomalies.”¹⁹

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- **Real Carrots and Sticks:** The United States should reconceptualize how it uses high-level engagement, programmatic support, and flexible punitive measures to advance U.S. objectives. Washington should dangle senior-level meetings and harness scorecards and indices to influence the calculus of African leaders on local and global challenges. Too often, U.S. engagement is symbolic and expected to persuade without anything concrete to offer. Even with the best intentions, it has been too quick to laud individuals, not institutions. It has historically favored expedient outcomes, not deliberative processes. Some U.S. signature initiatives lack transparency, awarding resources and prestige to governments, which may be undeserving and have no stake in a shared policy outcome. U.S. sanctions are often imposed to punish, not to advance a strategic goal, and are cumbersome to dismantle if a country starts moving in a positive direction. It is the rare policy that echoes the sophistication of former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker’s linkage strategy in southern Africa, which resulted in Cuban withdrawal from Angola and set the stage for Namibian independence.²⁰

CONSTRUCTIVE COMPETITION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA IN AFRICA

The United States must address the national security challenges posed by some of China’s activities in Africa. However, Washington is unlikely to advance U.S. and African interests by adopting a zero-sum approach, underinvesting in U.S. strengths, eschewing multilateral partnerships, and denying African agency. The goal is to foster a “healthy competition,” as suggested by former World Bank Vice President and Nigerian government minister Dr. Oby Ezekwesili at a CSIS debate.

The United States should define its goals vis-à-vis China in Africa. It should focus on specific, concrete threats, including critical infrastructure, such as ports and telecommunications, that undercut U.S. mobility and access. It should ramp up its soft power engagement, particularly educational exchanges in the United States and Africa, to deepen its ties to Africa’s next generation of leaders. Because China is almost as popular as the United States in many African countries, according to recent

polling, it is counterproductive to dismiss all Chinese investments as dangerous or as preludes to a “debt trap.”²¹ It insults African partners, and it pretends that the U.S. private sector is operating at the same scale or in the same sectors as Chinese state- or privately-owned firms. As ONE President and CEO Gayle Smith affirmed at a CSIS debate, economic competition is not “an all-or-nothing proposition.”

A more effective strategy is to mitigate harmful Chinese activities and entertain limited cooperation on shared interests such as health and development. This approach is already paying some dividends: the African Development Bank (AfDB) recently canceled several Chinese projects for fraudulent practices,²² and Cote d’Ivoire has established a task force to monitor Chinese investments.²³ The United States can offer to assist with contracts or provide technical support, or even smarter, it can nudge the AfDB, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank to provide these services.²⁴ This approach would be welcomed by many African countries as well as U.S. allies in Europe, the Gulf, and East Asia, which share concerns about Chinese activities.

Finally, the U.S. government should stop resting on its laurels, pointing to decades-old programs to convince African partners that the United States is a truer friend than China. The competition with China should be a clarion call to define what the United States stands for and refresh what former Deputy National Security Advisor and senior Treasury official Juan Zarate called “static” modalities, authorities, and policies at a CSIS debate. The United States should stress its economic strengths and use the competition to spur creativity in U.S. public diplomacy and economic and security engagements.

PRIVILEGING NEW COUNTERPARTS AND ARENAS

The United States should expand its diplomatic partners and repertoire. While relations with African national governments and European allies are vital, they are insufficient in navigating the continent’s dynamic urban environments, maturing multilateral bodies, the cautious U.S. private sector, and proliferating partnerships with external governments.

- **A Pivot to Cities:** The United States should increase its investments in urban areas and strengthen its diplomatic engagement with the region’s municipal leaders. According to the World Bank, urbanization is the single most important transformation the African continent will undergo this century. Africa will have at least nine megacities—cities of more than 10 million people—by 2050, which will be a magnet for an expanding consumer class. U.S. embassies can develop closer ties to the region’s governors and mayors, while senior U.S. policymakers could welcome high-performing municipal leaders to Washington and visit African city halls to diversify U.S. partnerships and expand trade and investment. The U.S. government should add real teeth to the sister city program, pursuing the economic equivalent of the U.S. military’s state partnership program.²⁵
- **A Partner to Regional Bodies:** The U.S. government should deepen its partnerships with Africa’s multilateral institutions. These institutions are gaining authority, driving economic integration, and leading the continent’s security response, but parts of the U.S. government treat them as an afterthought. While not all of the continent’s regional bodies are equal in capacity and political will, there are opportunities to

do more with specific groupings and integrate them into the policy process. In 2006, the United States became the first non-African country to establish a mission to the AU, and it has accredited ambassadors to several Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The U.S. government should consider seconding foreign service officers to these groupings—as it does with the World Bank and other international institutions.²⁶ It could initiate information exchanges with the AU’s Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and its regional components. Finally, the United States should support more predictable funding mechanisms to strengthen and assist the most promising institutions.

- **A Play for Commercial Influence:** The United States should engage its private sector in a more honest conversation about the opportunities, challenges, and trade-offs faced by the U.S. and African private sectors. Bullish statements and banal statistics—fastest-growing economies, for example—do very little to persuade U.S. companies that remain squeamish, skeptical, or uninformed about investing in the region. It underpins why U.S. trade with the region has been stuck at around 2 percent of all U.S. foreign investment. Washington should communicate to U.S. private companies which sectors align with U.S. comparative advantage or coincide with U.S. national security goals, including in agribusiness, energy, entertainment, finance, services, and technology.²⁷ It should partner with African governments to fix the enabling environments and prioritize support for the AfCFTA agreement. It could also leverage the U.S. private sector to advance diplomatic objectives. In the past, for example, U.S. diplomats accompanied Moroccan King Mohammed IV and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie to Disneyland to strengthen U.S. ties with the region.²⁸ U.S. and international sports bodies banned South African teams from competing in tennis tournaments or participating in the Olympics to isolate the apartheid regime.²⁹
- **A Prod for Multilateralism:** The United States should ramp up its engagement with the growing number of international players in Africa. It is not enough to just partner with the French and British, especially when other countries may be more credible when it comes to strategic competition and the challenges of transnational threats. The United States should assign more “Africa watchers” to its embassies in non-European countries such as India and China, and it should establish a division of labor to leverage

different talents, experiences, and resources to address challenges in African countries. The United States, for example, could tap the Malaysians to share their deep experience on combating piracy, ask Chileans to advise on national resource management, or facilitate exchanges with the Japanese on caring for the continent's growing elderly population.

- **A Plea for Innovation:** The United States should experiment with new venues and diplomatic pairings to advance its agenda in Africa and other regions. Not only should the United States revive its 2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, but it should consider alternative formats to address core issues. For instance, it could borrow from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as the Quad) to promote a dialogue between the United States, African governments, and other external stakeholders on strategic threats.³⁰ It could pursue trilateral arrangements to deepen cooperation on shared challenges such as piracy, wildlife trafficking, and terrorism. The State Department should encourage its smaller embassies to serve as laboratories of innovation, testing new initiatives to potentially scale across the continent. For instance, the U.S. Embassy in Niger could host informal “U.N. Security Council” meetings in Niamey with the representatives of the other 14 members to mark Niger's two-year stint as a nonpermanent member.

LEVERAGING U.S. DIVERSITY AND DATA-DRIVEN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The United States has been slow to revamp its public diplomacy and communication with both African and U.S. audiences. It is no longer defensible to rely on staid statements issued via an embassy website. U.S. ambassadors have to showcase American ingenuity if they want to connect with African publics. The U.S. ambassador in Kinshasa's recent video with a Congolese hip-hop artist on hand washing exemplifies what dynamic public diplomacy could look like, but it is still a relative anomaly.³¹

There is a pressing need to overhaul the government's approach to soft power. The State Department's continuation of the Jazz Ambassador program, which once sent Louis Armstrong to Africa, reflects a stubborn refusal to engage popular music in the United States and many African countries.³² While Washington seems stuck in the past, U.S. film studios, publishing houses, and record labels are churning out African content, including *Black Panther*,

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and the 2019 *Lion King* soundtrack. U.S. movie stars and athletes, as well as hip-hop and R&B artists, could serve as formidable U.S. cultural ambassadors. They represent America's diversity and underscore the deep ties between American and African cultures.

The U.S. government also should invest in marketing and hard data in formulating its communication strategies. U.S. public affairs specialists rarely lean on focus groups or polling data to hone their message. There is little understanding of which narratives, images, and statistics resonate with African and U.S. audiences. This is a liability when crafting messages about climate change and countering violent extremism as much as it is when promoting commercial opportunities. The U.S. government should consider employing behavioral economists, advertising professionals, and pollsters to refine its approach. It could even duplicate Japan's periodic survey of some 400 Japanese-affiliated companies operating in Africa to develop a more targeted strategy to increase U.S. investment.³³

Finally, the United States must accept a new mission: to engage its foreign interlocutors in an honest and candid dialogue about its polarized politics and persistent racial inequality. U.S. diplomats need to solicit and listen to African opinions on positive and negative developments in America. The U.S. government should start with alumni of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, and Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), asking them to share their insights and feedback. In addition, U.S. national security officials should use their platforms to speak to the American people and audiences abroad about racism and injustice. It is essential to talk about these issues directly, including by facilitating exchanges between U.S. and African activists and police forces. While Africa may seem distant, the reality is that U.S. communities are very connected to the continent, often benefiting from commercial ties and enriched by African cultures and diaspora.³⁴

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U.S. OPPORTUNITIES IN THE AFRICAN CENTURY

In a recent special report, *The Economist* argued that the continent is set to play a much more important role in global affairs, the global economy, and the global imagination.³⁵ It predicted that the region will finally fulfill what Thabo Mbeki, at his 1999 inauguration as president of South Africa, saw as the start of “the African century.” The United States has a window of opportunity to elevate policies and priorities to meet this moment. In particular, it has an opening to change how it formulates, implements, and communicates its objectives. A “business-as-usual” approach sees the region in a time capsule. It misses the region’s growing influence, underappreciates new trends, and often produces unsatisfactory outcomes. The United States has to dare to think differently, pursuing its objectives with renewed purpose. It must seize this opportunity to reinvigorate its policies, broaden its partnerships, and work with African counterparts to address strategic challenges on the continent and beyond. ■

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