

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

“From Africa to the United States: Recommendations for the Biden Administration”

Keynote Address

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FEATURING:

Lazarus Chakwera,
President,
Malawi

CSIS EXPERTS:

Judd Devermont,
Director, Africa Program,
CSIS

Transcript By
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Judd Devermont: Good morning. My name is Judd Devermont and I am the director of the African Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And it is my pleasure to welcome you to today's event, "From Africa to the United States: A New Policy for the Biden Administration." This is a joint event with the Center for Democracy and Development in Nigeria, the African Center for the Study of the United States at Wits University in South Africa, and the Institute for Global Dialogue also in South Africa.

It has been a few weeks since Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States. And it is already clear that he's injecting new energy into the U.S.-Africa policy, following four years of neglect and meanspirited policies and statements. He's reversed the travel ban, reopening the United States to Eritreans, Nigerians, Somalis, Sudanese, and Tanzanians. He has rejoined the Paris climate agreement, the World Health Organization, and endorsed Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the next director-general of the World Trade Organization. During the transition President Biden talked to South African President Ramaphosa, Kenyan President Kenyatta. He recently released a video statement to the African Union. His Secretary of State Tony Blinken has talked to the AU Commissioner Chair Moussa Faki, Sudanese Prime Minister Hamdok, and South African Foreign Minister Pandor.

But of course, there's a lot more to be done. I'm really looking forward to see how African issues fit into the forthcoming summit for democracy, as well as how the Biden-Harris administration will make good on its pledges to increase engagement with the diaspora and to launch its promised urbanization initiative. I also want to see the U.S. government elevate African voices. (Dog barking.) Hold on, that's my dog. My dog is also very excited to see what President Biden's Africa policy is going to look like. I would say that U.S. Africa policy will be incomplete if it just follows the recommendations that I just made.

Over the past year, the CSIS Africa Program has shared its platform with African thought leaders, journalists, activists, and academics to discuss the state of U.S. policies and the future of U.S.-Africa relations. If you haven't seen it yet, I hope you'll check it out. We call it Africa Reacts. We've featured over 60 voices – 60 of the region's sharpest analysts to share their thoughts on the entire U.S. election process, from the Iowa Caucus to the inauguration. And I believe if we really want to build back better, if we want to develop a more constructive policy toward sub-Saharan Africa, we have to listen and learn from our colleagues on the continent.

The United States has been through a lot in the past couple of years – divisive identity politics, a racial reckoning, and an attack on our democracy. And we have a lot of work ahead of us if we want to right our ship. And the only way to really do this is if we're going to reengage with

the world we have to do it with humility. And that's what we're doing today and every day at the Africa Program.

Today I have the pleasure of being joined by some of the region's leading scholars at some of the most prestigious think tanks in Africa. Bob Wekesa is the research, partnership, and communications coordinator at the African Center for the Study of the United States at Wits University. Idayat Hassan is the director of the Center for Democracy and Development in Abuja, Nigeria. And Philani Mthembu is the executive director of the Institute for Global Dialogue, also in South Africa. We're going to listen to their recommendations for U.S. policy. They're going to share with us a couple of warnings about how to avoid some of the mistakes of the past.

But first it is my honor to introduce our keynote speaker, President Lazarus Chakwera of Malawi. President Chakwera is uniquely qualified to discuss Malawi and the broader region's challenges. The president's record as a member of parliament and opposition leader, his commitment to pursue legal means to overturn the 2019 elections, and his subsequent election victory and the first few months in office attest to his commitment to democracy.

President Chakwera's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, similarly, has been commendable. His recent statement where he warned people about spreading misconceptions of the virus and affirmed that, in quotes, "the vaccine has been assessed and it's of no harm to humans" was pitch perfect.

In addition, the president really knows the United States. He studied at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois. And maybe it's just me, but I can hear just a little bit of an American accent slipping in and out when he speaks.

So the president's taped remarks are about 20 minutes, and then we'll start the panel dialogue at about 10:25. Why don't we turn it over to President Chakwera? Thank you.

President Lazarus
Chakwera:

Mr. Judd Devermont, director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and all member of CSIS here present, members for the Center for Democracy and Development – CDD – in Nigeria here present, members of the Institute for Global Dialogue – IGD – in South Africa here present, members of the African Center for the Study of the United States – ACSUS – at Wits University in South Africa here present, distinguished delegates from around the world, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the honor you have accorded me to address you on recommendations for the Biden administration regarding the relationship between Africa and the United States. I commend the organizers of this event for embodying the spirit of partnership, multilateralism, and collaboration that the world so desperately needs to

tackle both the challenges that are unique to different jurisdictions and those that cut across them.

The Biden administration is only 23 days old today, and yet has already demonstrated a firm cognizance of the urgency of the moment it has come into. It has shown a deep grasp of the fact that it does not have the luxury of settling down before tackling the multiple crises the world collectively faces. Notwithstanding because taking on global problems is a collaborative effort, it requires a coherent and considered foreign policy and strategy, especially with its partners in the developing world.

America's strategic partnership with developing countries has never been more critical than it is now, as the world grapples with a pandemic that has infected over 100 million of its population, claimed over 2 million lives, and decimated economies, with America leading in both the number of infections and deaths. But as devastating as the pandemic is, it presents a unique opportunity for the world in general, and for America and Africa in particular, to come together and address the socioeconomic inequalities and systemic disparities that the pandemic is highlighting and exploiting.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, anything relevant to U.S.-Africa relations, it is that in more areas of mutual interest than just the pandemic we must come to terms with inescapable fact that if one sneezes the other catches a cold. For this reason, neither America nor Africa can afford to regard our – or treat the problems of the other as having no bearing on the interest or progress of the other.

As a sub-Saharan nation with one of the lowest GDPs in the world, my country, Malawi, knows all too well its interconnectedness to global players large and small, as actions elsewhere on the globe are keenly felt through the adverse and advantageous effects they have on our local context. The opposite is also true, for there are activities in our local context whose effects have a knock-on effect on America's interests in the region and beyond. The need for greater cooperation and partnership between African states and the United States at both bilateral and multilateral fora cannot, therefore, be overstated.

As the current chair of the 46-member least-developed countries – LDCs – and the incoming chair of the 16-member Southern Africa Development Community – SADC – strengthening that cooperation in many areas is a top priority for me. The COVID-19 pandemic is only the latest area in which the interconnectedness between nations has failed. Since Africa and America both entered the pandemic storm in the first quarter of 2020 through COVID-19 cases brought home from abroad, it is important that multilateral cooperation needed to defeat the pandemic is the same that is needed to defeat other equally potent global threats.

In coming to terms with this reality, it serves no purpose for any U.S. administration to dwell on where a global crisis like COVID-19 starts from or where it ends because that kind of preoccupation only delays and derails our coming together to solve a problem that threatens all of us. Besides, we now know that any continent in the world can be a source of new strains of the virus for the rest of the world to conceive solutions for. So strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a Chinese virus or a South African strain of the same. All we have is a deadly virus that has entered the human population, that kills indiscriminately, and that must be confronted by all of us working together.

It is this understanding of the urgent need for global collaboration in solving global problems that is the Biden administration's strongest asset. It is an understanding that President Biden himself showed himself to have months before he took office. For example, on the 11th of July 2019, then-candidate Biden addressed an audience at the graduate center of the City University of New York on his intended approach to foreign policy. It was a comprehensive address on his vision for America's role of fostering collaboration in the global community – a vision that demonstrated his sensitivity to the interconnectedness of all nations, no doubt drawn from his many years as chair of the Foreign Relations Committee in the U.S. Senate.

As I recall, it was on that day that President Biden said, quote, “the fates of nations are more intertwined than they have ever been,” end of quote, and called for greater cooperation in confronting climate change, international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, cyberwarfare, disruptive technologies, and mass migration. Although his list of global problems requiring global cooperation did not include the pandemic, for the obvious reason that the pandemic had not yet started, it is clear that COVID-19 is now as much a top priority for the Biden administration as it is for African states.

One indication of this is President Biden's first foreign policy address, delivered at the State Department in Washington, D.C., only eight days ago. On that occasion, the U.S. president stated in no uncertain terms that his administration was, quote, “going to rebuild our alliances,” end of quote, in order to more effectively deal with, quote, “the pandemic, global warming, standing up for democracy and human rights around the world,” end of quote. In fact, it is refreshing to see that President Biden has already begun this work of rebuilding America's alliances, with Africa in particular.

Last weekend, ahead of my first attendance of the Ordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Government at the African Union I was pleased to see President Biden addressing us directly as African leaders to send us the best wishes of the United States because, as he put it, quote, “our fates are bound together,” end of quote. This renewal of America's solidary and pursuit of partnership with Africa is a welcome development. But it is a currency that must be spent wisely by both the Biden administration and

Africa in order to achieve common goals, including the president's stated goal of a U.S. foreign policy that is, quote, "purposeful and inspiring," end of quote.

As a new entrant into the global community of national leaders, having been sworn in as Malawi's president only seven months ago, it is my humble submission that the Biden administration's partnership with Africa, at both bilateral and multilateral levels, would be best spent on four areas of mutual interest. I will summarize them presently for purposes of generating discussion here, with the hope that where we achieve consensus the implications thereof will contribute to the development and improvement of U.S.-Africa relations beyond this event.

The first area where U.S.-Africa collaboration must be strengthened is in the area of national sovereignty. The Biden administration is in a unique position to leverage its influence at multilateral fora and institutions to ensure that the sovereignty of African states is respected and defended as much as developed nations desire African states to respect theirs. This will have the effect of making African states feel that their voices at the global community carry weight, which will in turn foster the kind of cooperation that is truly mutual and equal.

Strengthening the weight of developing countries' voices in institutions like the United Nations Security Council, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, is one way of recognizing the sovereignty of all countries and leveraging it to foster cooperation among them. This policy of treating any countries as children, to be forever regulated and sustained by external forces, has no place in the 21st century, for it encourages the childish tendencies of those nations to be employed and perpetuated as attention-seeking mechanism.

The second area where U.S.-Africa relations must be strengthened is the area of security. The threats against the security of all nations on all of us as a species are several, the most serious of which are pandemics, nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, and climate change. I therefore applaud the Biden administration for its decision to rejoin the Paris climate agreement, to renew the Strategic Arm Reduction Treaty, START, with Russia, and to refresh its support of the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control.

The third area where U.S.-Africa relations must be strengthened is in the area of prosperity. Abject poverty in developing countries is a cancer that the Biden administration must work with Africa to excise, for it fuels some of the problems that land on the doorstep of developed countries – such as illegal immigration. When President Biden said in 2019 that his administration would, quote, "ensure that the rules of international economy are not rigged against us," end of quote, he was right. But this

must go further, to ensure that those rules are not also rigged against Africa.

And Africa, that is rich in natural resources and entrepreneurial spirit but unable to create prosperity for its people due to unfair trade rules that focus on pitting Western giants against the Eastern giants at the expense of the global south, is an Africa that is forced to run towards prosperity on quicksand in a world where others run on solid ground. I'm therefore hopeful that the Biden administration will fully support the African Continental Free Trade Area, AfCFTA, and ease the movement of businesspersons between the U.S. and Africa to leverage the economic might of investors and the African diaspora for the socioeconomic development of Africa.

The fourth area where U.S.-Africa relations must be strengthened is in the area of liberty. This means strengthening human rights watchdogs and institutions, as well as giving greater economic support to the countries that uphold the rule of law, fight corruption, and respect democratic values and institutions. A country like Malawi – recognized by The Economist magazine as the country of the year 2020 for successfully overturning a fraudulent election and holding a credible, fresh election and peaceful transition of power without help from international observers; a country recognized by Chatham House for having a strong and independent judiciary that upholds the rule of law; and a country recognized by Freedom House as the only country in the world in which democracy has thrived amidst pandemic conditions is an example of the kind of partner the Biden administration can work with in strengthening liberty on the continent.

For this reason, I am keen to see Africa make the most of the global summit for democracy that President Biden has promised to host in his first year of office. By focusing on strengthening collaboration between America and Africa in these areas, I predict that it will be one of the lasting legacies of the Biden administration to have helped Africans turn their continent from an object of global charity to a place of global opportunity.

The Biden administration should make it its goal to help this dream that beats in the chest of all Africans come true, for a developed Africa is a catalyst for global security and prosperity. After all, if Africa has enriched the world while its peoples are poor, how much more will it enrich the world when its peoples prosper? I, for one, think that such a world comes not a moment too soon.

Thank you.

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