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Issue Brief

Hits and Misses of United States' Africa Policy under Biden

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S*ummary*

Successive US governments have devoted insufficient attention and resources to the African continent. Three key challenges vis-à-vis US engagement towards Africa relate to sustaining the diplomatic momentum, renewing of the AGOA and declining US military presence at a time of rising Islamist threat and growing Russian and Chinese influence.

On 30 July 2024, United States Deputy Secretary of State Kurt M. Campbell told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the US needed “to do more” to contest Chinese actions in Africa, including their forward basing strategy and desire for Africa’s lucrative rare earths that are critical to augment industrial and technological capabilities.¹ However, questions remain on what “outcompeting” with China in Africa actually means and what it entails.

Despite coming out with a strategy for US engagement towards sub-Saharan Africa, President Joe Biden’s administration has found it difficult to strike a balance between its interests-based and values-based foreign policy in Africa. Judging by the recent events in the Sahel, it is amply clear that America’s standing in Africa has taken a severe knock. Washington’s ‘military first’ approach to conflict resolution and decades of security assistance through training and capacity-building measures have failed to curb the spread of extremism in Africa, particularly in West Africa.²

US Engagement with Africa: From Carter to Trump

Washington’s policies on the continent have always lacked clear objectives and have been largely reactionary. They have tended to vacillate between exploitation, benign neglect and half-hearted efforts at democratisation and humanitarian assistance. US’ engagement with Africa from 1947 to the mid-1970s can be termed as episodic. It was only under President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) that Africa began to receive attention.³ He became the first President to visit sub-Saharan Africa in 1978.

Following the end of the Cold War in 1991, US efforts in Africa pivoted towards the promotion of democracy and conflict resolution. However, US’ humanitarian intervention in Somalia failed whereas it did not intervene in Rwanda. This meant that the US did not get proactively involved in Africa’s civil wars. After President Carter, it was President Bill Clinton who visited countries such as Ghana, Senegal, Botswana and Uganda in 1998. Under the 2000 ‘African Growth and Opportunity Act’ (AGOA), eligible African countries were provided with duty-free access to the US market.

Post the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the calculus of Africa’s strategic significance *vis-à-vis* the United States changed. The continent emerged as a major front in America’s ‘global war on terrorism’. In addition, Africa became an important theatre for strategic competition for influence and resources. In 2002, the US established Camp

¹ Patricia Zengerle, Michael Martina and David Brunnstorm, [“US Must Do More to Counter China’s Actions, No. 2 Diplomat Says”](#), *Reuters*, 30 July 2024.

² Eric Schmitt and Ruth Maclean, [“U.S. Confronts Failures as Terrorism Spreads in West Africa”](#), *The New York Times*, 7 June 2024.

³ John J. Stremmlau, [“Jimmy Carter: The American President Whose Commitment to Africa Went Beyond His Term”](#), *The Conversation*, 27 February 2023.

Lemonnier in Djibouti as a permanent military base and soon after established the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007.

During President George Bush’s administration, support for humanitarian aid increased as evidenced by the ‘Emergency Plan for AIDS relief’ programme. Much of the new aid commitments went to sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel region instead of North Africa, which usually was the case during the Cold War period. However, due to preoccupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, American direct intervention in Africa’s conflicts remained limited.

President Barack Obama’s election in 2009 raised expectations of him moving beyond his predecessors’ legacies and modernise US–Africa relations. However, his term was characterised by depleting levels of aid and attention to the continent.⁴ His administration instead chose to make Asia a strategic priority for the US under the ‘Pivot to Asia’ that was announced in November 2011. During his tenure, Africa received foreign aid anywhere between US\$ 7 billion and US\$ 8 billion.⁵ Although US military presence in Africa continued to grow with more troops, advisors and military bases, it did not result in curbing the spread of violent extremism across the continent. There was a mismatch between deepening military engagement and Washington’s limited investments in diplomacy and development.

Under President Donald Trump, competing head-to-head with geopolitical rivals like China and Russia became the focal point of his administration’s Africa strategy. He launched a new initiative called ‘Prosper Africa’ in December 2018 which primarily aimed at competing with perceived growing Chinese and Russian influence in Africa. He infamously referred to Africa as “shit-hole countries” which marked a low point for US–Africa relations.⁶

In terms of economic policies, greater emphasis was given to open African markets for US goods and services. On trade issues, he preferred to deal with African countries bilaterally rather than engaging in multilateral formats. Countries such as Rwanda were suspended from duty-free access to the US markets after it imposed “duties on imports of second-hand clothes”.⁷ In 2017, Trump introduced the controversial ‘Muslim travel ban’ bill under which many African nationals of Muslim-majority countries were unable to enter the US.⁸ As the US began to steadily lose its standing on the continent, Africa’s sources for foreign direct investment and trade

⁴ Nicolas van de Walle, [“Obama and Africa: Lots of Hope, Not Much Change”](#), *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5, October 2015.

⁵ Tomas F. Husted, Alexis Arieff, Lauren Blanchard and Nicolas Cook, [“U.S. Assistance for Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview”](#), Congressional Research Service Report, R46368, 7 November 2023.

⁶ [“Trump Referred to Haiti and African Nations as ‘Shithole’ Countries”](#), *NBC News*, 12 January 2018.

⁷ Allan Olingo, [“Tanzania, Uganda Survive as Rwanda is Removed from AGOA Beneficiaries List”](#), Trade and Law Centre (TRALAC), 3 April 2018.

⁸ Jason Burke, [“Trump’s Travel Ban Extension Leaves Africans Angry and Disappointed”](#), *The Guardian*, 6 February 2020.

began to diversify with countries such as China, India, Japan, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates and Brazil becoming more active on the continent.

Biden Administrations Africa Policy

Before Biden assumed office, there was bipartisan consensus in the American foreign policy establishment on the US need to “recalibrate, reimagine and chart a foreign policy course that aligned with the aspirations, values, and development priorities of the African public and elite”.⁹ Consequently, upon coming to office, President Biden “sought to give a new tone to Africa policy by replacing Trump’s transactional ‘America First’ diplomacy with the promise of ‘mutually respectful’ relations”.¹⁰ One of Biden’s first task was to remove Trump’s Muslim travel ban. In May 2022, he authorised hundreds of special operation forces to redeploy in Somalia.

Under his tenure, various programmes have been initiated like the ‘President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief’ (PEPFAR), ‘Power Africa’, and the ‘Millennium Challenge Corporation’ (MCC). The US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) was created to extend a loan of US\$ 250 million to the African Finance Corporation (AFC), which is responsible for spearheading the second phase of the Lobito Corridor—a proposed 1,300 km railway link which is touted to connect the Angolan port of Lobito with the city of Kolwezi in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and north-western Zambia.¹¹

The year 2022 was a significant year in the journey of US–Africa relations. In August 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken launched the new US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa which identified four strategic objectives for Washington’s engagement in Africa. They centered around

promoting fair and open societies; advancing democratic efforts and tackling security challenges; supporting a robust Covid-19 pandemic recovery; and encouraging climate adaption and green energy transitions.¹²

The strategy encouraged engagement with African actors on a more equal footing grounded on consultative dialogue and promoted US private sector engagement in Africa.

Additionally, following a gap of eight years, the US Africa Leaders’ Summit was held in Washington in December 2022 during which investment of US\$ 55 billion over the

⁹ Abhishek Mishra, “[Aspirations of the Diaspora-Biden on Africa](#)”, Observer Research Foundation, 10 November 2020.

¹⁰ John J. China and Haleigh Bartos, “[Rethinking U.S. Africa Policy Amid Changing Geopolitical Realities](#)”, The Strategist, *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Spring 2024.

¹¹ “[DFC Announces New U.S. Financing for Africa’s Lobito Corridor](#)”, U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, Media Release, 8 February 2024.

¹² “[U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa](#)”, The White House, Washington, August 2022.

next three years in Africa were committed.¹³ Other initiatives like the 21st Century Partnership for African Security, a Presidential Advisory Council on African Diaspora engagement, American support for African Union’s permanent membership to the G20, First Regional Multi Sectoral Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compacts, Digital Transformation with Africa and Space collaboration with Nigeria and Rwanda under the Artemis Accords, were announced.

Challenges Facing Biden’s Africa Policy

While America’s new Africa policy struck the right notes on paper for the most part, questions remained on whether US policies were able to match the developmental priorities of a continent that is increasingly young, connected and urban. Parallely, various challenges emerged within the continent during this period such as military interventions, complex electoral transitions in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, fragile peace agreement in Ethiopia and the humanitarian crisis in the DRC, to name a few. These developments complicated the task of US policy-makers to find a balance between implementing US’ long-term strategic framework and the immediate and structural challenges. Three primary challenges *vis-à-vis* US Africa policy are discernable.

Sustaining Diplomatic Momentum

Immediately following the US–Africa Leaders’ Summit, there was an uptick in high-level US officials visiting the continent. In 2023, 17 cabinet leaders visited 26 African countries.¹⁴ Vice President Kamala Harris visited Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia in March 2023 followed by First Lady Jill Biden’s visit to Namibia and Kenya. However, President Biden has so far failed to deliver on his promise to visit the continent despite underscoring Africa’s importance on global issues. On the contrary, Chinese foreign ministers have made Africa the first stop of their annual overseas travel for 33 consecutive years. Even the US–Africa Leaders’ Summit which was hosted in December 2022 came after a long hiatus of eight years.

This points to the need for US policy-makers to institutionalise its engagement with African leaders. Countries like Japan, China and even the European Union (EU) regularly engages with Africa through summits. It does not augur well for US’ influence on the continent to be the only major power to exhibit such haphazard engagement at this level. Therefore, if President Biden’s commitment that the US is “all in” on Africa’s future is to hold ground, then the US should begin by institutionalising the US–Africa Leaders’ Summit and address the issue of chronic shortages of staff at US missions in Africa.

¹³ [“2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders’ Summit Overview”](#), U.S. Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, December 2022.

¹⁴ [“Fact Sheet: Accelerating the U.S.-Africa Partnership After the 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders’ Summit”](#), The White House, 13 December 2023.

Renew and Modernise the AGOA

The Africa Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), U.S.’ flagship economic initiative which provides tariff-free imports from eligible African countries, is set to expire in September 2025. Despite American companies doing business in Africa advocating for an early renewal of AGOA, the Congress has not acted yet. Under AGOA, some countries have benefitted more than others.¹⁵ For example, Kenya’s apparel-dominated exports to the US have grown, Mauritius has exported chocolate and basket-weaving material, Lesotho has exported apparels, Mali has exported buckwheat and musical instruments, Mozambique has exported sugar, nuts and tobacco. Yet, some Central and West African countries have not utilised AGOA’s benefits owing to their weakness in governance, infrastructure and global market integration.

The provisions of ‘graduation’ and ‘eligibility’ within the AGOA presents major challenges.¹⁶ Graduation essentially implies a country is out of the programme when it reaches ‘high income’ states as defined by the World Bank. However, there have been many instances where a country is graduated, only to see its Gross National Income (GNI) drop below the threshold, which allows it to rejoin. Eligibility refers to the non-economic requirements such as respect for human rights, protecting workers’ rights, combatting corruption, reducing poverty, among others. Ethiopia has been removed on the grounds of human rights whereas there are calls to remove South Africa for its support for Russian invasion of Ukraine. African nations prefer a longer period of review for graduation and easing of non-economic requirements. AGOA remains an important component of US soft power, and it is in Washington’s interest to act fast on the task of renewing the AGOA.

Faltering Military Strategy

The unfolding events in the Sahel region over the past few years point to a hard reality—America’s standing in Africa is declining rapidly. President Biden’s administration has found it difficult to implement any coherent strategy in order to promote democracy, counter violent extremism, and compete with China and Russia.¹⁷ The US has regularly failed to stop the spread of coups stretching from Guinea in the west to Sudan in the east, all now run by military men.

On 5 August 2024, the US military withdrew from its base near Agadez, Niger. This marked the end of a security relationship that has lasted for over two decades.¹⁸ The

¹⁵ Bedassa Tadesse, [**“US-Africa Trade Deal Turns 25 Next Year: Agoa’s Winners, Losers and What Should Come Next”**](#), *The Conversation*, 6 May 2024.

¹⁶ William Alan Reinsch, [**“What’s AGOA-ing On”**](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies, 5 August 2024.

¹⁷ John J. China and Haleigh Bartos, [**“Rethinking U.S. Africa Policy Amid Changing Geopolitical Realities”**](#), no. 10.

¹⁸ Rachel Chason, [**“How the U.S. Military Cultivated – and then lost – a Key African Ally”**](#), *The Washington Post*, 5 August 2024.

nine-square-mile Air Base 201 which was opened in 2019 was vital for conducting counterterrorism operations and tracking the movements of extremists in North and Western Africa. At the peak of the US mission, there were 1,110 service members split between bases in Niamey and outside Agadez.

However, in July 2023, Niger’s military officers seized power in a coup d’etat by ousting the democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum. Within weeks, they asked the French troops to leave whereas the US began negotiating with the junta.¹⁹ Months of fruitless negotiations did not result in any breakthrough. Subsequently, the final tranche of service members flew out from Air Base 201 after American officials signed paperwork and turned over the base to Nigerien officials. The development marks a strategic defeat for the US, at a moment when the Islamist extremist threat in Sahel is growing and Russia’s influence is rising.

Conclusion

For the most part, US engagement with Africa was not prioritised in Washington with successive governments devoting insufficient attention and resources. Despite trying to give a new tone and tenor to US approach towards the continent, President Biden’s administration has found it difficult to navigate persistent tensions between an interests-based (countering violent extremism and competing with geopolitical rivals) and values-based (promoting democratic norms) foreign policy.

Although it is important not to exaggerate Russian influence on the continent, it is China which has emerged as the US’ main geopolitical rival by becoming Africa’s largest trade partner and lender of development finance. Some reports even indicate Beijing’s desire to establish a military naval base on Africa’s Atlantic coast with countries such as Gabon and Equatorial Guinea emerging as potential contenders.²⁰ Despite US rhetoric on outcompeting China in Africa, it continues to remain unclear on what countering China actually means, entails or how is it defined by US policy-makers.

As the 5 November 2024 US general elections race enters the home stretch, all eyes are on how a Trump 2.0 or Kamala Harris’ administration will engage with Africa. If Trump returns, it could possibly result in stricter migration policies for Africans. The global multilateral system, on which African countries are disproportionately dependent on for sharing their voices, could further get weakened. Africa could then slip further down the list of Washington’s foreign policy priorities.

¹⁹ Haley Britzky and Katie Bo Lillis, [“US Hopes to Maintain Some Forces in Niger as Talks on Withdrawal Continue, Officials Say”](#), Cable News Network, 10 May 2024.

²⁰ David Vergun, [“General Says China is Seeking a Naval Base in West Africa”](#), U.S. Department of Defense, 17 March 2022.

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