



Forum for American Leadership

Building a New U.S. Partnership with Africa

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Africa will be home to more people than India and China combined and one quarter of the world's population by 2050. Many of the fastest growing economies in the world are African, and by 2021, half the countries in the region [were](#) middle-income countries (MICs). Thirty percent of strategic and other minerals that are instrumental for twenty-first century technologies, such as semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries, and aerospace and defense instruments, are abundantly or nearly exclusively available in Africa. Africa is consequential now and will be even more so for the remainder of the twenty-first century. The United States' economic growth and national security are two of many vital interests that are increasingly bound to Africa. And with a young and ambitious population growing at unparalleled rates, maximizing African security and potential should be a key twenty-first century American interest.

None of our national interests can be advanced through the past or current approaches to the vast and varied continent, the status quo representing continued opportunity for China to assert its interests at the expense of ours—and Africans'. The United States must reinvigorate its partnerships with African countries and the African Union through a strategy that is centered on the advancement of private sector-driven economic growth, leverages new technologies, and speaks to Africans' democratic aspirations. The United States must be seen as Africa's partner of choice by Africans. Success requires recognition of Africa's inherent importance, not simply a recognition that its importance has not been lost on Beijing.

The Biden administration's recently released [Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa](#) is a prompt for Republicans to consider what is actually required of U.S. policy. While the publication of the strategy is a positive signal of renewed focus on the continent, the Forum for American Leadership [Africa](#) Working Group believes the United States must pursue a more ambitious plan for our engagement in Africa. Overall, our approach must prioritize economic growth and create deeper trade and investment links. In the medium term, the U.S. should approach Africa the same as we approach ASEAN or India, where we see shared opportunity and interests.

Reviewing the Biden Administration's U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa

For at least 30 years, each U.S. administration has sought to deepen our partnership with Africa, moving from seeing Africa as a continent to "assist" and closer towards seeing Africa as a strategic partner. To achieve this goal, every administration since the Clinton administration has put forward new initiatives around aid and trade. The strategy recently released by the Biden administration is heavy on detail as it seeks to answer the following question: "How can the U.S. engage in Africa effectively in a world with many other competing priorities for the administration and a limited appetite to spend much or any political capital on Africa?" The Biden administration deserves credit for putting forward a strategy that addresses important issues such as pandemic recovery and the challenges of greater urbanization. The administration should also be credited with hosting an African Leaders Summit in DC later in 2022.

However, the strategy is long on description and aspiration but short on new, big ideas and specific actions, and it makes clear that the administration will do little to advance economic growth through trade. It is a "status quo strategy." China's influence on the continent appears to be purposefully downplayed instead of

recognizing that influence as problematic for the U.S. and for Africans. Great Power competition will not play out in Beijing and Moscow but, rather, will play out in Bamako and Maputo, and the U.S. must approach Africa as a place of great strategic importance.

The Biden administration's Africa Strategy works within some self-imposed constraints. First, the current administration has no appetite to offer something new of consequence for Africa that depends on additional foreign assistance or reprioritization of existing assistance. Second, the administration will not offer anything to drive growth of trade other than following through on an inherited Kenya trade partnership from the Trump administration. And third, the Biden administration has no plans to think differently about other tools in the U.S. toolkit that could be leveraged in Africa, such as increasing the number of commercial officers in U.S. embassies throughout the continent or leveraging the innovation potential of the U.S. private sector.

The United States could and should do better. Many professionals had high hopes that the Biden strategy would look something like President Obama's [Power Africa](#) or President Bush's [PEPFAR](#), especially given that this administration engaged broadly here and on the continent while crafting the strategy. Instead, the strategy seeks to cover vast ground rhetorically while ensuring that no perceived political constituency is disappointed, resulting in a document that does not communicate a new vision nor real challenges to the status quo.

What Sort of Africa is Possible?

The U.S. is a supporting actor in Africa, not the central actor. Africans are the central actors. The United States' long-term goal should be to help Africa be a prosperous, democratic, and peaceful continent where Africans seek to make their futures, and where African countries are net contributors to global peace and solving global challenges. To achieve this vision, the U.S. must be seen as the partner of choice, especially compared to China. The U.S. should seek to be Africa's "first phone call" on all things trade, development, security, and diplomacy.

Instead, our interests and influence as currently enshrined are far less than what is possible. While the United States has been the largest bilateral aid partner on the continent for 20 years, China has risen to number one trading partner for [over 25](#) African countries and is the second largest trading partner for a number of others. Clearly, if we do not put forward a better offer, Africa has other options.

And, crucially, U.S. companies are perceived as largely absent across Africa. Some of this perception stems from Africa's generally negative (and very distorted) media coverage in U.S. and Western media. Other hesitations come from *Foreign Corrupt Practices Act* concerns and due to a basic ignorance on the part of U.S. corporations. The U.S. Government has significant, untapped resources and capabilities to help enable more U.S. business activity on the African continent—should doing so be a priority.

Enormous human potential and opportunities for the private sector exist across the continent. [Over 300 million](#) people belong to the middle class in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is over one-third of the population. The region has a projected urbanization rate of [75 percent](#) by 2050, and [46 percent](#) of people, or nearly 500 million Africans, use cell phones to participate in the economy.

Current Impediments to a Thriving Relationship

We have some work to do. Sadly, many African nations have taken the opposite side of the United States on essential international issues. For instance, on the March 2, 2022 UN General Assembly resolution that deplored "in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine," African

countries were divided in their votes. Of the 54 African countries represented at the UN, only [28 African countries](#), just over 51 percent, voted in favor of the resolution. Meanwhile, over 81 percent of non-African countries voted for the resolution. Seventeen African countries voted to abstain, and eight did not submit a vote. Eritrea joined Belarus, Russia, North Korea, and Syria in voting against the measure.

This shameful record cannot be laid at the feet of Africans alone. The U.S. has treated these individual countries as a confusing collection of low-value relationships, which in turn invites low value on their part and the feeling that they can take a bad vote with no consequences. The United States has never fought for African votes like we meant it, creating enough of a shared value between African countries and the United States to make being on the wrong side consequential. To successfully demand more of Africa, we must have more at stake between us and them. Foreign assistance is a poor lever but shared economic and strategic interests are strong levers. Where China might demand tribute, the United States should instead offer partnership and shared responsibility.

Another challenge to the U.S.-African partnership are conflicts, political instability, and the movement and displacement of large numbers of people across the continent. Thanks to chronic misgovernance and lack of economic opportunity, the Sahel region currently faces an [unprecedented humanitarian crisis](#) due to largely jihadist-driven armed conflict underwritten by global terror networks, and the displacement of millions of people in parts of Mali, Niger, and the areas around Lake Chad and Burkina Faso. [Numerous countries](#) around the Horn of Africa continue to face internal conflict, political instability, and humanitarian crises, and instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo mirrors that of Sudan and South Sudan twenty years ago.

These kinds of crises have contributed to a perception of Africa as a “basket case,” with no national interest at stake in its perceived social and political failures. Africa has been viewed as a strategic backwater, inconsequential until such time as it is host to a rival or enemy—be it the Soviet Union and Cuba during the Cold War or today’s assertion of economic power by China. But in fact, mitigating these conflict-driven emergencies and instabilities is very much in our national interest, even when seemingly unconnected to geopolitics. Instability provides purchase for transnational threats to Americans and Africans alike, including generating violent extremism and uncontrolled mass migration. Humanitarian crises take enormous human and economic tolls that extend far into the future through lost potential. These challenges necessitate a bipartisan consensus on U.S. policy, but these challenges cannot define a region with 54 countries and a billion people. Addressing instability, poor governance, and transnational threats is integral to every other aspect of an effective U.S.-Africa policy.

Time for a Bolder Vision for U.S. Africa Policy

The United States should be the major partner in ensuring that all African countries achieve at least \$15,000 GDP per capita in 30 years’ time, working with African business leaders and change agents to diversify African economies, assist African growth, and strengthen democratic institutions. We should hope for the day when hundreds of thousands of Americans move to Africa not only to work in the Peace Corps but also to start businesses and build their fortunes in partnership with Africans.

The Forum for American Leadership Africa Working Group proposes the following as some initial ideas for a bolder Africa policy centered around the key strategic objectives of economic growth and prosperity, self-reliance and flourishing, and the United States enshrined as partner of choice for Africa.

1. Economic Growth

- ***Commit to Closing the Digital Divide in Africa.*** The words blockchain, crypto, digital currencies, and “smart contracts” do not appear at all in the Biden strategy. There is an immense bipartisan opportunity to focus on future rather than past tech across the continent. Either Huawei, ZTE, and AliPay will dominate the digital sphere in Africa, or some other consortium will offer an alternative. The U.S., African partners, other free nations, and the private sector need to work together quickly and intentionally to create this alternative. This will require a universe of partnerships to create an alternative digital ecosystem across Africa.
- ***Develop a New Continent-Wide Trade Initiative.*** A robust trade initiative with Sub-Saharan African countries presents the best opportunity to counter China and deepen our trade and investment ties for mutual benefit. The Biden administration is clearly ignoring this other than following through on its Kenya trade initiative. The *Africa Growth and Opportunity Act* (AGOA) must be reauthorized by Congress next year, providing an opening for bold and meaningful changes to U.S. policy to drive economic growth in Africa. Congress should push for deeper trade ties not only through AGOA but also through new, deeper forms of trade partnership.
- ***Leverage a Whole of Government Approach to Engage U.S. Business with African Markets.*** Outside the extractive industries, American businesses are surprisingly absent from Africa. The U.S. Government has tremendous tools to bring to bear—DFC, USTDA, and USAID—to rally U.S. businesses to explore opportunities on the continent. This effort would include market feasibility studies from USTDA, financing from U.S. DFC, and integrating U.S.-created innovations into our extensive international assistance programs. Prosper Africa’s tool to assist U.S. businesses to export to African markets is a step forward that the U.S. Government should seek to build upon, but engagement across all departments and agencies has been both a failure of vision and a failure of scale and thoughtfulness given what Washington is capable of. Even with a whole of government approach, U.S. companies may not always be the most competitive given market realities, but this strategy should aim to narrow the competitive gap, when possible.

2. Self-Reliance

- ***Model of Success.*** The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), launched by President Bush in 2003, has profoundly and positively changed perceptions of the United States as well as perceptions of what is possible through partnership. Ensuring PEPFAR’s continued success in building country-ownership will continue to have positive effects well beyond public health. But PEPFAR’s effect on U.S.-African relations came not simply from the fact that it addressed an existential health threat, or that it was the first commitment globally of resources that matched the problem, but also the boldness and the truly exceptional American approach that compelled other countries to follow our lead. PEPFAR demonstrates what Africans know to be true about the U.S. and our exceptional role in the world—should we choose to lead. This American boldness and ingenuity should be duplicated in security, agriculture, manufacturing, or any number of other areas of high priority and great potential for shared benefit.
- ***Maximize the Human Potential of Africa.*** Africa has the youngest population in the world, and with 70 percent of Sub-Saharan Africans under the age of 30, there is enormous untapped human potential across the continent. Any future president should build out an ambitious agenda in Africa,

potentially focused on higher education and critical institutes of technology, energy security, and greater overall security cooperation, that both furthers U.S. interests and unleashes the young continent's potential in a way that only U.S. engagement and cooperation can. This includes consistent support for Africans' overwhelming aspiration for democratic self-governance. Maximizing Africa's human capital requires U.S. foreign assistance to support responsive, transparent, and accountable governance that deters corruption, serves citizens, and supports property rights and rule of law to enable broad-based development.

- ***Secure Energy Independence for Africa.*** Building on the more forward-leaning and private sector-engaging programs like Power Africa and Prosper Africa, the United States should assist Africa with gaining energy security in the short term and energy independence in the long term. This independence must be secured in partnership with U.S. and allied corporations and African governments. Catering to domestic constituencies, the Biden strategy refers to energy transitions in line with African countries' social and economic objectives, but so much of what Africans want and need is not energy transitions but energy security. This is an unrivaled opportunity for the United States to partner with the private sector and African governments to secure this priority for Africans and show that U.S. partnership can deliver results in strategic sectors.

3. **Africa's Partner of Choice**

- ***Reform U.S. Diplomatic Presence on the Continent.*** Currently, African countries have the longest wait times for U.S. student and tourist visas, U.S. embassies across the continent have staffing challenges, and too many U.S. ambassadorships are empty or held by ambassadors who have never been to nor served in the African country where they are sent. Staffing shortages and bureaucratic impediments are unambiguous messages of low value we send to Africans. The U.S. must prioritize the diplomatic, economic, and national security necessity of ease of interaction and travel between and among the U.S. and allies in Africa. The Foreign Service must ensure that Africa is seen as an avenue for career advancement rather than a backwater post, providing a level of diplomatic seriousness that speaks to that importance.
- ***Ally with the People of Africa, Not Just Their Leaders.*** According to [Afrobarometer](#), Africans overwhelmingly believe democracy is the best form of government; substantial majorities reject authoritarian alternatives including military rule (75%), one-party rule (77%), and one-person rule (82%). U.S. support for African autocrats too often alienates the United States from African citizens who do not want to live under corrupt, one-party rule. Supporting free and fair elections, vibrant civil societies, and independent media, as well as empowering young Africans to find their political voice and participate in their nations' politics, would tie the United States to Africa's emerging democratic majority, including a rising generation of young leaders who reject the old strongman model and aspire to live in open societies.
- ***Maximize the African Leaders Summit.*** President Biden deserves credit for convening an African Leaders Summit (scheduled to be held in December 2022). To ensure the Summit is fully successful, and since the President seemingly does not plan to visit Africa during this term, he should receive every head of state in attendance bilaterally for a short meeting in order to foster personal relationships and create communication channels. The next Summit date should be proposed at this year's convening, and President Biden should commit U.S. support for holding it in Africa so leaders leave knowing that the United States earnestly seeks to create deeper,

dependable ties with countries across the continent. Likewise, Republicans should work with Democrats in Congress to also officially host African heads of state during the Summit, communicating that our government supports the growth of U.S.-African relationships in full.

This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership's [Africa](#) Working Group.

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