



President Biden's Africa Policy

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In February, Joe Biden delivered his first speech to an international forum as US president. His message reaffirmed a longstanding commitment to multilateralism, diplomacy, and dignity. While Biden's rhetoric may have been predictable—a first step towards rebuilding America's global reputation—his audience was less so. Rather than start with traditional US allies or significant global powers, Biden chose to make this first address to the African Union (AU) Summit. This symbolic gesture may signal a long-overdue shift in American foreign policy towards Africa.

Whether or not Biden's timing was serendipitous, increased focus on Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) policy would present a distinct opportunity for his administration to advance his foreign policy goals—which centre on democracy, human rights, and mutual prosperity—and prove America's commitment to a new, more balanced global leadership role.

With average GDP growth of around 3.5 percent over the past decade and a middle class expanding by the millions each year, African countries can be valuable economic partners to the US while also benefitting from our trade and investment. Though facing widespread democratic backsliding, SSA's young and growing population is eager for more open government. This presents enormous potential for progress on democracy building, a key Biden priority. African countries are also critical partners in the global fight against climate change and security issues. Collaboration on these shared priorities will not only yield progress, but build strong relationships.

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Despite the ever-increasing importance of the African continent to America's strategic interests, America's engagement in SSA has been largely stagnant for the past two decades. Infrequent wins such as the Bush administration's PEPFAR initiative and the Obama administration's Ebola response have been overshadowed by declining trade and investment, diplomatic retreat, cruel immigration policies, and odorous rhetoric. Since 2010, US trade with Africa has decreased by more than 50 percent, and US presidents have made just two visits to the continent.

America's disengagement has not gone unnoticed. Africans are well-aware and take umbrage at US neglect and disrespect. Meanwhile, America's rivals have taken advantage of openings to expand influence. China is now the continent's largest trading partner, has put nearly \$2 trillion towards investments and construction projects since 2005, and has taken dominant control over vast deposits of rare earth minerals essential to manufacturing electric vehicles and modern defence technologies. Russia has signed new military cooperation agreements with seventeen African countries since 2015 and is building six new military bases on the continent.

To bolster these efforts, China has mobilized a vast diplomatic effort, with over 80 visits to Africa by high-level authorities in the past decade, including visits to eight countries by Xi Jinping. The Chinese premier and Vladimir Putin both host African leaders at lavish annual summits. America's historic diplomatic decline, meanwhile, has been particularly harsh in Africa. State Department capacity has been decimated, and the Trump administration failed to send a senior diplomat to our landmark 2019 US-Africa Business Summit.

President Biden appears rightfully prepared to engage with SSA as he looks to make his mark on American foreign policy. The new administration's approach in SSA should reflect Biden's values and be grounded in mutual respect, genuine partnership, and an effort to build multilateral strength, particularly through African organisations. To truly succeed,

however, American policy will need to back up rhetorical values with a well-crafted, forward-thinking policy grounded in a nuanced understanding of the diverse realities and opportunities across SSA's 46 countries, and how they are interwoven through complex regional dynamics.

The following sections consider such dynamics across SSA, highlighting prominent issues and opportunities in each region, and giving recommendations for how American policy can effectively meet them. Together, these analyses propose a holistic vision for US-Africa relations in a new era.

URGENT ACTION

American policy must first take urgent action on COVID-19 and the Ethiopia conflict. As the Biden administration rushes to get a COVID-19 vaccine to Americans, it should also provide more dedicated and visible support to the World Health Organization (WHO) and COVAX initiative to ensure vaccine access in African countries. Leadership on this front will save lives, accelerate economic recovery in Africa and give immediate credibility to Biden's overtures of partnership and multilateralism.

In Ethiopia, a civil war that started the day after America's elections has already cost thousands of civilian lives, displaced over one million people, and drawn in neighbouring Eritrea, as new reports of

war crimes emerge. This dispute is rapidly destabilising a country that, just last year, completed a decade of nearly 10 percent annual GDP growth and saw Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed win the Nobel Peace Prize. Rather than let the conflict slip further from view, Biden's team should back the AU to drive a committed peace process, ensure all possible steps are taken to address human rights violations and prevent further impact on neighbouring countries.

TARGETED REGIONAL STRATEGIES

East Africa

Urgent responses must be accompanied by thoughtful strategies that set the stage for long-term collaboration and respond to specific regional and national contexts. East Africa, for instance, presents an important opportunity to promote investment and catalyse untapped economic potential, but the lack of a regional response to the conflict in Ethiopia speaks to greater issues of political division, weak economic ties, and political repression that American policy makers must take into account.

For years, regional powers have vacillated between antagonism and disinterest. Kenya boasts East Africa's strongest democratic and judicial institutions, but has avoided action on Ethiopia, done little to bolster Sudan's crucial transition, and fuelled disputes rather than democratic elections in Somalia. Violent political repression in Uganda, Tanzania,

Rwanda, and Burundi, meanwhile, is barely mentioned by regional leaders, while mutual destabilization continues to cripple relations. Refugees and trade, meanwhile, have been instrumentalised in regional politics, exacerbating tense relationships and leaving millions without state protection.

Weak ties cripple not only governance, but prosperity. Competitive relationships result in trade wars and disputes, such as the Grand Renaissance Dam controversy, rather than economic integration and cross-border projects that might finally unlock the potential of the East African Community (EAC). US policy enables this counter-productive isolationism through bilateral dealings, one-sided trade policy, and feeble diplomacy. As COVID-19 threatens to stunt GDP growth across the region and push millions into poverty, new sources of investment and economic support will be more critical than ever.

US policy in East Africa should seek to build the benefits of economic and political synergy in the region. With greater financing and more targeted strategy, the newly minted US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and Prosper Africa investment initiatives can be powerful tools to incentivise cross-border collaboration and foreground the role of the EAC. The focus on integration and African-led institutions should be embraced at a continental level as well, through support to the promising African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).

Finally, America should decouple trade and investment from self-defeating development targets and direct competition with China. By modelling rigorous transparency and attention to human rights and environmental impacts, America can distinguish its offerings without imposing onerous (and unrealistic) conditions. Initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network are a good start but need more resolute backing; America must also acknowledge that, to deliver unique opportunities for an economic partnership, it will need an investment strategy that engages with all levels of the economy, including budding entrepreneurs and community enterprises.

East Africa highlights the interconnectedness of economic and political issues. With closer economic ties, East African leaders will be less likely to antagonise their neighbours or turn a blind eye to violent repression of opposition parties, independent media, and civil society voices. Amplifying fair, collaborative engagement with the region will advance prosperity, help prevent anti-democratic trends from continuing to undermine public services, and dissuade regional leaders from turning to China and other partners who don't ask questions.

West Africa

In West Africa, Biden's goals of advancing democracy and rule of law will face intersectional challenges in the midst of creeping authoritarianism. Senegal's recent protests are the latest headline in a year that saw constitutionally dubious third terms in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire leading to popular protests and repressive violence against citizens. In Burkina Faso and Niger, dominant ruling parties consolidated power; while the August 2020 coup in Mali has led to a pivotal democratic transition period that will require delicate yet concerted attention.

West Africa's political future is made more uncertain by the nexus of violent extremism and environmental precarity. Islamist groups in the Sahel region carried out an unprecedented number of attacks in 2020, and, in 2021, have already intensified violence in Northern Nigeria and Niger. Environmental fragility has already displaced millions in the Sahel and, with rising temperatures and populations, threatens further destabilisation in coming years.

US policy should begin with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which has, in the past, proven its impetus and authority in defending human rights and the rule of law. The body's hesitant response to recent democratic backsliding, however, raises concerns that the entrenched political class will use its authority as a backstop for their regimes rather than a force for mutual accountability. The US should deploy technical and diplomatic resources to help restore ECOWAS' leadership, with a focus on preventing constitutional overrun, defending human rights, and supporting independent judiciaries.

On common global priorities of security, climate, and poverty, American policy should look towards African-led initiatives. In the Sahel, the US military presence has done more to stoke cynicism and assist extremist recruitment than to quell violence. Support to the G5 and Multinational Joint Task Force

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(MNJTF) regional security cooperations may be necessary, but US policy should prioritise increasing the accountability of all armed forces, reducing rampant civilian casualties, and creating the space for negotiations.

To reduce the region's astronomical inequality, transparent governance and better tax policies that address exploitative practices by global corporations should be accompanied by investments in community-based education programs and economic rights. Ambitious initiatives such as the AU-led Great Green Wall promise lasting cooperation and long-term results; America should join its allies in providing greater support for such efforts.

Ultimately, in West Africa and across the continent, active civil society will be the most effective guarantor of open, participatory government and social progress. American policy should invest in the robust network of community organisations, non-profits, and individuals advocating for these causes in their own countries. Financial, technical, and political assistance can strengthen the capacity and recognition these actors need to succeed. With this in mind, Biden's team should reorient the \$5.4 billion USAID spends annually on health programs (70 percent of the annual budget) towards investments in democracy, human rights and governance, which currently make up just 4 percent of USAID spending (\$312.4 million). The US must also back these efforts at a political level, by taking a clear

stance against authoritarian regimes that imprison opposition leaders, intimidate human rights defenders and journalists, and erode judicial independence. Along with vocal support for their cause, the US should be prepared, when necessary, to offer them protection. Sustained American support for democracy as a long-term project grounded in the people themselves offers greater prospects for success and stability.

Central Africa

America's greatest policy challenges will arguably arise in countries facing complex, long-running conflicts, most notably: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan. In these resource-rich countries, weak central governments struggle to maintain lasting control over a multitude of loosely organised armed groups, resulting in widespread human rights violations and intervention by unscrupulous actors.

In DRC, 30 years of conflict that has left millions dead, continues on with scant international attention. China, meanwhile, has taken control of over half of DRC's total mineral exports through imbalanced investment-for-resource deals and cooping foreign mining interests. The 60 million Congolese living in extreme poverty see little benefit from such deals. In CAR, Russia has deployed private military contractors (PMCs) from the quasi-governmental Wagner Group to support President

Touadéra in exchange for secure access to large deposits of gold, uranium, and other minerals. Meanwhile, the US remains disengaged and continues to overlook the human rights abuses accompanying these ongoing armed conflicts.

In these contexts, America must resist the urge to pursue peacebuilding as a panacea. Such efforts are unlikely to be any more successful now than in the past and risk exacerbating tenuous situations. The US has invested billions in negotiating peace in South Sudan but, after a decade of independence, successive peace agreements have failed, and the same two leaders continue to dominate an ongoing cycle of violence and political bartering. Frustrated, the US has withdrawn—abandoning the South Sudanese people who continue to suffer egregious human rights abuses.

America should not disengage from these complex political landscapes, but must avoid fighting proxy wars, selecting strongman leaders, or using heavy-handed top-down interventions and contingent economic deals that present false choices. US policy should offer fair, transparent investments that focus primarily on the well-being of the region's long-overlooked populations. Further, US leaders must shine a light on the opaque investment tools and supply chains that allow foreign actors to control natural resources, while also foregrounding the hidden costs to local populations, and support civil society organisations investigating and bringing accountability to these opaque networks. In doing so, America can also work with its allies, the private sector, and regional leaders to craft trade and investment policies that offer an appealing alternative to China.

The US should carefully build diplomatic and economic ties in the region, while working with allies to put pressure on local and international parties to protect human rights and improve security. Biden's team should also participate in a multilateral push for public-oriented peace efforts, such as African-led hybrid tribunals in South Sudan and CAR. By working with

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civil society, the UN, and allies to enforce human rights and international treaty obligations across the region, the US can save lives, improve its image, and help build the foundations for democracy in the long run.

Southern Africa

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Finally, Southern Africa demonstrates how the Biden administration can work in partnership with African countries to address the grave toll poor governance exacts on economic prosperity and human security.

Across the region, corruption and mismanagement have coincided with declining commodity prices and predatory debt to paint a dire economic picture. Zambia, facing anaemic growth and debt at 120 percent of GDP, became the first country to default since the IMF cleared the debt of the continent's poorest countries in 2005. In Zimbabwe, Emerson Mnangagwa has failed to deliver much-anticipated economic reforms since replacing Robert Mugabe. Instead, he resorts to repression of opposition politicians and journalists as food insecurity surges by almost 50 percent. Meanwhile, the rapid rise of an ISIS-affiliated rebel movement in northern Mozambique has produced horrific violence, displaced half a million people, and threatens to destabilise the region, but has remained largely overlooked by world powers.

South Africa is a natural ally for the US and has a vital role to play in the region. The country, however, remains in the throes of recovery from former-president Jacob Zuma's pillaging of public coffers. Already struggling with a junk sovereign debt rating, systemic corruption, and the world's most severe levels of inequality, COVID-19 has created new hardships for South Africans, including a 13-year high in unemployment.

South Africa's robust democracy and legal institutions have nonetheless stood strong in the face of these challenges: Zuma was forced to resign, and a judicial commission is investigating state capture during his tenure. President Ramaphosa's administration, meanwhile, has reengaged foreign investors, taken steps to reform corrupt law enforcement agencies, and shown a refreshing interest in working with international partners. Malawi, having recently proven the strength of its independent Supreme Court and electoral system, and Botswana, should not be overlooked as valuable partners for stability and rule of law in the region.

The US should support South Africa's internal efforts by providing much needed economic assistance with stipulations that steps be taken on corruption and inequality. This would provide Ramaphosa political cover to implement more aggressive policies and propel action on issues like land reform. With American assistance helping to overcome domestic challenges and isolationist tendencies, South Africa could fulfil its potential as a regional leader.

With US support and South African leadership, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) could be propelled into action. Immediate priorities should be to coordinate critical debt relief, address rights violations and economic instability in Zimbabwe, and develop a concerted multilateral strategy to save lives and build government capacity in

Mozambique. Biden's recent decision to send American Special Forces to assist Mozambican troops is helpful recognition of a problem that has been mistakenly overlooked. But, the approach is emblematic of America's historical attitude—lacking in long-term vision or multilateral effort. In looking ahead, the US should work with South Africa, the AU, and international allies—including civil society—to accelerate implementation of the AU Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, and build momentum for collaborative debt transparency initiatives that have been slow to gain traction. This approach would also help develop entities capable of taking on longer term roles to further stability and create structures for sustainable solutions.

DIPLOMACY

Diplomatic transformation will be at the core of success for a rejuvenated American approach in Africa. Relationships with leaders are indispensable to advance common priorities, renew American credibility, and create non-financial levers for influence. Biden set the right tone with his remarks at the AU summit, but must back this up with official State visits, as well as adopting a more expansive, people-centric approach to diplomacy. In-depth contextual knowledge and strong relationships are needed to identify the right opportunities for investment, build trust, and maintain productive cooperation. The character of America's diplomatic corps should be

defined by individuals prepared and empowered to engage in this effort. America must complement formal diplomacy with investments in academic, commercial, and cultural exchanges that allow citizens from both sides of the Atlantic to increase mutual understanding and lay the foundations for long-term solidarity with Africa's next generation of leaders

.BRINGING BIDEN'S PRINCIPLES TO BEAR

Implicit in Biden's repeated call for America to lead by the "power of our example" is an acknowledgement of the failed promises and missed opportunities that have marred American foreign policy in recent years. Biden is famously comfortable with the politics of compassion, collaboration, and respect, and has promised to reflect them abroad. Leading by those principles must be a global endeavour that meets the new realities of our time, when America's leadership is in question and power is no longer reserved for the global North. But success will hinge on the ability of Biden and his talented yet conventional foreign policy team to shift the historical perspective of American foreign policy and take a principled and ambitious approach in Africa, and elsewhere. ■

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Joe Biden's administration has committed to transforming America's relationships across the globe. This period of reform presents the opportunity for a long-overdue reimagination of America's policy in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this Strategic Update, Rebecca Rattner and Bjorn Whitmore argue a successful new relationship between America and Sub-Saharan Africa must rely on genuine partnership, support to local actors, and strong regional institutions. Their piece considers how to apply these principles in practice by examining the nuanced socio-political realities in East, West, Central, and Southern Africa.


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