

# Africa Is Changing—and U.S. Strategy Is Not Keeping Up

## Washington Needs to Rethink Its Approach to the Continent

By [Jon Temin](#) October 8, 2021 (Source: Foreign Affairs Magazine)



Construction in Kigali, Rwanda, August 2003  
Sven Torfinn/ Panos Pictures / Redux

Africa has never been a top priority for the United States. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all launched impactful initiatives there—helping advance trade, health, and energy, among other things—but their administrations devoted only limited, episodic attention to the continent. President Donald Trump gave it even less thought: he was the first U.S. president since Ronald Reagan not to travel to Africa, and his Africa policy, to the extent it could be discerned, focused on the narrow goals of competing with China, reducing the U.S. military footprint, and expanding private-sector engagement.

President Joe Biden’s administration has been similarly slow out of the blocks on Africa. Aside from its focused diplomatic response to the horrific civil war in Ethiopia and a few hints about other areas of emphasis, such as trade and investment, Biden has not articulated a strategy for the continent. Yet powerful demographic, economic, and political changes are sweeping across Africa, expanding the opportunities for positive U.S. engagement there and underscoring the need to elevate Africa on the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities.

In the coming months, the Biden administration should set out a bold strategy that reframes American thinking about Africa from a focus on the sub-Saharan region to a wider look at the continent as a whole and from an overemphasis on U.S.-Chinese competition to a broader engagement with Africans themselves. Doing so will require lengthening the time frame for U.S. objectives, especially those concerning democracy and human rights, and focusing more on bolstering institutions than on preserving relationships with individual African leaders.

### AFRICAN CENTURY

In a speech on the eve of the new millennium, former South African President Thabo Mbeki called this the “African century”—and for good reason. Between 2020 and 2050, Africa’s

population is expected to roughly double, growing far faster than the population of any other region. Nigeria alone is expected to exceed 400 million people by 2050, overtaking the United States as the third most populous country. Africa's population is also overwhelmingly young compared with other regions, meaning that it will have a substantial workforce well into the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has dampened short-term economic growth, but the long-term outlook is strong: population growth—especially in cities, where most innovation happens—combined with the continent's enormous capacity for creativity and innovation translates into tremendous economic potential. Furthermore, Africa's 54 countries can form a powerful political block on the global stage and are showing an increasing ability to act in unison—through the newly formed African Continental Free Trade Area, for instance. If African countries, especially the most influential ones, can find a truly united voice, they will be a political force.

### **Demographic, economic, and political trends all make Africa increasingly important to the United States.**

These demographic, economic, and political trends all make Africa increasingly important to the United States. In addition to powering growth and innovation, the continent can be an engine of democratic expansion—including in unexpected places, such as Sudan and Zambia—that can advance U.S. and global efforts to reverse democratic backsliding. Prominent African countries also are potential allies with the United States on many of the most pressing global issues, such as climate change.

At the same time, however, security concerns are growing in the Sahel and in eastern and southern Africa along the Indian Ocean: by some estimates close to 70 percent of the UN Security Council's agenda is devoted to peace and security in Africa. China, Russia, Turkey, and Middle Eastern countries are expanding their spheres of influence on the continent, often strengthening authoritarian governments and factions that are hostile to American interests.

### **AFRICA REFRAMED**

Moving Africa up the list of priorities on the U.S. foreign policy agenda will require rethinking how the continent is framed—both geographically and geopolitically. Most of the U.S. government draws an imaginary bureaucratic line between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, with the latter being treated as part of the broader Middle East. But this delineation is increasingly illogical. People, goods, and arms all flow freely across the Sahara desert, and the power vacuum in Libya has contributed to instability in Sahelian countries such as Chad, Mali, and Niger. The African continent, in other words, is a single interconnected entity.

The African Union, in which North African countries wield substantial influence, makes no distinction between North Africa and the rest of the continent. North African countries could make greater economic and diplomatic contributions across the continent if they turned more attention south—a shift that the United States should encourage. To its credit, U.S. Africa Command has already done away with this anachronistic division, but the rest of the U.S. government should do the same. Treating the continent as a whole will help officials respond to challenges, such as migration and terrorism, that cross the Sahel and the Sahara—an unstable region poised to grow substantially in population and geopolitical importance in the coming decades—unencumbered by bureaucratic seams. Doing so would also drive more attention to a continent that borders the Mediterranean and Europe, helping secure more resources for understaffed teams focused on Africa within the U.S. government.

## **The United States should abandon the narrative that it is battling China for primacy in Africa.**

Washington should also reframe its geopolitical understanding of Africa, especially its understanding of how many African countries relate to the Gulf states across the Red Sea. Over the past decade, political and economic ties between the Horn of Africa and the Middle East have greatly expanded. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have increased much-needed investment in the region as well as in the Sahel, but rivalries among those countries have been exported to the Horn, especially to Somalia, further destabilizing already fractured political systems. The trajectories of Ethiopia and Sudan—arguably the two highest priorities in Africa for Biden so far—have been strongly influenced by Middle Eastern interests. Many Sudanese fear that their revolution, which overthrew the dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019, could be hijacked by outside forces opposed to a democratic Sudan. Biden was right to create the new position of U.S. special envoy for the Horn of Africa and to fill it with the seasoned diplomat Jeffrey Feltman. The Biden administration should reinforce that move by enhancing collaboration across bureaucratic departments and agencies in order to elevate both shores of the Red Sea to core national security priorities.

Finally, the United States should abandon the narrative that it is battling China for primacy in Africa. To be sure, there is an element of strategic competition animating both countries' activities there, and Chinese actions clearly bolster authoritarian regimes. But framing U.S. Africa policy this way, as the Trump administration did, treats the continent's more than 1.3 billion people as bystanders to a larger geopolitical collision in which they have little stake. It also ignores the fact that China engages in Africa in ways that the United States does not, offering loans and other forms of support that are not matched by others. The terms of those deals may be stacked against the recipients—although there is debate on this point—but in many instances the United States simply does not offer an alternative, making its criticism of Chinese behavior ring hollow. The United States needs to demonstrate to Africans that it cares about them because of their inherent value and potential, not because of their role in great-power competition. That will mean abandoning tired talking points and offering competitive alternatives to Chinese economic support.

## **VALUES IN FOREIGN POLICY**

On the campaign trail, Biden pledged to put values at the center of U.S. foreign policy. To remain true to that commitment in Africa, his administration will have to do more than reframe its understanding of the continent; it will have to elongate its policy timetable and focus more on strengthening institutions than on maintaining relationships with individual leaders. Advancing values such as democracy and respect for human rights is a long-term endeavor. Too often, however, these objectives have taken a back seat to short-term interests, especially those tied to security. When the leaders of Guinea, Ivory Coast, the Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda all manipulated term limits in recent years to extend their rule, for instance, the U.S. response was muted. Washington issued some carefully crafted statements, and U.S. diplomats surely conveyed their feelings behind closed doors, but none of these leaders faced any meaningful consequences for evading their term limits. Opinion surveys show that Africans overwhelmingly support two-term limits for their leaders. Yet U.S. policymakers weren't willing to risk a short-term disruption in U.S. relations with these leaders (and the supposed stability they guarantee) to defend the integrity of African democratic institutions.

Survey data also shows that a majority of Africans share many of the values that the Biden administration seeks to emphasize, such as support for democracy, free and fair elections, freedom of association, and freedom of expression. In many cases, it is their leaders who don't

believe in these values. Too often, the United States has sided with the authoritarians because of short-term uncertainty about who will succeed them, fear of chaotic transitions, or the desire to preserve security partnerships. Such was the case when Mahamat Déby, the son of Chad's longtime strongman Idriss Déby, seized power upon his father's death earlier this year contrary to the succession plan laid out in the country's constitution. The United States chose not to call this what it was—a coup—presumably in order to preserve its long-standing counterterrorism partnership with Chad.

But the longer unpopular leaders (or their offspring) remain in office, the more chaotic the eventual transitions are likely to be. (After evading term limits in 2020, for instance, Guinea's President Alpha Condé was overthrown in a coup earlier this year.) The Biden administration should therefore pursue a multiyear strategy for the continent that is grounded in the values that Americans and Africans share and have the patience to see that strategy through. That will mean resisting the temptation to let short-term interests drive adherence to the status quo when it is clearly inconsistent with African popular sentiment, keeping in mind that a commitment to democratic principles sets the United States apart from countries such as China and Russia in the eyes of many Africans.

### **Advancing values such as democracy and respect for human rights is a long-term endeavor.**

The United States must also elevate institutions over individuals. Washington has learned hard lessons by doing the opposite. For instance, when South Sudan gained independence in 2011, U.S. policymakers wrongly believed that their long-standing relationships with the country's most influential politicians would enable them to persuade those politicians to compromise and lead the country toward stability and democracy. But at every turn, South Sudan's leaders put their own self-interest ahead of the nation's, defying American appeals.

U.S. officials made the same mistake in Ethiopia, embracing Ahmed Abiy when he became prime minister in 2018 without asking many questions. To be sure, Abiy made a number of early moves that were genuinely encouraging and suggested that Ethiopia was making a turn toward respect for human rights. But the United States—along with many other countries, the Nobel Committee, and some commentators (including this author)—were too quick to elevate Abiy and portray him as a new type of leader. (The United States made the same mistake with his predecessor Meles Zenawi.) Far from leading Ethiopia toward a democratic future, Abiy has fanned the flames of ethnic hatred and led the country into a horrific civil war.

The safer and better bet is on the institutions that check executive overreach, uphold the rule of law, and expose kleptocracy—the courts; legislatures; the media; and commissions that focus on elections, combating corruption, and defending human rights. Many South Africans credit the courts and the media—along with civil society organizations—with helping the country survive the disastrous presidency of Jacob Zuma. Since Zuma's departure from office in 2018, South African authorities have continued to investigate his administration's corrupt activities, leading to the former president's recent imprisonment for defying the courts—a remarkable example of accountability. In Kenya and Malawi, the courts have made bold decisions to invalidate flawed elections, angering sitting presidents. Substantial U.S. aid already goes to supporting these types of institutions, but U.S. policy and diplomacy needs to keep up. Senior officials should invest as much in relationships with these institutions as they do in relationships with heads of state. They should also defend these institutions when they come under attack, including by imposing sanctions. Biden's upcoming [Summit for Democracy](#) should emphasize—and include representatives from—these kinds of pivotal democratic institutions.

## **AFRICAN VOICES, GLOBAL DEBATES**

In August, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland traveled to South Africa to co-chair the Working Group on African and Global Issues, which seeks to elevate South African engagement on pressing global debates. Initiatives such as this one should be expanded. Conversations about the forces shaping the world—from climate change to technology to migration—are dominated by developed nations, but the impact of these forces is universal.

In the case of climate change, Africa bears the least responsibility of any region but could end up paying the highest price: extreme heat and variable rainfall already threaten human survival in the Sahel, and rising sea levels will soon put whole cities at risk. Each of Africa's 54 heads of state is a potential voice in the climate debate, as are the continent's dynamic civil society organizations, which are too often ignored.

The United States should push for more African leadership in the global institutions where these issues are debated—and then genuinely listen to what Africans have to say. This is not a matter of the United States and other powerful countries being magnanimous: it serves their interests to have African countries that are directly affected by climate change take part in the push for solutions, including by putting pressure on major polluters, just as it serves their interests to include African countries in discussions about the factors that drive migration, such as the lack of economic opportunity.

Reforming the UN Security Council to give Africa a more prominent role would be a good first step. It is difficult to imagine the Security Council being more dysfunctional than it already is; reform could offer the jolt that is sorely needed while also addressing an important African demand. The G-20, which currently has just one African member (South Africa), should also consider adding Nigeria, which has become an economic force. And in ad hoc gatherings such as Biden's Summit for Democracy, Africa's democratic leaders (and not only heads of state) should be featured prominently. The Biden administration should push for these changes proactively, acknowledging that reform of long-standing institutions is overdue. Doing so would go a long way toward demonstrating to Africans that the United States sees their continent's potential and is invested in their future.