

Re-Balancing the Triangle: American Strategy in Africa Should Prioritize African Leadership, not Chinese Competition

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Introduction

At the moment, the U.S. is without a strategy for development and diplomatic engagement with Africa. Both the Department of State (DoS) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) lack high-level staffing in political positions that would shape and respond to policy in this context, so functional areas of the relevant agencies continue apace as best they can with the trajectories they had before the 2016 presidential election. What limited guidance has come from the White House thus far has largely suggested a withdrawal of attention from and engagement with the continent, accompanied by deep cuts in diplomatic and aid budgets,² and an indifference towards trade relationships.³

There are two major reasons for developing a policy sooner rather than later. One, the United States is not the only player on the continent—China's rise to the position of a global power with global reach means that for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. is looking at tripartite interactions rather than bilateral ones—or at the very least in addition to bilaterals—in various functional and geographic area. Two, problems and fragilities across the continent are increasingly not limited to any one country or even one region, but cross and transcend them.⁴ Addressing those problems and fragilities will require the combined attention of the U.S., China and African nations in concert as a continent as opposed to as individual states. The world does not have the luxury of not addressing problems of this complexity, and a lack of communication and cooperation among the relevant actors will inevitably make them worse.

That latter point in particular underscores that it is imperative to recognize that rudderless and indifferent engagement from the United States is not a pattern that can continue for long.

Sooner or later the pace of events and the inevitability of some sort of crisis, whether natural or man-made, during the tenure of any administration, will snowball together to challenge existing policies. At the same time, opportunities for growth and investment will go by unnoticed and untapped.

This brief will discuss a series of reasons why it is critical that the U.S. government produce a strategy for engaging with Africa that can help build resilience to potential shocks and respond better to emerging opportunities. That strategy should take Chinese engagement and the need for multilateral cooperation into account. Most critically, that strategy should approach the first two points not by focusing on the U.S. and China as primary actors, but by supporting and strengthening African actors and African institutions as the primary focal point.

Conversation around this issue of cooperative engagement in Africa tends to be framed in the bilateral terms of U.S.-China engagement even when it is phrased as a trilateral engagement inclusive of Africa.⁵ The core of the argument here is that the U.S.-China relationship—sometimes absent, often competitive, and in fact more cooperative than often assumed—will inherently tip towards competition as long as it is framed in these bilateral terms. Seen as such, there is also an inherent disadvantage to the American bargaining position with African states, since it comes with more strings for beneficiaries and less U.S. government support than Chinese actors offer. Unless the U.S. is willing to abandon its own core values, this will not change. The best way forward is to build a strategy that focuses on strengthening African actors and institutions themselves rather than on the U.S. competition with China. This brief, in other words, calls for the United States to develop a strategy that prioritizes strengthening African institutions.

Those African institutions represent states, businesses and political actors that can (and should) lead the charge for African peace, security and development, helping external actors to recognize that the most sustainable investment environment and best security landscape is defined by resilient, peaceful, legitimate and accountable governments and societies. At the very least, such institutions can still help to reduce or even eliminate the ability of toxic actors across the continent to manipulate the gaps and tensions formed by U.S.-China competition to further their own malign goals.⁶ Here, then, is also a call for African leadership and African multilateral institutions to formulate a strategy to deal with external powers.

What Do We Have to Build On?

It can be argued that the U.S. has never actually had a strategy toward Africa.⁷ We have foreign policy tendencies. We have been opportunistic in some areas, tactically canny in others, and for some specific operational issues—counter-terrorism and food security, for example—we have been more strategic, if not always correctly so.

But we have never had a strategy in the sense that we could articulate what we were trying to achieve either unilaterally or in partnership, beyond boilerplate statements that we sought to “improve access to and delivery of health services, to support more accountable and democratic institutions, to start businesses and foster an environment attractive to private investment, and to stave off conflict and strengthen communities.”⁸

This list of goals is just that—a list of goals, but not an articulated strategy. In order to achieve that distinction, we would need to add a coherent vision of why these things are important to the indigenously defined and self-sustaining peaceful and secure conditions we seek to support. Lip service is often given to “African solutions for African problems,” but the reality is that this is frequently undermined by the conflict between the actions we take on behalf of African peace and security, and those we take on behalf of our own national security that may undermine the former.

Prior to the wave of de-colonialization in the 1960s, American strategy would of course have focused on engagement with the various colonial powers, rather than with Africans themselves. As recently as 1962, Rupert Emerson was pointing out that the U.S. was effectively unencumbered in the policy department where Africa was concerned, “not bound by established positions or traditions, by fixed agreements or vested interests.”⁹ During the Cold War, American engagement across the continent was more concerned with area denial to the Soviets than with productive engagement with African states and people, often with disastrous results for the latter.¹⁰ Since then, the U.S. has enumerated what it will do, but not articulated a pattern or a driving reason for doing it. The U.S. engages with multinational entities such as the African Union and African Development Bank, but not as strong, authoritative actors whose presence could serve a greater purpose than they already do. Neither the United States nor China, in fact, has more than a transactional approach to African engagement, usually around specific functional lines.

What the U.S. does have tends to be stovepiped along country, regional or thematic lines. The continent is rife with divisions both real and artificial, and those are causing increasing problems. American policy-makers tend to equate Africa with “sub-Saharan Africa,” while North Africa is lumped together with the Middle East into a separate group of operational and policy areas within the functional arms of U.S. government, USAID and the DoS. Interestingly, this is not mirrored in the Department of Defense (DoD), where the Combatant Command structure puts all of North Africa (with the exception of Egypt, which falls under the Middle East-focused Central Command) under the Africa Command (AFRICOM). The U.S. therefore has a somewhat broken foundation on which to begin a new policy of engagement.

China, for its part, also arguably lacks an overarching strategy.¹¹ Or rather, it has a holistic vision, but one that revolves around its own economic interests rather than the evolution of partnerships on the continent.¹² Africa still comprises a relatively small percentage of China's global trade. Although the volume of trade with Africa has been growing, so has China's total global trade and consequently, Africa's share has actually remained relatively stagnant.¹³ However, this is beginning to change—China's view of Africa has become ever more nuanced and well-articulated over the past decade, but it does not yet rise to a level of a clear “strategy.”

In both cases, it is important that the movement towards articulation does not begin to reverse itself—Africa has made great strides in development over the past decades,¹⁴ in no small part due to increased investment by foreign powers in addition to humanitarian and foreign assistance packages. Losing that momentum is likely to increase the risk to Chinese investments and to American security concerns. In the worst-case scenario this could accelerate the withdrawal of both powers from the continent, or even increase the kind of hard security interventions that often worsen the problem they intended to solve. That, in turn, also tends to correlate with the kind of turbulent power vacuums that no-one can afford.

The Basis of Strategy: What are the Conditions We Seek to Support?

The recommendations here are not intended to provide a “better way to counter China in Africa,” nor are they intended simply to foster more collaboration between the two external powers—although that would certainly be helpful. Lately, there have already been too many tensions across the continent that are reminiscent of Great Power clashes from previous historical eras. Furthermore, there are too many problems—real and perceived—that can be further aggravated by a growing sense of competition between the U.S. and China and further marginalize voices of African states.

Regardless, there is no way for the United States to directly compete with the Chinese model of engagement without adopting tactics that are inimical to American policy and values. To do so would require, for example, mirroring government control of companies, abandoning environmental impact and economic assessments, or mimicking the development model of importing foreign labor rather than working with or through local partners and companies.

Therefore, it is important to form a strategy that would make the U.S. a preferable partner, yes, but which will more importantly serve to nurture the kind of African capabilities that are critical to a secure, peaceful and prosperous continent. The best way of doing that would be to integrate security, economic and political needs into one holistic vision that prioritizes strengthening and supporting the kind of African institutions that in the long run have the greatest role to play in developing security across the continent.

This has the dual advantage of improving American interests in a way that also supports beneficial African institutions, reduces the gaps and deficiencies that toxic leadership and violent groups can take advantage of, and in the process, fosters the kind of alliances that make the United States a more attractive partner.

Ultimately, the question of external strategies in Africa tends to be framed in terms of the great-power interests, and the places where each has practices that seem to institutionally block the other. To the U.S., China's policy on the continent seems mercantilist and somewhat mercenary, and the official policy of non-intervention means in practice that China works with governments that the U.S. is institutionally barred from because of strictures relating to human rights violations. To China, the U.S. policy of attaching governance, rights and justice caveats to aid and business engagements is an ill-disguised form of imperialism. Neither country is about to abandon its own principles in order to gain more influence.

Most important to recognize is that as stated above, the United States not only cannot compete directly with China, but does not need to. The assertion here is that while both the U.S. and China are critical trading partners for African economies, Africa is not a critical trading partner for either external power. The "Chinese model" of governance¹⁵ has found an increasing number of adherents on the continent of late, but there is no shortage of democratic governance still, and an American desire for greater levels of democracy is better served by allowing developing nations to find their own path given multiple choices. There are significant differences in approach between the two external powers—but given the expansiveness of economies, markets, and governance across the African continent, there is ample room for collaboration. However, the inverse is not true—while there is ample room for collaboration, competition could be costly to everyone.

What Now?

Africa is not currently a strategic priority for China any more than it is for the U.S., although there is a similarly high level of interest at a transactional level—primarily for markets and resources on the Chinese side, primarily for security on the American side, although there is of course a good deal of overlap. The continent is geographically removed from both powers, which means both the U.S. and China are largely free from the threat of a direct violent attack, and of the flows of refugees that Europe faces. That geographic distance has led to a political one as well, with the continent treated as a useful source of resources, but otherwise largely unworthy of closer or sustained attention. The emerging trends and growing risks across the continent, however, make it critical for Africa to become a strategic priority for both powers. In addition, it is imperative that there is sufficient communication (at least, if not coordination) between U.S. and China so that misunderstanding and competition between the two does not contribute to further fragility on the continent.

Over the past five years, growing evidence points to the fact that within a very few years the majority of the world's poorest will live in conflict-affected and fragile countries, and the majority of those will be concentrated in Africa.¹⁶ Violent movements have metastasized across the Sahel, with ideology, illicit money, weapons and fighters flowing south and westward from various points in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁷ Famine is spreading, worsened by increasing levels of conflict. Climate change models show worrisome projections for the future.¹⁸ In 2014, the Ebola outbreak began and spread across several countries in West Africa, with luckily only sporadic and limited spread to the rest of the continent and the world. At the same time, Freedom House has measured an 11-year slide in the levels of free and democratic governance across the continent.¹⁹

These developments mean that the most difficult problems to solve, the ones that tend to generate the most insecurity and most rapidly undermine investment—and the ones that tend to cross borders most easily—are increasingly concentrated in the same areas. As a result, they will tend to amplify each other and become even more difficult to solve. Thus, they are also more vulnerable to the kind of unintended consequences that arise from unwise or shortsightedly self-interested interventions by external powers. In particular, they result from the misunderstandings and tensions born of competition and mistrust between those powers, which, in turn, can be played upon by self-interested local actors. That means the U.S. needs a focus not only on policies toward individual states, but strengthened the focus on regional programs and institutions.

More worrisome still, population across the continent is growing rapidly accompanied by a record youth bulge.²⁰ This is cause for a great deal of concern, yes, but it is still early enough to avert a crisis with the tools that Africa, the U.S. and China already have at their disposal. The additional urgency in the recommendations here is that this last point may not be accurate for long. The Trump administration has signaled a move towards broad withdrawal of diplomatic and development engagement worldwide, including across Africa.²¹ The President's proposed budget—even if taken only as a “statement of values” as opposed to a rigorous financial document—would cut funding at a level that signals an interest in destruction, not efficiency. These are the wrong moves at a particularly bad time.

Addressing trends like the ones described above requires a broad focus on peace and security rather than a narrow one on counter-terrorism or return on investments; something more than a transactional or non-interventionist approach. American and Chinese policies, if not moving toward collaboration and growing engagement with African institutions, can create political vacuums that could be destructive not only to Africans, but also to Chinese and American interests.

What then for Strategy?

Think Continent-Wide

As USAID's regional program strategies²² point out, little in Africa stays within a single national border, especially violence.²³ Conflict dynamics, fighters, flows of money, climate change dynamics, and disease vectors are all good examples, but they're not the only ones. Africa is not only a conglomeration of things that need to be fought or reduced, but also of those, such as markets and workforces, that need to be nurtured and supported. USAID and the DoS both have these regional viewpoints institutionalized, but they also split the continent at a critical point along the Sahel, with North Africa falling into a different department. That leaves a potential gap where problems to arise. DoD meanwhile, is the one U.S. entity that has a truly continent-wide focus but it is not clear how much coordination there is among the three.

It would be useful to have a way of communicating issues across these structures such that the continent-wide—but understandably security-centric DoD focus—can interface better with the regional and country-specific USAID and DoS sections focused on development and diplomacy. DoS has a continent-wide coordination mechanism of its own, but lacking a strategy coming from the White House, and lacking the more operational implementation capabilities of USAID, has limited reach.

The diplomatic and development agencies need to have their regional focus strengthened and expanded—something the Trump administration appears to be actively recommending against.²⁴ Most preferable would be the addition of a continent-wide layer inclusive of both sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa at least as a security consideration, and the nurturing of continent-wide African institutions such as the African Union. While the Sahara does pose a barrier to the spread of epidemics, weapons, fighters and ideology, these have made their way across on occasion, as we saw with the arrival of Tuareg fighters in Mali who acquired arms and experience as mercenaries for Moammar Qaddafi.²⁵ In other words, the lack of an overarching framework—American or anyone else's—allows national and regional actors to play the U.S. and China against each other and take advantage of the competition between the two. That needs to end, and the way to end it need to be African at their core if for no other reason than to lessen the impact of the shifting priorities of an American presidents.

This is not to say that local strategies have no place, or should be tarred irrevocably with the brush of “stovepipes.” They remain necessary, even—perhaps especially—at a sub-national level, as each individual country in Africa contains multiple regional dynamics of its own. Appropriately localized sub-strategies should be tailored to dynamics, demographics and conditions on the ground in order that a deep and locally-relevant focus is not lost.

The combination of a continent-wide focus linked together with multiple locally-appropriate foci is critical to ensuring that the tactics used to pursue specific areas of U.S. interest do not trip over or cancel each other out, that they do not undermine the ability to achieve long-term strategic goals, and that gaps between them cannot be taken advantage of for mercenary reasons by toxic actors. Security strategies that aim towards the short term, for example, can all too easily undermine the goals of peace and security highlighted on the USAID and DoS individual plans.

American strategy should seek to create the conditions in which African mechanisms for security, economy and governance are strengthened and supported to build an African policy and institutional framework that recognizes regionality and specificity alike. This is the best way to ensure a stable continent moving forward, but also the best way to level the playing field on which to engage with China, which the U.S. neither can nor wants to compete with head-to-head. The kind of strategy that would serve to build resilience and strengthen African mechanisms for peace and security is also the kind of strategy that would tend to make the U.S. a more attractive partner and at a minimum strengthen the perception of the U.S. as a trusted ally interested in African success.

As the ideological contests of the Cold War era fade further into the historical mists, there remains no inherent barriers to forging a collaborative relationship across the continent. There is, however, a risk that Africa could become the staging ground for a new cold war in which competition between the U.S. and China is fought out far from either country's backyard. Perhaps not a high risk, but one to be mindful of nonetheless. The continent-wide component of an American strategy would allow risks like this to show up more rapidly against a well-understood, resilient and holistic backdrop, and tactical frictions would more likely remain local rather than metastasizing.

Focus on Building African Institutions

African institutions, quite obviously, exist and should be strengthened so that they can fulfill the roles they were meant to play. The African Union came into existence in 2001 with the Marshall Plan as a template to create a functioning multi-national bloc with a regional rather than a global focus. To date, it has been widely criticized for not doing as much as it could.²⁶ Some have called for simply scrapping the whole endeavor on the grounds that a European-style model is fundamentally poorly matched to the needs of African politics.²⁷ While I would agree that transplanting political models is more often a recipe for failure than for success, it would still seem far more useful to reform and improve existing systems than to throw them away entirely.

Certainly those elements of African institutions that can serve to coordinate African responses to external powers involvement with the continent's countries, should be kept and strengthened so as to minimize competition between those powers and ensure that where such competition exists it does not have pernicious consequences.

What is notably missing in all too many discussions of external strategies towards Africa are African perspectives. Control over the parameters and nature of external intervention must be predicated on the following questions: "What are African interests?" and "What does Africa wants to see from those who intervene and do business on its shores?"

Like everything else in politics, there are of course a number of caveats here. Using the word "Africa" to represent the collective of fifty-five countries within it serves as a metaphor, but breaks down entirely in operation. The multilateral institutions that currently exist and could serve as connective tissue among those fifty-five states and facilitate their presenting a united front on behalf of their members' interests are of course flawed enough to warrant an "easier said than done" response. That said, we also know that we cannot continue hiding behind "easier said than done" as an excuse for the lukewarm efforts toward a necessary endeavor.

The Path Forward

Good strategy is proactive, and not simply reactive, leads towards clearly articulated goals, and provides a map for how to get there. The latter would be untenable even if we tried it—the trajectory right now is not a promising one, and circumstances will outpace us ever more rapidly the longer we hold to outmoded approaches.

There is more that unites than divides American and Chinese interests in Africa. Some of these have been explored before—there is a promising body of research on areas of mutual concern that offer opportunities for building a track record of productive engagement on issues of mutual importance and that they *should* progress is rarely contested.

The fact that Africa is a paradoxical combination of high and low importance to both the U.S. and China is a hindrance, but does not need to be an insurmountable one. Security cooperation is usually thought of in terms of military to military training and coordination, which causes concerns for both sides—particularly the Americans, who are worried that they will contribute to the military modernization of a potential enemy. U.S. strategy should recognize that not only is this not necessarily the case, but there are several areas in which security cooperation is already taking place—proof of concept that the pattern can be continued and expanded.²⁸ For instance, the U.S. and China have been and continue to work together on anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. China also provides increasing numbers of peacekeeping troops on the continent, while the U.S. has increased funding for them.

Both the U.S. and China have a mutual and vested interest in helping to foster the kind of secure environment that results in stable markets, workforces and investment climates. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the two powers worked well together to help contain and limit the spread of the disease. Examples like this illustrate a parallel point, that “security” should not be simplistically understood as “stability provided through force of arms.”

Ultimately, “stability” is the wrong goal. The word can easily cover all manner of sins, too many of which involve authoritarian governments purchasing a blind eye to their abuses by selling themselves as a preferable alternative to the chaos they claim would ensue without them.²⁹ Stability is a stopgap measure, at best a way of ensuring that violent conditions are lessened to the point where a deep and sustained peace process can take root. It should not, however, be mistaken for being the same as that process.

The key to the suggestions here, however, rests in the idea that these are policies that neither China nor the U.S. should pursue unilaterally or even bilaterally, but rather through the vehicle of strengthened African institutions. The examples of successful cooperation enumerated above should be seen as proof of concept, but not as a checklist or limited set of guidelines. International efforts should be focused on building and strengthening African institutions that in turn build these conditions as a secondary effect. At the end of the day, Africa needs its own strategy for dealing with outsiders more than outsiders need a strategy for dealing with Africa.³⁰ And the U.S. and China alike need to recognize that fostering this, is in their own best collaborative interests.

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