

What U.S. Elections Could Mean for Africa

By Cameron Hudson

Presidential elections in the United States are consequential to every region of the world. Historically, however, they have mattered less in Africa, on which a bipartisan policy consensus in Washington has largely prevailed. Washington's fundamental approach to the continent has not varied substantially from one administration to the next. Indeed, since the Clinton administration, the U.S. approach to Africa has followed a similar formula involving signature development programs, aspirational talk around democracy and human rights, and ever-expanding security partnerships that have kept ties to the continent on a steady trajectory, but not much more.

However, amid a succession of global and U.S. shocks, from the Covid-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza to the George Floyd protests and the January 6 insurrection, Africa sees the United States through starkly different eyes today. Meanwhile, deep and growing political polarization in the United States is undermining even traditional areas of bipartisan agreement, such as Africa policy. As a result, the conduct and outcome of November's elections will no doubt shape how Washington is viewed and could well influence a host of policy questions that not only matter materially to Africa, but will affect U.S. credibility on the continent for years to come.

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Africa's Expectations

Africans are decidedly more sanguine today about what any new U.S. administration will mean for them. Not since Barack Obama was first elected president have Africans believed that whoever was in the White House would materially affect their well-being. However, the notion that a U.S. president with African roots would somehow fundamentally elevate the continent's importance in Washington was quickly dispelled by an Obama administration that did not stray far from traditional orthodoxy toward Africa: **braying** about democracy and human rights while also pursuing national security interests that often ran contrary to its stated values. The U.S.-led overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi in 2011, the pernicious effects of which are still reverberating across the continent today, remains a contemporary reminder of the ongoing gap between the promotion of U.S. values and the aggressive pursuit of Washington's fundamental interests in Africa.

Despite **promises** from the Biden administration to elevate the collective voices of Africans in global decisionmaking and institutions, the White House has continued to fall short of its rhetoric. Africans still hold no seat at the UN Security Council two years after Biden first **agreed** to it, while the U.S.-led response to climate change, development finance, and great power competition all seem to continue to favor the Global North. This overpromising and underdelivering has only further reinforced the well-established reputation that Washington is an inherently unreliable, even hypocritical, partner. Neither Donald Trump nor Kamala Harris, who have ignored Africa over the course of their campaigns, have done anything to give Africans the impression that their administrations would be appreciably different from the past.

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Against this backdrop, Africans have actively diversified their political, economic, and security partnerships away from Washington over the past decade, sometimes running counter to U.S. interests. China is currently Africa's largest **trade** and investment partner, and countries such as Russia, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates are increasingly becoming the security partners of choice to African countries looking for no-strings-attached military assistance. This hedge against U.S. unreliability not only makes the outcome of any single presidential election less consequential to the continent, but also makes it more difficult for any incoming administration to deepen ties with Africa.

Form over Function

The prospect that there will be deep policy differences between a Trump or Harris administration suggests that each side has deeply held views about what U.S. relationships or policies regarding Africa should look like. But that is simply not the case. From a macro perspective, Africa should expect a great deal of continuity in Washington's underlying policy approach, featuring a few key development and humanitarian initiatives but nothing that fundamentally challenges the ongoing U.S. modus operandi

or how it ranks Africa within its global list of priorities. Interestingly, the prospect of a second U.S. president with African roots also does not appear to have tantalized African publics the way Obama's campaign did, as most of them have now learned to not expect too much from any U.S. politician.

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However, a Harris administration would likely stay faithful to Biden's **U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa**, released in 2022, which seeks to elevate Africa's voice in global institutions and in U.S. decisionmaking on policy matters that affect the continent directly. Harris herself saw this up close when she **traveled** to Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia in March 2023 to "highlight and advance the extraordinary creativity, ingenuity, and dynamism on the continent." But she has also fallen into the easy trap of trying to frame Africa's continuing challenges as somehow China's fault, while painting U.S. engagement as entirely benevolent by making a key **feature** of her Africa program China's responsibility for Africa's debt crisis. Neither are quite true, but holding tight to these tropes does little to show an approach to the continent that breaks from past narratives about how the United States sees African states or how African states should see the United States.

Meanwhile, the Trump shadow policy doctrine, **Project 2025**, seemingly lifts entire elements of Biden's same Africa strategy, arguing, for example, that Africa's "explosive population growth, large reserves of industry-dependent minerals, proximity to key maritime shipping routes, and its collective diplomatic power ensure the continent's global importance." This suggests that the Trump team at least recognizes Africa's long-term strategic importance, much as Biden did. The question is: What will they do about it?

More importantly, the Trump team has perhaps now learned to frame Africa's position as an inherent strength and not merely as a smaller component of the United States' larger **geopolitical** struggle with China or Russia, as it did during his first term in office to the **chagrin** of many on the continent. The bigger litmus test for a potential second Trump administration will be whether he can continue to articulate Africa's inherent value to U.S. strategic interests or if he will revert back to the kinds of **insensitive tropes** that defined his first term in office.

Indeed, the biggest overall difference may be one of form over function. Trump's decidedly derogatory tone during his first term still causes Africans to bristle, but some now view this in retrospect as a harsh yet honest assessment of where they stand in the hierarchy of Washington's priorities. As difficult as this truth is, having it openly stated sets clear expectations for what African leaders can anticipate from Washington and puts the onus on them to deliver for their own people, something that they are already doing as they seek new security and financial partnerships.

Similarly, as distasteful as it seems to many in Washington's foreign policy **establishment**, Trump's blatantly transactional approach to policymaking comes off to some African leaders as a more direct

and transparent way of doing business—and mirrors how many of them already pursue relations with their partners. In contrast to a policy relationship where both sides do not explicitly benefit, which looks more like charity, this approach can more closely resemble a meeting of equals, which is precisely what many African leaders say they seek in their relations with the world. China goes so far as to call its own **strategic agenda** with Africa “A Partnership of Equals.” It would therefore be unsurprising to see a Trump approach to Africa with echoes of China’s own tactics toward the continent.

Conversely, Washington’s continued pursuit of its hard interests often only thinly disguised under the veil of “shared values” can ring increasingly hollow on a continent where leaders take full note of what they see as U.S. hypocrisy when our values are not universally applied around the globe. An incoming administration will have to reckon with the fact that the overall tenor of U.S. relations with Africa will be shaped in large part by Washington’s unquestioning support of Israel and Africa’s own increasing sympathy for the Palestinian cause, as well as Washington’s ongoing support of Ukraine in its war with Russia, the immediate side effects of which continue to punish Africans in the form of higher commodity prices.

Waning Bipartisanship and Global Policy Differences

Expected policy changes toward Africa are likely to be defined more by their delivery than their fundamental intent. Indeed, many of the approaches that will affect Africa the most, from trade to climate to social policies, are not Africa-specific but will affect the continent quite differently than other parts of the world. The fact that so much of U.S. relations with Africa continues to be determined by the unintended consequences of higher-priority efforts elsewhere in the world defines the challenges and pitfalls policymakers face. Therefore, having approaches that are specifically tailored to Africa’s needs and sensibilities will be critical for any administration seeking to deepen partnerships.

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TRADE

The next administration will first have to renew the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (**AGOA**), the Clinton-era trade platform that remains a cornerstone of U.S. Africa policy and which **expires** at the end of fiscal year 2025. The act’s inherent strength stems from the fact that it emerged as a direct answer to African leaders’ long-repeated demand for a relationship with Washington based on “**trade, not aid**.” But while it remains a defining program of the U.S. relationship with Africa, its promise remains unfulfilled and uneven. Only 32 of Africa’s 54 countries currently **qualify** for duty-free access to the U.S. market under AGOA, while more than 80 percent of **AGOA benefits** accrue to only 5 countries.

Expanding AGOA’s reach and impact should be central to its renewal, but this will require a break from recent precedent in which the Biden administration stripped more countries (seven) of their AGOA **eligibility** than it restored (two), the most suspensions by any president. Fears exist that a potential

Harris administration might push seemingly onerous environmental, social, and governance (ESG) requirements that could further hinder AGOA, which would be equally able to punish as to reward when African states fail to meet Washington's high standards and reinforce the reputation of the United States being a fair-weather friend to Africa. Similarly, Republican threats to suspend the participation of South Africa, AGOA's largest beneficiary, owing to Pretoria's "**outrageous** anti-Americanism," also risks further fanning African accusations that the United States is an unreliable partner. For this reason, either administration would do well to insulate this trade privilege from the kinds of political machinations at home that routinely undermine U.S. interests abroad.

UKRAINE

Africa has suffered undue burdens from not only the war in Ukraine itself, but also the Washington-led response to it. Higher inflation, as well as sanctions prohibiting trade with Russia in essential commodities such as fertilizer and wheat, has hurt African economies. And the "us versus them" **narrative** Washington has created within the United Nations has alienated African partners and strengthened U.S. adversaries' ties on the continent. In particular, **Russia** has been adept at convincing many Africans that it was U.S. adventurism and aggressive action that provoked Moscow's invasion.

As such, explicit efforts to end the war in Ukraine and reestablish price stability in the global economy will be met with resounding applause in Africa. Trump has repeatedly pledged a quick end to the war in Ukraine, and his party **platform** boldly asserts, "War breeds Inflation while geopolitical stability brings price stability. Republicans will end the global chaos and restore Peace through Strength, reducing geopolitical risks and lowering commodity prices." Conversely, a Harris administration might double down on bleeding Russia in Ukraine without taking more explicit steps to insulate Africa from the war's unintended effects; this could foster greater resentment from African states and provide new opportunities for Russia to undermine American interests on the continent.

MILITARY COOPERATION

In 2017, Islamist militants ambushed four U.S. Army Green Berets in Tongo Tongo, Niger, throwing into **sharp relief** the small but significant footprint of U.S. troops spread across the African continent. Responding to the incident, President Trump asked "What interest did we have in putting U.S. soldiers in harm's way in fights in Africa that were not ours?" by ordering a "**blank slate**" review of U.S. forces in Africa that could have resulted in the complete withdrawal of troops from the continent, which it almost fully achieved in Somalia. However, Trump's term ended before the review could be completed, and it was quickly shelved under a Biden administration eager to address growing **terror threats** through continued military partnerships.

Might a second Trump administration return to this "America first" deployment strategy in Africa? Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Trump's once and perhaps future national security advisor, Robert O'Brien, argued that "the Pentagon should consider deploying the entire Marine Corps to the Pacific, relieving it in particular of missions in the Middle East and North Africa." But Africa looks far different today than when Trump was in office. The threat from violent extremist organizations has metastasized across the Sahel, and Russia is now a significant player on the security landscape in an increasing number of African states. After expulsions from Chad and Niger over the summer, the U.S. force presence is now even smaller than when Trump was president. As part of a de-emphasized military-first approach, the Biden administration is pursuing a more holistic policy toward these expanding security threats, with

Vice President Harris **announcing** a \$100 million assistance package to frontline states seeking to build resiliency and local-level community efforts to prevent extremist recruitment—an approach a Harris presidency appears poised to continue.

But taking a step back, much of Africa remains largely skeptical of an expanded U.S. military presence on the continent. With the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) already previewing potential new **bases** for U.S. forces in Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, Chad, and Libya, a Trump approach that seeks to actively limit U.S. military presence on the continent could be seen as a welcome change. However, frontline states in West Africa dealing with the encroaching threats from jihadi groups in the Sahel may see such curtailment of U.S. power projection as undermining their own security. It will be difficult for either administration to calibrate the proper disposition of U.S. power. Critical to this endeavor will be letting African leaders and their publics lead in setting the terms of engagement, something the Department of Defense has struggled to do in places like **Chad** and **Niger**, which have expelled U.S. forces in recent months.

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GREAT POWER COMPETITION

One of the memories Africa carries of Trump’s time in office was his **view** of the continent as a chessboard to check China’s growing malign ambitions. The framing of U.S. relations with Africa in the context of great power competition harkens back to Cold War-era policies that created zones of influence in Africa and proxy conflicts that undermined the continent’s political and economic development for decades. While the Biden administration has been careful to frame U.S. engagements in Africa as being strategically important for a **host of other reasons**, its choice of partners suggests that China remains a main driver of U.S. engagement in Africa.

The favor that Washington over the past two administrations has shown to **Angola**, a state with spotty human rights and governance performance and an even worse track record on corruption, is a case in point. Started under Trump, the Biden administration has rapidly accelerated a charm offensive with Angola, as seen by repeated **visits** by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Luanda, the **hosting** of Angolan president João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço at the Oval Office, and Biden himself preparing to visit Angola in October in his **only trip** to Africa as president. This reflects an **unprecedented campaign** to claw Angola back from the Communist orbit it inhabited for decades.

Similar U.S. attention has been heaped on **Equatorial Guinea**, a country with an even more abysmal human rights record but plentiful natural gas deposits that has expressed its openness to hosting a Chinese naval base. A parade of senior U.S. officials has visited President Teodoro Obiang Nguema

Mbasogo, Africa's longest-serving leader at 42 years in office, and his heir-apparent son, proving that China can be kept at bay—mostly when Washington is willing to suspend its values-driven approach.

Africans see this double standard and, in many cases, are doing what they can to stoke U.S.-China competition for their own benefit. Both Harris and Trump appear poised to continue to play the game, which in the long run will only further undermine Washington's already strained credibility in Africa—that is, unless efforts to keep China at bay are recast not as explicitly trying to contain or undermine China, but as being motivated by a deeper desire to improve U.S. bilateral relations with African nations.

CLIMATE

Africa experiences the global climate crisis in a multitude of ways despite being the continent least responsible for it. For years, African leaders have decried Western-imposed climate policies that limit the kinds of energy Africa can access, the mechanisms it can use to finance new energy projects, and the added environmental conditions imposed on their development. In an *Economist* commentary in 2022, Nigeria's vice president **argued**, “Rich countries, especially in Europe, have repeatedly called for African states to use only renewable power sources. . . . The renewables-only mantra is also driven by unjustified fears of the continent's future emissions. Yet under no plausible scenario is Africa a threat to global climate targets.”

The Biden administration, for its part, has acknowledged some of this but has not used its leverage in institutions such as the World Bank to lift bans on fossil fuel financing, including and especially for natural gas projects, as Africans have called for. Interestingly, this is perhaps a policy where a Trump administration might better align with African states' policy objectives. As a recent Heritage Foundation paper **argues**, “It's obscene for aid agencies to demand that Africans forgo economic growth to satisfy Western fears of climate catastrophe. A conservative foreign-aid policy should prioritize real people over climate paranoia.” But with so far to go to meet their energy demands, Africans want more than a simple acknowledgement of the issue; they want to see tangible progress. The U.S. administration willing to push back against current climate-finance orthodoxy will find deals to be done in Africa that reap positive externalities beyond the energy sector.

IMMIGRATION

No U.S. domestic political issue is likely to be felt more in Africa than the topic of immigration. Africans remember clearly the painful language used by President Trump when he enacted his first “**Muslim ban**” during his first hours in office. A new, and possibly expanded, prohibition on citizens from a host of Muslim-majority African countries entering the United States could well set back relations with the continent before any other Africa policy can even be formulated.

Countries such as Sudan, Libya, and Somalia—whose citizens were previously banned from travel to the United States—would likely join an even wider list under a second Trump administration owing to the increased illegal **migration** of West Africans across the southern U.S. border in recent years. That many of these African migrants originate in countries now deemed by AFRICOM as representing a new **epicenter** of jihadi violence in the world increases the odds that a Trump administration could ban more Africans from U.S. shores. While promises of immigration bans, strict vetting, and “mass deportations,” as spelled out in the Republican **platform**, appeal to a certain American electorate, such far-reaching policies have the potential to undermine every aspect of U.S. engagement in Africa.

SOCIAL ISSUES

One element that continues to rile U.S. partners in Africa is Washington's tendency to impose its own social values on global development policy. Whether it is the requirement that countries respect and extend LGBTQ **rights** as laid out in Biden administration policy, likely to be continued under a Harris administration, or the prohibitions on family-planning and abortion funding supported by successive Republican administrations, both parties have a history of imposing their respective mores on African partners.

To this end, **Uganda** was suspended last year from the AGOA program and saw multiple rounds of visa restrictions and financial sanctions imposed on Ugandan officials over the passage of a bill that criminalizes same-sex relations. At the same time, \$1 billion in President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) funding—the wildly popular, bipartisan effort to fight HIV/AIDS across Africa—was **held up** over Republican claims that the program was also funding abortions overseas.

As a recent Heritage Foundation study on U.S. development assistance **notes**:

Washington should devote its limited [development] resources to programming that all Americans can support, not partisan pet projects. Pursuing the latter will only further divide a polarized country and result in poor outcomes around the world. African countries, for instance, resent tying aid to what they consider to be ideological colonialism and routinely point out that China attaches no such strings to its aid.

While recognizing that this challenge to U.S. development policy is perhaps half the battle, it is unlikely that either a Trump or Harris administration would abandon its “partisan pet projects,” even if it means ceding more ground to U.S. global competitors. This approach is likely to complicate relations with Africa for years to come.

Conclusion

A new U.S. administration comes into office next January and will immediately have to grapple with a host of security and political challenges gripping African states, from the civil war in Sudan to spreading extremism in the Sahel to instability in the Great Lakes region. Addressing these challenges will require local partners and local knowledge to craft a response tailored to the specific circumstances driving each issue. However, so much of the overall U.S. policy agenda toward Africa, from trade to finance to development to climate, is being set elsewhere and then applied unevenly to the continent in ways that do not fully address Africans' needs or achieve the United States' desired impact.

As the global competition for influence mounts on this increasingly strategic continent, African leaders will be looking to see that their interests have been heard and are being acted upon. This will require the United States to not only tailor responses to meet their specific concerns, but also refrain from imposing its own domestic political fights on its partners. African leaders and Washington have both benefited from the bipartisan political consensus that has defined their relations for decades. But if this bipartisanship erodes further, the United States risks ceding even more influence to its competitors and further alienating a continent that already sees it as unreliable. Washington's own ability to arrest and reverse this trend will do much to determine the strength of relations with the continent well past the incoming administration. ■

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