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The US-Africa Leaders' Summit: A Review

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1. Introduction

A half-day policy seminar was held on 27 February 2023, hosted by the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS), and the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship (CAS), both at the University of Pretoria (UP) in South Africa; and the Center for African Studies at Howard University in Washington D.C. in the US. The meeting sought to review the main outcomes of the December 2022 US-Africa Leaders' Summit held in Washington D.C., and to assess the historical and broader context of the relationship. The seminar was attended by policymakers, scholars, civil society, and media in Africa and America, and sought to address five key questions: First, was the US/Africa summit successful at addressing mutual interests between both sides? Second, what was promised and delivered in the eight years between the two US/Africa summits of 2014 and 2022? Third, what pledges were made at the 2022 summit, and what obstacles could prevent their fulfilment? Fourth, how can African governments muster the agency jointly to set the agenda of, and pursue the continent's interests at, these summits? Finally, how can Africa leverage any political, economic, security and other opportunities presented by these summits? This report is based on discussions at the February 2023 policy seminar and some additional research.

2. The US/Africa Leaders' Summit: From Barack Obama to Joe Biden

The US/Africa Summit in December 2022 was the second meeting since its inception in August 2014. President Donald Trump (2017-2021) did not convene a US/Africa Summit during his term in office. At both meetings in 2014 and 2022, presidents Barack Obama (2009-2016) and Joe Biden (since 2021) pledged financial support to diverse socio-economic sectors in Africa. President Obama specifically proposed an initial \$7 billion commitment of US government financing to electricity; \$7 billion in government financing to encourage US exports to, and investments in, Africa; and an annual expenditure of \$110 million to help African countries to develop their peacekeeping capacity. Through the Rapid Response Partnership programme, several technical accords were also signed including the Investment Framework Agreement with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

At both US/Africa Summit meetings in 2014 and 2022, presidents Barack Obama (2009-2016) and Joe Biden (since 2021) pledged financial support to diverse socio-economic sectors in Africa.

SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT, CYRIL RAMAPHOSA, MEETS US PRESIDENT, JOE BIDEN, IN THE WHITE HOUSE IN SEPTEMBER 2022.

IMAGE CREDIT - [Wikimedia Commons/Adam Schultz](#)



Two of the most notable initiatives that emerged from the 2014 Summit were Power Africa, a programme aimed at boosting foreign investment in African energy infrastructure, and the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), a professional development programme through which 500 African youths under the age of 35 were annually provided with six weeks of intensive executive leadership training, networking, and skills-building at US institutions. \$10 million was also to be provided for building businesses and social enterprises in Africa.

Power Africa, however, fell short of its targets. As Obama left office in 2016, this project, intended to double electricity to 20 million African households, had left the continent in the dark: less than 5 per cent of new power had been generated at 400 megawatts, way short of the target of 10,000 megawatts. By 2023, however, the US government reported that the project had provided Africa with over 6,500 megawatts of new electricity. YALI was regarded as more successful, having trained thousands of young African leaders who are now part of a continental network of dynamic innovators.

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YALI WELCOMES PARTICIPANTS TO THE SOUTHERN AFRICA YALI REGIONAL LEADERSHIP CENTER IN PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA IN FEBRUARY 2017.

IMAGE CREDIT - [Wikimedia Commons/USAID/Southern Africa Regional](#)



Obama further called on the US Congress to extend and improve the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which allows duty-free access to the American market for over 1,800 African products. Enacted in 2000, the extension of AGOA is due in 2025. The initiative has enabled African countries to export non-oil products to the US worth \$34 billion between 2014 and 2021. However, none of the 36 eligible African countries have been able to take full advantage of these opportunities due to a lack of capacity. In 2015, 52 per cent of African exports to America consisted of oil and gas, while only 1.3 per cent of US imports came from Africa in 2021.

The 2022 US/Africa Summit prioritised conservation, climate change; clean energy transition; supply chains; investment; entrepreneurship; and technology innovation. Some of the main outcomes included: plans to invest at least \$55 billion in Africa over the subsequent three years, and commitments of over \$15 billion in two-way trade, investment deals, and partnerships. New investment and policy initiatives at the summit also included the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Washington and the Accra-based African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) secretariat to promote equitable, sustainable, and inclusive trade that seeks to bolster Africa's \$3.4 trillion market of 1.3 billion people. Former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Johnnie Carson, was appointed to coordinate the implementation of the key outcomes of the summit, which included the creation of a President's Advisory Council on African Diaspora.

The gathering of African leaders in foreign capitals like Washington, Beijing, Paris, and Tokyo over the past two decades was, however, criticised as having done little to advance the continent's economic development and self-reliance. For example, Washington and its allies have failed to provide the \$100 billion annually they had promised to African and global South countries to protect them from the ravages of climate change. Africa was thus urged to build a common continental home, brick by brick, to ensure wider and deeper integration, as well as to promote internally-driven development that serves African citizens.

At the US/Africa Summit in 2022, African leaders called for greater American support to tackle counter-terrorism on the continent. This situation was criticised by civil society as having reduced the summit to a political bazaar in which personal loyalties were traded. It could result in dangerous “elite pacts” in which ordinary citizens are held hostage to US-trained security forces – increasingly conducting counter-terrorism activities on behalf of Washington – who are emboldened to act with impunity. Somali leader, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, for example, requested Washington to loosen restrictions on drone strikes against al-Shabab militants, which could result in a lack of accountability for Somali civilian deaths, with the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) already failing to report accurately on civilian fatalities from its military strikes, which are often treated as “collateral damage”.

Speaking at the US/Africa Summit, senior American officials such as Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and Administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Samantha Power, tended to view Africa through a prism of risk and instability, ignoring the “Scramble” for the continent’s riches by great powers which has often fuelled such insecurity.

3. Key Issues in US/Africa Relations

There is an inherent power imbalance bedevilling Africa-US relations. At the heart of this asymmetry is the idea of 49 African heads of state travelling to Washington D.C. to meet with the American president. Furthermore, African leaders did not make much input into the summit agenda. This contradicts and undermines the much touted “equal partnership” mantra that Washington often repeats. American interests in Africa do not also always align with African interests, as seen in the unwillingness of the US to place the issue of illicit financial flows from Africa to the US on the summit agenda.

A compelling theme of the 2022 Summit was the Biden administration’s efforts to engage and embrace America’s African Diaspora. Caution was, however, expressed about narratives emerging from the summit that sought to mask important differences, while constructing a single, “new” African Diaspora comprised of groups who had voluntarily migrated to the US after the decade of African independence from the 1960s. These American Africans have been defined as distinct from the “old” Diaspora of African Americans: the descendants of enslaved Africans. It was noted that the US/Africa Summit’s emphasis on the “new” Diaspora aligns well with Washington’s revisionist history of American capitalism which is untethered from its dark past of slavery and colonialism. But the separation of the African Diaspora into “old” and “new” will likely have important domestic and international consequences, some of which could create deep divisions within the black community in the US.

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US SECRETARY OF STATE, ANTONY BLINKEN, MEETS WITH ETHIOPIAN PRIME MINISTER, ABIY AHMED, IN WASHINGTON, D.C. IN DECEMBER 2022.

IMAGE CREDIT - [Wikimedia Commons](#)



On the African side, there was little coordination between African governments and the African Union (AU) to develop a common position on Africa/US relations. This has made the continent vulnerable to “divide and rule” strategies that make it easy for Washington to play different countries off against each other. The failure of regional African powers such as Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Algeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia to lead the continent, has been exploited by global powers such as the US, China, France, and Russia which have all established a military presence across Africa.

The African media’s framing and representation of the US/Africa Summit has also sometimes served to undermine the continent’s agency. For example, beside reporting the summit as “news”, the continent’s media need to focus on interrogating the structural arrangements and processes that enable power disparities to be perpetuated within the broader international system.

4. A Critique of the New US Africa Strategy

It was argued that US policy has been consistently malignant for Africa over the past six decades. The simplistic approach of viewing Democrats as “good” for Africa, and Republicans as “bad,” is therefore unhelpful. During the Cold War, presidents from both parties backed autocrats in countries such as Somalia, Zaire – now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – Liberia, and Chad. After the Cold War, as the genocide that killed 800,000 people in Rwanda unfolded in 1994, the Democratic president, Bill Clinton, forced the withdrawal of a 2,500-strong United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force which would have saved countless lives. In contrast, Republican president George W. Bush’s \$18.8 billion President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) provided support to 12 African countries, and saved millions of lives.

African-American Democratic president, Barack Obama, massively extended George W. Bush’s military expansionism into Africa, with a US military presence in an estimated 20 countries by the time he left office in 2016. Democratic president, Joe Biden, has not yet found time in his over three years as president to visit Africa, though he has travelled to Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

The new “US Strategy for sub-Saharan Africa” of August 2022 promised to “reset” the relationship. It enunciated four key goals: foster open societies; deliver democratic and security dividends; advance pandemic recovery and economic opportunity; and support the climate agenda.

Barack Obama massively extended George W. Bush’s military expansionism into Africa, with a US military presence in an estimated 20 countries by the time he left office in 2016.

US SOLDIERS AND BOTSWANA DEFENCE FORCE MEMBERS PRACTICE PATROL MOVEMENTS IN BOTSWANA IN AUGUST 2022.

IMAGE CREDIT - AFRICOM



Beijing's \$4 trillion Belt and Road initiative has built roads, bridges, and railways across Africa, while Washington's Group of Seven (G7) Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment remains unimplemented.

THE SECOND BELT AND ROAD FORUM WAS HELD IN BEIJING FROM 25 TO 27 APRIL 2019.

IMAGE CREDIT - [Wikimedia Commons](#)



But this strategy is highly problematic in four important ways. First, the US cuts Africa off at its head, insisting that this is a sub-Saharan African policy. In contradiction of this approach, Washington then invited Afro-Arab leaders from North Africa to the December 2022 summit. Second, even as the US uses political and economic muscle to emasculate African interests in global fora, it is calling in this strategy for African agency and strong African voices. Third, with no sense of irony, the US strategy repeatedly touts its “long and proud history...with African countries built on a foundation of deep cultural connections,” as if America's 250-year participation in the sordid Transatlantic slave trade which greatly assisted the country's industrialisation – at the cost of 450,000 enslaved Africans – never happened. More recently, president Donald Trump described Africa as a “shithole,” exposing the deep and persistent prejudices at the highest levels of the American government. Fourth, the US has an unbridled free-market capitalist ideology. This approach tends to see Africa mainly as an economic opportunity for its corporate giants, rather than as a place that wants to promote its own communal solidarity and fairer societies through economic development and integration.

The 2022 US Africa Strategy explicitly warned Africans about what it described as China and Russia's malign activities in Africa. However, between 2016 and 2020, the US was the largest arms exporter to Africa at 37 per cent, compared to China's five per cent. Beijing's \$4 trillion Belt and Road initiative has built roads, bridges, and railways across Africa, while Washington's Group of Seven (G7) Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment remains unimplemented. China, Africa's largest trading partner at \$254 billion; has lent African governments \$160 billion over the last two decades, with two-thirds ploughed into infrastructure; while Beijing accounts for 20 per cent of Africa's industrial output. While Africans appreciate Beijing's infrastructure, they are generally opposed to Chinese autocracy. Many Africans have also observed that Washington and its allies have themselves benefitted tremendously from Chinese trade and investment. Africa should, however, welcome president Biden's support for permanent African and Latin American membership on the powerful UN Security Council.

Policy Recommendations

The following 10 recommendations emerged from the policy seminar:

1. First, the US must act in the true spirit of “equal partnership” that rhetorically undergirds its 2022 Africa strategy by inviting substantive inputs from African governments into the agenda of future summits; both sides should also rotate the hosting of the US-Africa summits, with the next one to be held in Africa.
2. Second, Washington must specifically address the issue of illicit financial flows from Africa to the US at the next summit.

3. Third, African governments should agree on common positions to adopt at future summits; such meetings must also include more sessions with, and representations from, African civil society, the media, and youth groups.
4. Fourth, the African Union should coordinate a cooperative regional leadership driven by states such as South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Algeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya to craft a collective position for Africa to engage the US.
5. Fifth, African governments need to invest in at least one national research centre that studies the US in order to foster knowledge-driven engagement between both sides; African leaders should also build a world-class medical university financed by a \$10 million annual contribution from each of the AU's 55 members. Within 20 years, a valuable network of regional medical centres would have emerged.
6. Sixth, synergy should be promoted between various media outlets (including public and private) in Africa in order to frame and represent the summit in ways that align with Africa's common positions.
7. Seventh, rather than pleading with Washington to open its markets to African goods, African governments should boost African markets that are currently dominated by agricultural imports through greater intra-African trade.
8. Eighth, if the US is really serious about sustainable security and governance in Africa, it needs to invest heavily in peacebuilding, working with local and regional actors, as well as the UN, since by some estimates, half of war-torn countries relapse into conflicts after peace settlements as a result of a lack of support for post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding activities.
9. Ninth, to combat bullying, African governments must craft more effective non-alignment strategies, insisting on the withdrawal of American, French, Russian, and Chinese militaries from Africa, while strongly supporting international norms through the UN and other multilateral bodies. This would help combat attempts by legislators in the US Congress to pass laws such as the anti-Russian bills which unsuccessfully sought to force African governments to adopt punitive approaches towards Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.
10. Finally, the US should strengthen its historical and strategic alliances with the African Diaspora, and avoid creating divisions between "old" and "new" Diasporas. If Washington is to engage more effectively with the often enterprising two million-strong American Africans in the US, a new strategy must be built around the entire 40-million strong African-American population, the Congressional Black Caucus, and US civil society and businesses acting to provide greater investment and tourism, as well as supporting Africa's humanitarian and security needs.

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PARTICIPANTS AT THE US AFRICA LEADERS' SUMMIT AT THE WASHINGTON CONVENTION CENTER IN DECEMBER 2022.

IMAGE CREDIT - [Wikimedia Commons/Adam Schultz](#)

