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Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder No. 5
May 2021

Major Power Rivalry in Africa

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This Discussion Paper was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

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INTRODUCTION

Competition for influence on the African continent is an undeniable geopolitical reality. The Donald Trump administration's emphasis on countering China and Russia on the continent raised concerns about unwelcome echoes of the Cold War era, when the United States often treated African states as pawns or prizes rather than partners. But a desire to avoid the mistakes of the past does not negate the need to grapple with the motivations and consequences of other powers' Africa agendas. The Joe Biden administration, and all major powers, face the same facts: by 2050, a quarter of the world's population will be African and the continent's youthful and growing labor force—the largest in the world by that point—will stand in stark contrast to the aging populations of other regions. That human capital will increasingly become the most important feature of Africa's global profile, although Africa's natural resources, including cobalt and other rare earth metals critical to humanity's technology-driven future, will also remain relevant. No entity aiming to influence global affairs in the decades to come can afford a passive Africa strategy.

These facts do not have to lead to what the *Economist* called a “new scramble for Africa.”¹ They speak to the continent's greater integration into the global economy, the promise and the peril of Africa's demographic transformation, and the power of Africa's voice and vote when most of the region's fifty-four countries are united in global forums. At a moment when the norms and expectations of international relations are in transition, countries taking stock of the future see the wisdom in deepening ties with Africa. But the nature of that interaction varies widely, as do the motivations and ambitions that underlie major powers' Africa agendas.

Although major power competition is a reality, giving it an outsized role in policymaking would be a mistake. With a host of interests at stake, simply boxing out rivals will not deliver policy success or influence, and policies that prioritize that approach are guilty of a fundamental misunderstanding of African interests. African states are not looking for one patron or protector, but rather as wide a range of partners as possible so they can choose the best offer in any given situation to achieve the security and prosperity they seek. No tough talk will change that, and no partnership is likely to have lasting benefits without matching African aspirations and interests to those of the United States.

Major power rivalry cannot be ignored, but it also should not dominate the Biden administration's vision for U.S.-Africa relations. In acknowledging that African governments and societies will interact with a wide variety of partners to achieve their goals, the United States should develop a clearheaded understanding of the interests, strategies, and methods employed by other significant external actors in order to identify areas of friction and avoid unnecessary tension. The thorniest issues will entail challenges to the United States' ability to project power and protect sea-lanes, as well as challenges to global norms and standards in realms as varied as cybersecurity and human rights. Understanding what exactly the United States seeks to avoid—and why—would mitigate the tendency to see inevitable and even healthy global interaction with the continent as threatening. It can also reveal opportunities to deepen cooperation with other external powers when possible and desirable.

As part of that process, the United States needs to break its habit of warning against the potential pitfalls of working with other major powers without providing effective alternatives to satisfy the needs that these powers address. This is not a race-to-the-bottom proposal. The United States should not seek to meet the needs of a government seeking arms and surveillance technology to repress its own people simply because it fears someone else will. But the United States should also recognize that other states seeking financial support to build critical infrastructure or satisfy their populations' energy needs are pursuing legitimate national interests. Abstract appeals to "shared values" or vague warnings about their partners' nefarious intentions are beside the point.

Instead, U.S. policy should be dictated by a farsighted understanding of its goals in regard to peace and security, prosperity and development, and institutions and norms in Africa. The United States benefits when African states are able to provide for their own security and address

transnational threats emanating from within their borders; when African economic growth provides opportunity to African citizens and to those abroad who trade, invest, and co-create with them; when Africa is a rule-governed region that bolsters respect for universal rights and the rule of law; and when Africa is invested and active in international institutions that mitigate global crises. To help realize this vision, the United States should capitalize on what makes it a compelling partner to African states, work more closely and strategically with like-minded partners, create more space for African agendas in its vision for future global governance, and work to build lasting affinities.

MAJOR POWERS' INVOLVEMENT AND INTERESTS IN AFRICA

Although many countries pursue a variety of interests and partnerships on the African continent, among major powers, the United States and China are by far the most influential and the most frequently understood as rivals. Afrobarometer data suggests that African populations see China and the United States as roughly equal in their influence, with other powers distantly behind.² However, understanding other actors in the region—India, Japan, Russia, Europe, and, increasingly, Turkey and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf—will be essential to any successful U.S. attempt to compete with the Chinese juggernaut on the continent.

THE UNITED STATES

The United States has broad security, economic, and political interests at stake in Africa, although it has had only sporadic success in pursuing them. On the security front, the United States works with African partners to constrain and defeat violent extremist organizations across the continent, from al-Shabab in the Horn of Africa to Boko Haram in Nigeria to affiliates of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and al-Qaeda throughout the Sahel. Despite the Trump administration's talk of a drawdown in military personnel, which provoked strong congressional opposition, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) still has between six and seven thousand military personnel on the ground in Africa.³ The United States has only one permanent military base on the continent, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti (a hub for U.S. military activities in Yemen as well as on the African continent), but has many smaller outposts throughout Africa of varying degrees of permanence, from Manda Bay in Kenya to Agadez in Niger. Indeed, since the United

States established its Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, critics of U.S. policy have decried the increasing militarization of U.S. Africa policy, noting the proliferation of counterterrorism efforts and the fact that the DOD's resources often dwarf those available to other elements of government.

But not all U.S. security activity on the continent is focused on countering terrorist threats. In pursuit of stability, the United States has long been the world's most generous contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations, the majority of which are deployed on the African continent. For decades, the United States has worked to train, equip, and exercise with African militaries in an effort to boost professionalism and capacity and develop lasting relationships.⁴ The U.S. commitment to open sea-lanes and the global commerce they facilitate keeps the U.S. Navy invested in countering piracy and ensuring freedom of the seas all around the African continent.

Since the Bill Clinton administration, the United States has also highlighted trade, investment, and the opportunities inherent in Africa's growing middle class. The 2000 African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)—which provided African goods access to U.S. markets—led to some gains in trade volume initially, but since those improvements plateaued, concrete progress has come in fits and starts at best. Due in part to changes in energy markets and a slowdown in African growth, U.S. trade with and investment in Africa have declined significantly over the past decade, now accounting for less than 1.5 percent of U.S. global trade and less than 1 percent of U.S. foreign direct investment.⁵ The Trump administration's Prosper Africa initiative was intended to address this policy shortfall and bolster U.S. business in Africa by better coordinating the U.S.

government's efforts, supported by legislation that established the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and doubled the limit on U.S. government-backed investments from \$29 billion to \$60 billion globally.⁶ Although Prosper Africa's aims are laudable, the initiative has had limited time to deliver results.

Meanwhile, with AGOA's looming expiration in 2025, the Trump administration focused on negotiating a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with Kenya, hoping it would be a model for other countries. Whether the U.S. government has the bandwidth for negotiating individual FTAs with most African states and what the implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area could be for that approach remain unclear. Given the changing African context, the Biden administration will have to devise an economic approach to the continent that is fundamentally different from what came before.

The United States has also long been one of the continent's most significant development partners, providing over \$7 billion a year in assistance to African states.⁷ Most of that funding (roughly 70 percent) is devoted to health priorities, particularly to combating HIV/AIDS, but the assistance portfolio is vast and includes work in education, natural resource management, agriculture, and strengthening governance. The United States is also the world's largest contributor to the World Bank and to various UN agencies that do significant work in Africa, including agencies responsible for humanitarian relief.

The United States aims to develop partners that can share in advancing its preferred global norms and in addressing the burden of global threats, from pandemic disease to climate change to illicit trafficking in people, arms, narcotics, and wildlife. That means both enhancing African capacity and strengthening African support for the United States' global agenda. The United States has long assumed a certain degree of African support for the rules-based international architecture that has governed international relations since the end of World War II, and it has sought African support within that framework for policy priorities from nuclear nonproliferation to human rights protections. The United States provides funding to strengthen democratic governance and the rule of law throughout the continent, supporting everything from independent media training to anti-money laundering units in African finance ministries. In some instances, when African visions on global norms are not aligned with those of the United States, Washington has sought to apply pressure to African states, using targeted sanctions on both individuals and entities. As in the rest of the world, U.S. policy priorities on the continent sometimes conflict with each other, as when

counterterrorism partners are accused of human rights abuses. Inconsistencies abound.

Despite all of this activity, the Biden administration is inheriting narratives about the United States in Africa that focus on waning commitment, a jealous obsession with China, and unforced errors, such as Trump's widely reported disparaging characterizations of African states, travel bans, and proposed regulations barring Africans, including students accepted into U.S. universities, from the United States.⁸ Year after year, the Trump administration's budget requests proposed massive cuts to foreign assistance, both bilateral and through the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, that would likely affect Africa more than any other region. Only bipartisan congressional support for U.S. policies with respect to health, democracy promotion, and security assistance in Africa saved these signature commitments from the chopping block. The Trump administration declined to follow up on the 2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, the first event of its kind. Meanwhile, confused diplomacy in Ethiopia and Sudan sidelined support for those historic transitions in favor of U.S. desires to bolster support for Egypt and Israel. The U.S. position on Western Sahara, an important issue to many African states, was haphazardly linked to last-minute Middle East diplomacy. And attacks on the International Criminal Court, which thus far has primarily dealt with African cases, muddled U.S. messaging on support for accountability and human rights.⁹ The Biden administration will benefit to some degree from representing a change from the policies of the past four years. But it will have a challenge on its hands in affirming the United States' commitment to partnerships in Africa and to African democracy while coping with a major economic crisis, and it will have to rely on deft diplomacy rather than substantial new spending.

CHINA

The breadth and depth of China's economic involvement in Africa are difficult to overstate, but China's political and military involvement in the region varies in intensity. Far from an emerging actor on the African scene, China has been the preeminent and indispensable infrastructure and financing partner for many African states for many years. Since 2000, long before the formal launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, China has hosted a regular Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a more formalized and regularized approach

to high-level partnership than the United States has pursued. But even before establishing this formal channel to drive its Africa strategy forward, the Chinese Communist Party has enjoyed decades-long close ties with certain powerful African political parties, such as Zimbabwe's ruling African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM).

Since surpassing the United States as Africa's largest trading partner in 2009, China's trade with the continent has come to dwarf that of any other single country.¹⁰ Foreign direct investment has grown at some 40 percent per year for a decade, and China is by far the largest source of infrastructure financing on the continent.¹¹ Chinese-financed infrastructure projects are ubiquitous throughout Africa; from roads to rail to ports to power plants, China is bankrolling prominent, often promising projects that make tangible differences in the economic opportunities available to Africans. However, the terms of this financing are rarely transparent, raising real concerns among Africans and others about debt. China holds roughly 20 percent of all African debt, and in some countries—such as Zambia and the strategically important Djibouti—that figure is over 50 percent.¹² In the worst case, that level of indebtedness can leave populations mired in poverty as governments direct scarce resources toward servicing debt rather than transformative domestic investments. It can ultimately lead to an effective loss of state assets and even sovereign control to foreign creditors.¹³

Africans are not blasé about being beholden to Beijing. Afrobarometer found that 58 percent of those aware of loans from China believe that their government has borrowed too much and are concerned about being overly indebted to China.¹⁴ Nor is it certain that China can continue pumping money into African economies at its current pace; explicit policy decisions and its own domestic economic constraints are likely to slow the pace of Chinese investment in Africa. Nonetheless, China will remain a premier economic partner for the foreseeable future.¹⁵

China's preferred vision for global technological standards also finds expression in its Africa policy. The telecommunications company Huawei dominates African markets, and ZTE has been actively gaining market share since 1997.¹⁶ China's approach both responds to real demands on the ground for affordable and functional information technology and raises concerns about privacy and Beijing's access to African data. For example, after China built and equipped the new African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa in 2012, AU data was

transferred constantly to servers in Shanghai until the breach became public in 2017.¹⁷ Yet the AU signed a new memorandum of understanding with Huawei as recently as 2019.¹⁸

Increasingly, China also seeks a more robust military and security presence on the continent. From participating in peacekeeping missions to joining multilateral efforts to counterpiracy in the Gulf of Aden to increasing the presence of Chinese “private security companies” (which are closely tied to the state), the past decade has seen a significant increase in Chinese military engagement in Africa.¹⁹ Most notably, China built its first formal overseas military base in Djibouti, which officially opened in 2017 alongside bases controlled by the United States, France, Italy, and Japan. In 2018, China began hosting annual China-Africa Defense and Security Forums, and it has pledged military assistance to the AU’s African Standby Force.²⁰ China is also the second-largest arms exporter to sub-Saharan Africa, after Russia.²¹

The overarching political frame for China’s activities on the continent explicitly depends on a contrast to the United States and Europe. Beijing seeks to offer an alternative model of development to that of the Washington consensus of free-market economic prescriptions espoused by the Bretton Woods institutions. The Chinese approach is to hold up its own breathtaking domestic economic transformation as the example to be emulated—one that does not require multiparty democracy to deliver results but rather enjoys the efficiency of authoritarianism.²² Thus, China can largely adhere to its stated commitment to noninterference in the domestic affairs of African partners, at least insofar as it rarely uses its influence to counter the interests of ruling elites.²³ Indeed, Beijing seeks close relationships with ruling parties, investing in significant party-to-party training.²⁴ The overall approach makes China particularly appealing to governments struggling with sanctions or preconditions from international financial institutions.

This frame is not just a tool for differentiation but an agenda and vision for global governance with China at its center. China’s 2015 white paper on Africa policy makes this explicit, framing China-Africa cooperation in the context of a changing international order that needs to accommodate new powers and priorities.²⁵ At the same time that it asserts China’s increasing importance in shaping global developments, the white paper calls for UN reforms to increase African representation and voice—linking Chinese aspirations to those of African states—calling for nothing less than “a new model of international relations.”²⁶

RUSSIA

Russia's approach to Africa appears more opportunistic and less ambitious than that of China or the United States. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was a powerful and influential patron of countries such as Ethiopia and Angola, and it waged proxy conflicts with the West on African soil. But after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Africa seemed to fall off the radar screen of Russian policymakers. Russia still welcomes opportunities to frame itself as a longtime ally of African liberation and to criticize the West as a neocolonial oppressor. In recent years, Russia has significantly raised the public profile of its Africa presence, most notably at the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi.²⁷ As a permanent UN Security Council member, Russia assiduously works to court African states serving on the council as part of its overall effort to thwart Western powers and to continue influencing global affairs. But today, Russian assistance and investment pale in comparison to that of other external actors. Russian trade with sub-Saharan Africa is roughly a quarter of the United States' and less than one-tenth of China's. Russia does not factor among the ten largest sources of foreign direct investment in Africa, is not at all a relevant actor in mainstream development initiatives, and has been criticized for self-dealing in its paltry humanitarian and disaster assistance efforts.²⁸ Despite the window dressing of major power diplomacy, Russia brings little to the table in Africa.

Most of Russia's African activities are narrowly transactional, even in the security sphere. The Russia of President Vladimir Putin seeks African clients for its arms trade (Russia accounts for over a third of all sub-Saharan African arms imports), mercenary operations, and nuclear technology.²⁹ Russia has aggressively sought defense cooperation agreements with a number of countries and publicized its interest in establishing military bases in the region, but it remains to be seen whether meaningful substance will emerge to match the rhetoric.³⁰ The recent announcement that Russia secured an agreement to build a naval base in Sudan would seem to mark a significant step in realizing Moscow's ambitions, and it undoubtedly triggered concern in Washington—though the still-undetermined outcome of Sudan's political transition could yet influence the scope of Russian plans.³¹ The Wagner Group, an ostensibly private military company closely linked to the Russian government, attracted attention and prompted some alarm with its notable involvement in resource-rich countries, such as the Central African Republic and

Mozambique, but the organization's performance in these countries is hardly a compelling advertisement for Russian prowess. Russian businesses have stepped up their involvement in Africa's extractive industries in recent years, as exemplified by Alrosa's involvement in Angolan and Zimbabwean diamond mines.³² But for competitive purposes, the most significant opportunities Moscow seeks in Africa are circumstances that allow Russia to play a spoiler role or to thwart Western aims in multilateral forums.³³

Perhaps Russia's most ambitious Africa initiative in recent years was its attempt to reinvigorate its relationship with South Africa, using historical ties, a shared reflexive distrust of the West, and the dubious proposition that BRICS members—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—had enough in common to help build alternatives to the Western-dominated international architecture. But Russia sabotaged its own effort by centering its strategy on the corruption of South African President Jacob Zuma's government. When parts of South African civil society and elements of the South African state pushed back against a nonsensical and wildly expensive plan to hire Russia's Rosatom to build nuclear power reactors in the country, the backlash contributed to Zuma's downfall and left Russia exposed as a power eager to help loot the state at the expense of its citizens.³⁴ Russia could have success in weaponizing corruption elsewhere, but in this case, it set back Russian attempts to gain new leverage in southern Africa.³⁵

EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union (EU) and many of its member states, notably Belgium, France, and Portugal, have long and complex histories in Africa and retain significant cultural and economic ties there. In certain African countries, sizeable European expatriate populations inform policy decisions, particularly regarding fundamental issues of stability.³⁶ Europe often touts the fact that when European countries are taken as a bloc, the EU is Africa's main trade partner.³⁷ In recent years, the EU has sought to elevate the profile of its Africa partnerships, both in response to increasing political sensitivity to migration from Africa among member states and as part of a strategy to protect Europe's interests in a time of geopolitical change and the possibility of a future defined by increased U.S.-China competition.

In 2020, the EU proposed a new Africa strategy with five primary focus areas: a "green transition" and energy access; digital

transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace, security, and governance; and migration and mobility. Though COVID-19 has forced the postponement of the EU-Africa summit originally planned for October 2020, a version of this strategy is likely to be approved at a rescheduled summit. Likewise, 2020 was slated as the year to solidify a successor to the Cotonou Agreement that has governed trade and provided structure to development and governance dialogues between Africa and the EU since 2000. The EU's highly formalized and institutionalized nature is somewhat reflected in the AU, and to a certain degree, the EU presents itself as an example to emulate as Africa works toward greater integration in the pursuit of the AU's Agenda 2063.³⁸

Among European states, none has more significant influence in Africa than France. France has long provided security guarantees to former colonies, and today, its Operation Barkhane in the Sahel is its largest overseas military commitment, with nearly five thousand French personnel deployed in counterinsurgency efforts to contain radical extremists and stabilize Mali and its neighbors. Over two thousand additional French service members are stationed elsewhere on the continent, including at a permanent base in Djibouti, which sometimes hosts personnel from other European states.³⁹ France maintains extensive commercial ties to francophone Africa, to the point of retaining involvement in the monetary policy of fourteen African states (though West African states recently moved to end this anachronistic arrangement).⁴⁰ Under French President Emmanuel Macron's leadership, France has also made significant efforts to bolster economic ties with anglophone countries such as Nigeria and Kenya.⁴¹ But French influence is a perennial point of contention for francophone African societies, and widespread suspicion that the French privilege their own interests and those of their African elite business partners can be politically perilous for France.

OTHER NOTABLE ACTORS

United Kingdom

How Brexit will affect the United Kingdom (UK)'s policy in Africa remains to be seen. Early indications are that London hopes to leverage its influence in certain African states to dramatically increase investment and bolster its global profile now that it has decoupled from Europe. The UK maintains a military base in Kenya, and its

Commonwealth relationships still sometimes give it outsized political significance, although the weight of history is sometimes as much a hindrance as a help to British policy in Africa. Whether the UK can find strategic clarity in its Africa policy, identify real comparative advantages that make it an appealing partner to Africans, or marshal the resources to match that rhetoric remain open questions.⁴²

India

India aims to prevent Chinese dominance in the Indian Ocean. It has accordingly stepped up its naval presence in the area, including through a naval monitoring base in Madagascar, military facilities in the Seychelles and Mauritius, and agreements with France and the United States enabling India to access their Indian Ocean military bases.⁴³ India has joined Japan in responding to China's Belt and Road Initiative by launching the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to promote development and cooperation in the context of a "liberal and value-based order."⁴⁴ Beyond these efforts, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has proposed a sprawling ten-point agenda for India-Africa relations, covering intelligence sharing, agriculture, and more; established new diplomatic missions on the continent; and elevated the profile of regular India-Africa Forum Summits.⁴⁵ India is Africa's third-largest trading partner and provides modest financing and development cooperation on the continent.⁴⁶ But the reality is that outside of the Indian Ocean island states, India has not come close to matching Chinese or U.S. investment, and the sizeable Indian diaspora in some African countries does not translate into political affinity or influence.

Japan

Over the past decade, Japan has pursued an energetic strategy aimed at building goodwill among African partners, protecting its interests in maritime security, and ensuring that China does not come to dominate the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁷ It maintains a sizable development assistance portfolio in Africa; has increased the frequency of formal Tokyo International Conference on African Development meetings that drive high-level diplomacy, development, and private-sector investment in the region; and established its only overseas military base in Djibouti. Although trade between Japan and Africa has declined as cheaper exports from China have gained preference, Japan's foreign investment in the region is still notable at roughly \$9 billion.⁴⁸

The Gulf States and Turkey

Other external powers have developed robust Africa strategies and can play significant roles in specific countries or regions. In the Horn of Africa, the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have significantly expanded their involvement and influence in the region, ramping up diplomatic presence, trade, and investment in agriculture, manufacturing, and construction.⁴⁹ But they have also pursued a security agenda, seeking new pathways to counter Iranian influence in Yemen and elsewhere. The UAE staged operations in Yemen out of a base in Eritrea and reportedly pursued building another in Somaliland, the largely autonomous northern region of Somalia.⁵⁰ Saudi Arabia has reportedly sought a base in Djibouti and has been active diplomatically, going so far as to convene the Red Sea Forum in 2018 in an effort to position itself as the center of gravity in a region that includes the volatile Horn of Africa. Meanwhile, the diplomatic split within the Gulf Cooperation Council was exported to the Horn, as Turkey and Qatar bolstered their presence in Somalia, which hosts Turkey's largest overseas military facility. How the mending of Gulf relations will affect the positions of these actors in the Horn remains to be seen.

MAJOR SOURCES OF FRICTION

The Biden administration clearly anticipates friction with China in Africa. At her confirmation hearing, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield took pains to assure U.S. senators that she and her colleagues are keenly aware of China’s “self-interested and parasitic development goals” in Africa specifically.⁵¹ The United States and China will continue to clash when African support for their preferred international norms is at stake, and the two powers diverge sharply on a number of issues. Rivalry in these arenas is inescapable. The upshot is that for each party, having real political influence in African capitals will only become more desirable over time.

HUMAN RIGHTS, GOVERNANCE STANDARDS, AND VOTES IN MULTILATERAL FORUMS

China and Russia will continue to resist U.S. and European attempts to pressure governments that are abusing their citizens’ civil and political rights, and they will continue to cloak that resistance in the language of defending African sovereignty. At stake is not just a tussle between major powers’ normative visions, but the question of whether the principles enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights are foundational to the continent’s governance norms, or mere hollow moralizing.

As permanent members of the UN Security Council, the United States, China, and Russia will all continue vying for the support of African states and looking for opportunities to accrue and maintain influence on African governments. For African states rotating through the Security Council, the opportunities to extract favorable terms from major powers will only grow, but so too will major

powers' attempts to leverage existing ties to secure sympathetic African votes. Even beyond the council, Africa's substantial voting blocs in international organizations can decisively affect outcomes. African states have stood firmly in defense of China's treatment of its Uyghur population at the UN General Assembly and have supported China's crackdown on civil and political liberties in Hong Kong at the UN Human Rights Council.⁵² The accumulation of these votes helps to establish international norms, as does the leadership of the institutions, which is why China actively cultivates African support for its many bids to place Chinese officials at the top of international institutional hierarchies.⁵³ Although the Trump administration's public threats to cut aid to countries with voting records that diverge from that of the United States had little discernable effect, diplomats from all major powers will continue jockeying for influence over Africa's positions in international organizations.⁵⁴

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Framing major power ambitions in Africa as a competition for natural resources is often an unhelpful cliché, and the changes in oil markets and U.S. energy infrastructure over the past decade have significantly reduced the importance of oil in U.S.-Africa relations. But the technology economy requires rare earth minerals and other metals, such as cobalt, and as U.S.-China tensions persist, the United States' reliance on China as a source of rare earth minerals will increasingly become a vulnerability, and African states will be desirable alternative suppliers.⁵⁵ But China has already deeply penetrated the African mining sector and is unlikely to be passive as the United States seeks to establish new relationships and supplies of critical resources.

TECHNOLOGY STANDARDS

The U.S. campaign to dissuade governments around the world from relying on Chinese telecommunications behemoth Huawei has largely run aground in Africa. Huawei's years of market dominance and generous financing deals in Africa continue to engender loyalty, and the company has gained access to critical undersea cables that transmit data to and from all parts of the continent.⁵⁶ At the same time, the continent provides numerous examples of the vulnerabilities that concern the United States: Huawei technicians have helped African governments

hack and track political opponents, and those disclosures have cast an unflattering light on China's technology diplomacy.⁵⁷ In the specific case of Huawei and in the broader arena of norms regarding using technology to influence and control societies, China is prevailing on the continent. As Africa becomes increasingly integrated into the global economy, this source of friction is likely to persist.

POTENTIAL FOR RIVALRY TO SPARK CONFLICT

Despite these sources of friction, direct clashes between major powers on the African continent are unlikely in the foreseeable future, although the outside possibility of miscalculation and escalation does exist. (China's using lasers to harass U.S. pilots in Djibouti is one example of a minor provocation that, handled inappropriately, could have triggered a cycle of retaliation.)⁵⁸ But the prospect of proxy conflicts is not just hypothetical; in the increasingly militarized, highly combustible Horn of Africa, they will be tremendously difficult to avoid. Regional powers from the Gulf have already heightened tensions in Somalia as they have vied for influence in the fragile and fractured state. Over time, as China draws closer to both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, heightened tensions and perhaps even proxy confrontations could develop between U.S.-aligned actors and those supported by former Gulf partners if naval supremacy in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden is at stake, but this is an outside possibility, not a probability.

Similarly, given the current state of Russian policy in Libya, Moscow could flex similar muscles farther south on the continent that could exacerbate conflict, should it see an opportunity both sufficiently lucrative and humiliating to rivals. Russia has proven willing to go to lengths to avoid losing its status as the Central African Republic government's preferred partner, and resource-rich, fragile Mozambique could become a venue for more decisive intervention should Russia overcome the apparent shortcomings of its efforts to influence the country's security situation.

More likely scenarios entail major power rivalry creating the conditions for disorder in African societies. China's tendency to bolster existing African elites and to provide African governments with the means to suppress civil society or political opponents prolongs the

tenure of actors out of step with their societies.⁵⁹ African political systems could become more brittle, and the chances of violence between the state and the population could increase as fundamentally unsound and unpopular governments lean on Chinese support to cling to power.

But the United States, too, in its zealous pursuit of a counterterrorism agenda, has empowered abusive and often ineffective governments and militaries in the hopes they will transform into bulwarks against extremists. From Mozambique to Burkina Faso, the United States has struggled with the tension between its counterterrorism agenda and a commitment to human rights and accountability for abuses, all the while acknowledging that abusive security forces can drive recruits into the arms of extremists.⁶⁰ Likewise, a Cold War redux version of major power rivalry on the continent—in which the enemy of an enemy is a friend—could easily find the United States supporting modern-day versions of its dubious clients of the past while subordinating principles of good governance. Arms sales could tick up as a way to secure influence, and Russian mercenaries could muddy already conflict-clouded waters, prolonging fighting in pursuit of profit.

Finally, major power rivalry risks drowning out African agency and Africa's own agenda. African states are poised to become more assertive on the international stage, but if their aspirations and priorities are understood only through the lens of major power rivalry, the resulting attention is unlikely to advance a broad African agenda that is likely to focus on structural reforms of multilateral institutions and global inequities. Major powers will seek to peel away African states for their own purposes, and the region's own institutional infrastructure and well-defined, if not always applied, norms risk being weakened by ad hoc arrangements between individual African states and major powers.

AREAS OF COOPERATION WITH CHINA

Despite many sources of friction, the United States, China, and other powers share a number of interests in Africa. These include maintaining a free flow of commerce; raising prosperity, which translates into lucrative markets for goods and services; strengthening capacity to cope with global threats, including pandemic disease; and engendering the stability that enables these activities and precludes the need for costly interventions and relief efforts. These broad, shared interests can form the basis of a collaborative agenda—one that includes African partners from inception to execution.

The United States, China, Europe, and Japan share interests in freedom of the seas, ensuring that commercial shipping can proceed unhindered in the waters around the African continent. Building on the success of multilateral anti-piracy cooperation off Somalia's coast, international actors can cooperate to ensure continued maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and to foreclose the possibility of regional conflict inhibiting commercial traffic. An even broader maritime initiative that would serve African interests could include cracking down on illegal fishing in African waters, a problem that requires commitment from both China and Europe to resolve.⁶¹

Although China-backed African infrastructure projects rankle U.S. policymakers, some also improve the operating environment for all parties—including U.S. firms. Chinese power plants can make it easier for businesses to operate effectively, and Chinese-built roads and rail lines can get goods to market for all actors in an economy. Actors interested in rising prosperity and job creation in Africa can find ways to work in a manner that is complementary, if not cooperative.

Perhaps the most frequently cited area of potential U.S.-Chinese cooperation is the pursuit of stability. Although Washington and Beijing

understand stability differently, potential for cooperation in preventing state collapse, civil war, and interstate conflict exists. For example, in the lead-up to the 2011 referendum on South Sudanese independence, China and the United States shared a common interest in avoiding a return to North-South conflict in Sudan. Chinese oil investments and years of painstaking U.S., European, and African diplomacy were at stake. China played a constructive role in making it clear to Khartoum that the referendum had to be timely and credible. Seizing opportunities for this type of country-specific collaborative conflict prevention should be the norm.

As permanent members of the UN Security Council and the top two UN peacekeeping budget donors, the United States and China share an interest in peacekeeping reform aimed at making missions more effective and efficient. Despite significant philosophical differences between the two parties—such as the responsibility to protect—some divergences are complementary rather than oppositional and dovetail with Undersecretary-General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix’s calls to link mandates and operations more substantially to political processes and development strategies.⁶²

Finally, debt relief is perhaps the most urgent area for potential collaboration between the United States and China. Even before COVID-19, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) sounded the alarm about African debt in their joint Debt Sustainability Framework, noting that eighteen countries were at high risk for debt distress.⁶³ But the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic has exacerbated the problem, creating a need for health and stimulus spending at a time when African governments have little fiscal space in which to operate. While overall the United States’ handling of the

pandemic's first year created opportunities for China in Africa (see appendix), managing the economic fallout is a work in progress that both major powers need to navigate. The Paris Club and the Group of Twenty (G20) have offered some relief with debt service suspension, but these efforts do not match the scope of the problem. Meanwhile, the United States and others are loath to forgive debt if China does not do the same, reasoning that doing so would subsidize China rather than help overstretched African states. A coordinated approach is required, although the secrecy surrounding many Chinese financing deals, Beijing's desire to work out financing issues on a country-by-country basis, and the sheer variety of interests among African debt holders could impede progress. Nonetheless, the recent restructuring of Angolan debt and the subsequent G20 framework agreement in November 2020 indicate that progress is possible. Success on this issue would create a more stable and prosperous future on the continent—which would benefit major powers and Africans alike.⁶⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The broad bipartisan consensus around the United States' Africa policy priorities enjoyed for many decades is not wrong; the United States is more secure and more prosperous when Africa is too. The Biden administration will need to pursue long-standing U.S. interests in Africa through policy that is mindful of today's competitive geopolitical landscape and anticipates assertive African partners seeking the most advantageous security, trade and investment, and development arrangements. In addition to selectively cooperating with China on debt relief, peace-keeping reform, and other issues, the United States should aim to compete effectively with China by strengthening its relative appeal, better integrating democracy and governance issues into strategies aimed at improving stability, incorporating Africa more effectively into a renewed commitment to multilateralism, and keeping an eye on the future by ensuring that attention and investments prioritize African youth. In this way, the United States can chart a course that distinguishes it from China, advances U.S. interests, and responds to Africa's transformation.

SHOWCASE U.S. COMPETENCE AND SHORE UP THE U.S. MODEL OF GOVERNANCE

At the heart of China's case for why it should be the model and standard-setter for governance in the future is an argument about efficacy. China claims that its particular brand of authoritarianism delivers real development and economic gains. State efficacy, then, is ground the United States should not cede. In pursuit of U.S. policy goals, Washington should continue to capitalize on areas of historical and technical strength in areas that matter deeply to Africans, such as a long-standing commitment to improving international food

security, combating infectious disease, and bolstering health systems, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 response.

Modeling effective governance also requires emphasizing transparency and accountability. In keeping with its overall commitment to reverse democratic backsliding and pervasive corruption, the Biden administration should reinvigorate the United States' commitment to the rule of law and transparency in Africa, which is vital as the continent continues to urbanize and questions about how governments spend revenue and execute policy become easier for African citizens to raise. Acknowledging that combating corruption is a shared priority rather than an Africa-specific project and supporting transparency mechanisms and law enforcement capacities makes sense for Americans and Africans alike, and success in this effort should broaden opportunities for U.S. investment. These issues respond to African desires, make the United States a more desirable partner, and bolster the argument for democratic governance norms.

In addition to acknowledging that democracy and corruption are domestic areas of concern, as well as international ones, candor about the United States' struggle with systemic racism, which certainly has not been lost on Africans, and concrete progress in addressing it is an important part of shoring up the appeal of U.S. governing norms.⁶⁵ Rather than unsuccessfully pretending that U.S. society embodies all of its professed ideals, U.S. leaders looking to form lasting partnerships with African states around the protection of core human rights principles and accountable governance should work to model a system that is responsive to calls for justice.⁶⁶

EMBRACE A MORE DYNAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF STABILITY

Trade-offs between security priorities and governance concerns are a perennial tension in U.S. policymaking but also point to a critical area of difference with China going forward. Decades of U.S. counterterrorism efforts on the continent have yielded a clear conclusion: bolstering a state's capacity to combat an internal or external threat cannot be achieved through military or law enforcement means alone. Addressing the causes of social discontent and mistrust are equally essential. Lasting stability requires respect for basic rights and a state with the capacity to reform itself and accommodate emerging demands from citizens.

An understanding that stability requires some dynamism is a differentiating feature of the United States and a powerful counter to the

Chinese model that prioritizes order over justice and often sees diversity and popular demands for change as a threat to be quashed rather than an evolution toward a better future. As African societies confront their own massive social changes and pressures, the United States can avoid missteps and, over time, develop stronger partnerships by recognizing that stability in Africa also requires flexibility, including periods of reform that promote inclusion and respond to the sources of social discontent.

The Biden administration's enthusiasm for bolstering democratic solidarity should provide impetus to this long-overdue recalibration of promoting stability in Africa to ensure that human rights and inclusion are elevated in the pursuit of security. In practice, this means that U.S. diplomacy will require a close understanding not just of elite or official agendas but also of popular and grassroots movements. Consultation will be critical, though challenging, as neither the AU nor its constituent governments reflect the will of the people in every instance. Therefore, U.S. diplomats should be enterprising in understanding the aspirations and concerns of African societies, reaching beyond government contacts to better grasp the direction of popular sentiment, identify issues that threaten enduring stability, and work to encourage reforms and political inclusion as a means of conflict prevention.

PRIORITIZE AFRICA IN EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN MULTILATERAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

The Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance references the need to “modernize the architecture of international cooperation.”⁶⁷ To do so effectively, the United States will have to acknowledge that global governance should become more accountable and representative. Increasingly, Africans are rightly skeptical of international institutions and agreements that deny the region the same agency and voice that others enjoy.⁶⁸ China will continue assiduously courting African governments to win support for its preferred policies and institutional leadership, and the United States should significantly elevate the intensity of its diplomatic efforts to do the same. Moreover, the United States should make it clear that China is not the only major power attentive to African frustrations with international institutions. The United States should find a path that accommodates a more assertive Africa and protects critical elements of the international system it helped create. That will require rethinking U.S. comfort with the status quo when it comes to the structure of the UN Security Council, acknowledging that combating climate change cannot succeed without

simultaneously and seriously addressing energy poverty, and most immediately, recognizing that the global COVID-19 vaccination drive is the kind of extraordinary situation that calls for waiving standard intellectual property protections.

The United States should support Africa's subregional and continental integration and institutionalization projects, working collaboratively with the organizations demonstrating fidelity to their own stated principles and goals. Where that commitment is absent, the United States should frame its skepticism and distancing with explicit reference to those African-authored norms that are being disregarded and encourage reforms to resolve that dissonance. The African Union, the African Continental Free Trade Area, and certain subregional organizations are embodiments of African aspirations to conduct rule-governed foreign relations. Contrasted with China's transactional, case-by-case approach in financing endeavors and Gulf actors in the Horn of Africa, working through African institutions and respecting multilateral African regimes helps bolster a global governance model suited to farsighted U.S. interests. These institutions will not always take positions aligned with Washington's, but overall, supporting them for more effective dispute resolution on the continent is far preferable to an endless set of ad hoc, transactional approaches.

In addition to institutionalized multilateralism, the United States should work closely with like-minded powers, including India, Japan, and Europe, to be a more visible partner in working toward African prosperity. All these powers pursue development agendas complementary to the United States', but too often they lose out on opportunities to collaborate in the interest of scale. This should be a priority for the Development Finance Corporation and the Millennium Challenge Corporation going forward. When resources are pooled, the benefits for all parties can be greater than the sum of their parts. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee report calling for greater transatlantic cooperation in countering China in November 2020 suggests ample opportunity exists for the Biden administration to find bipartisan support for such an effort.⁶⁹

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Washington should also assess opportunities and investments to give greater priority to job-creating contributions. Education assistance should be more tightly linked to labor market needs of the future, and support for health-care systems should emphasize the strengthening

and broadening of African health-care workforces. Particularly in light of Africa's rapid urbanization, opportunities abound in high-need sectors—such as affordable housing, smart water infrastructure, and urban climate resilience—that could provide employment and deliver the visible gains that China's infrastructure projects deliver, particularly if the United States works in close partnership with other actors who have a stake in keeping China from an immovable influence across the continent. The Biden administration is well suited to undertake a more honest U.S. reckoning with climate change—the effects of which are already devastating parts of Africa—and to support a vision that expands domestic ideas about job growth by building a green economy beyond U.S. borders.

When it comes to technology and China's dominance in Africa, U.S. policymakers should commit the resources and research required to bolster U.S. competitiveness. Pressuring African states not to build technology infrastructure with the lowest-cost option without providing competitive alternatives is a strategy doomed to fail while simultaneously casting doubt on the sincerity of Washington's interest in shared prosperity. China's Digital Silk Road is an investment intended to yield dividends in influence. The United States can flag cybersecurity risks and the dangers of unchecked digital surveillance with African partners but ultimately will have to make its own strategic investments, mindful of African needs and priorities.

Finally, the United States should stop alienating talented young Africans with student visa restrictions and exclusionary policies. It should recognize that building relationships with Africa's youth and partnerships with African innovators is in the United States' interest. China embraces this strategy, investing in and publicizing scholarships for African students to the point that it hosts more African students studying abroad than any other country. Even before COVID-19, the number of Africans coming to study in the United States was in decline.⁷⁰

Yet the United States has real advantages in this area that it could exploit. In recent Afrobarometer polling, 71 percent of Africans said English is the most important language to learn to succeed in the future, compared to the 2 percent who chose Chinese.⁷¹ A revived attempt to encourage Africans to study in the United States would likely be met with an enthusiastic applicant pool. At the same time, the United States could reach an even wider cross-section of African youth by thinking more seriously about culture and the creative industries. American cultural exports, including music and film, enjoy wide success in Africa,

and African cultural content is finding its way to the United States as artists collaborate across the Atlantic. Not only do Africa's creative industries represent investment opportunities—but they are also compelling venues for the creation of shared norms around freedom of expression and the protection of intellectual property.⁷²

As the United States copes with a rising China and a period of change and uncertainty in the global order, its Africa strategy should focus on building mutually beneficial partnerships with African states and working with them to create an international order that accommodates shared interests and values. That agenda will require careful attention to China's and other major powers' strategies but should prioritize the outcomes the United States wishes to achieve, not merely focus on those it wishes to avoid. This approach will require some painful reassessments of policies pursued in the interest of stability, a willingness to rethink the structure of some international institutions, more energized diplomatic efforts, and cooperation with partners and, in some cases, with rivals. To believe that Africa is relevant only as a forum for competition and not a source of partners in co-creating the next iteration of global governance is to misunderstand what is at stake, and what is possible, in Africa.

APPENDIX: COVID-19: A CASE STUDY IN HOW NOT TO COMPETE WITH CHINA

Helping Africa maximize its considerable capacity to contain and control the spread of infectious disease should be a fruitful area of U.S.-China cooperation in the region. But over the course of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became an arena for intense competition, in which U.S. attempts to inflict harm on its rival often backfired and China leveraged the crisis to assert its global leadership in new ways.

Despite its long history of investing billions of dollars in strengthening health systems and fighting infectious disease in Africa, the United States has suffered from ineffective messaging, its own domestic dysfunction, and a self-defeating obsession with vilifying China. Although the United States is providing hundreds of millions of dollars in new assistance to help Africa fight COVID-19 and the associated economic disruption, its diffuse efforts do not match the scale of the problem.⁷³ Meanwhile, the shocking death rate in the United States is well covered in local media, painting a picture of a declining power unable to manage a crisis that Beijing appears to have under control.

The Trump administration also made a series of errors that called into question the United States' credibility as a partner to African states. Its insistence on referring to COVID-19 as the "Wuhan virus" torpedoed a strong Group of Seven (G7) joint statement in March, creating a spectacle of major powers in disarray at a time of global crisis.⁷⁴ Trump and some aligned members of the U.S. Congress launched an attack on the World Health Organization (WHO) in what many saw as an attempt to deflect blame for the United States' symbolic response to COVID-19. African leaders were quick to push back and defend WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Ethiopian doctor whose performance as the head of the WHO is a source of pride for many Africans.⁷⁵ When the United States declined

to join the vast majority of countries around the world in the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative aimed at ensuring that safe and effective vaccines be quickly distributed to high-risk populations in all countries, it only hardened perceptions that an “America First” approach was synonymous with indifference to the plight of poorer countries.⁷⁶

In contrast, China used COVID-19 to assert itself as the leading global friend of Africa. By amplifying its “mask diplomacy,” heralding the work of Jack Ma and his foundation, and using its embassies to coordinate assistance from Chinese businesses, China was able to send a unified message about its altruism, making even modest contributions loom large in the popular consciousness. President Xi Jinping has promised to give Africa priority access to a Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccine and announced a \$2 billion contribution to the WHO at the start of the World Health Assembly in the spring of 2020, stepping into the vacuum left by the United States.⁷⁷ Simultaneously, Chinese diplomats have aggressively called into question the United States’ efforts.

The Biden administration has taken several steps to mitigate the harm done in 2020, reviving U.S. membership in and support for the WHO and making a \$4 billion pledge to COVAX. But as global focus shifts to vaccine access and China highlights its vaccine deliveries to the continent, the United States should find a path forward that acknowledges and responds to urgent African needs while avoiding any perception that it prioritizes competition with China over urgent public health outcomes.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to Shannon K. O'Neil, deputy director of studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Paul B. Stares, director of the Center for Preventive Action, and Joseph Haberman, research associate for Russia studies, for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions on drafts of this paper. Thank you to Research Associate James West for his help in preparing the text for publication. My thanks also to Patricia Dorff, editorial director, and to her team of editors: Chloe Moffett, Katherine De Chant, and Cassandra Jensen. I am also grateful for the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which supports CFR's work on managing global disorder.

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*Cover photo: The Kibera slum appears against the skyline
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