

Harris or Trump: America's Africa strategy is unlikely to change

by Joel Odot

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US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Vice President Kamala Harris host State luncheon for Kenyan President William Ruto, May 2024

Photo Credit: Flickr/Statephotos

With Africa's population currently at 1.4 billion and **projected to reach** 2.5 billion by 2050, the "African Century" seems imminent. Despite **ranking second** in this year's Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index, which measures countries' diplomatic networks, engagement levels, and potential influence, the US pays little diplomatic attention to Africa. This situation is unlikely to change, regardless of who becomes the next president.

Historically, the US's policies toward the African continent have been inconsistent. During the Cold War, Africa was seen as a crucial ally of the US-led system, with several **proxy wars** fought on African soil. However, after the Cold War Africa was often neglected in US foreign policy, although humanitarian support continued mainly through the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Even though the US is **the single largest bilateral aid donor** globally, contributing US\$9.5 billion in humanitarian aid in 2023 alone, its funds have predominantly supported "soft" projects in education, health, and governance. This emphasis has often come at the expense of "hard" projects, including roads, railways, and other critical infrastructure.

Africa's infrastructure sector, according to the African Development Bank, requires **between \$130 and \$170 billion** in annual investment. China, through the trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a key player in infrastructure finance in Africa, **committing \$25.7 billion** to African infrastructure projects in 2018. The US committed **only \$297 million** that year. Chinese companies win **half of all infrastructure contracts** in Africa, although concerns about transparency have been raised.

In the political domain, China, which only assumed a seat at the UN in 1971, now controls **four of the 15 UN agencies** and is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. As of May 2024, China had 1,802 military and police

personnel in UN peacekeeping operations and in 2015 pledged US\$200 million over a decade towards the China–UN Peace and Development Fund. Notably, nearly all of the Chinese peacekeepers are deployed in Africa. Neither Joe Biden nor Donald Trump visited the African continent during their presidencies, and visits by US officials to Africa have been minimal. In contrast, for over three decades, every Chinese foreign minister's first visit abroad is traditionally to Africa.

Russia has similarly expanded its political and security presence on the continent through the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organisation now incorporated into the Russian army, challenging US security engagements in Africa.

While US presidents from both the Republican and Democratic parties have generally tended to neglect Africa, there has been intermittent engagement. President George W. Bush notably initiated the President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to provide HIV/AIDS treatment and launched the Millennium Challenge Corporation to fund development projects in Africa. Bill Clinton initiated the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to boost trade by providing duty-free access to the US market for African products. Barack Obama initiated the Power Africa program to increase access to electricity, as well as the Young African Leaders Initiative to empower young African leaders. Donald Trump established the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation to counter China's BRI by promoting private sector investment in Africa and elsewhere. He also launched the Prosper Africa initiative to increase trade and investment.

Although analysts say the Biden administration's aid budget is the highest since the mid-1980s, the recent \$95 billion foreign assistance budget allocates \$61 billion to Ukraine, \$26 billion for Israel and Gaza, and \$8 billion for the Asia-Pacific, with only a tiny portion directed towards the rest of the world, including Africa. The election of another Democratic president is unlikely to bring dramatic changes to the US's Africa policy. As the AGOA arrangement expires in 2025, concerns over its future have emerged. Since its enactment in 2000, the AGOA provided duty-free access to the US market for over 1,800 products — although America's trade with Africa was only US\$44.9 billion in 2021, compared to US\$ 254.3 billion between China and Africa in the same year.

In October 2023, Uganda, the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Niger were thrown out of the AGOA by Biden owing to gross violations of internationally recognised human rights standards. This follows the previous expulsion of Rwanda in 2018 by President Donald Trump owing to Rwanda's ban on second-hand apparel from the US, intended to encourage local textile industries. The suspension of Rwanda, especially, raises questions about the true intentions of the AGOA program.

In January 2018, former President Trump made his controversial “shithole countries” remark while expressing frustration with illegal immigrants from Haiti and African countries. Although he was often checked by Congress, Trump attempted to cut billions of dollars in development aid and reduce funding for diplomacy and humanitarian assistance, which would affect support to the African continent. In his [reelection bid](#), Donald Trump vows to continue with the “America First” program, implement tough immigration laws, and cut foreign aid, including to Ukraine.

If support for Ukraine and Gaza is threatened by Trump’s policies, it is unlikely that US will do much to address the conflicts tearing apart the African continent. Trump has stated that American aid should go to [friends and allies](#). Put differently, American taxpayers’ money is not for countries like those in Africa that are not seen to embrace American values.

Descended from Jamaican and Indian parents, and having attended the historically black Howard University, Kamala Harris is obviously the candidate with closer connections to the African and Asian continents. In fact, Harris visited Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia in March and April of 2023, during which she promised to unveil the non-profit [Partnership for Digital Access in Africa](#) to connect one billion people to the internet by 2030 and to increase connectivity for women and girls from 30% to 80%.

While these are certainly good signs that Africa could receive more favourable consideration in the US’s diplomacy, it remains to be seen whether this will translate into enhanced engagement with the continent, especially in the domains of trade, investment, and infrastructure. Post-pandemic US is bogged down with serious domestic issues: inflation, a range of social issues including gun crime and minority rights, and immigration are likely to dominate the focus of the next American president. The strategic priorities and geopolitical realities that have historically shaped US engagement with the African continent will most likely continue to do so.

Overall, the upcoming US elections are unlikely to bring significant change in US policy toward Africa. The continent will likely remain a secondary concern in the broader context of US foreign policy but could receive even less attention if Trump is elected. The primary focus of US foreign policy will be addressing the challenges posed by China and Russia, as well as dealing with issues in the Middle East.

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