



U.S. Air Force Technical Sergeant Jared Todd, 818th Mobility Support Advisory Squadron Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape air advisor, and Tanzania air force command Colonel Ian Haule discuss radio communication techniques at African Partnership Flight Kenya 2019, Laikipia Air Base, Kenya, August 22, 2019 (U.S. Air Force/Renae Pittman)

Convergence of Opportunities

By Opher Heymann and Peter Yeager

President Joe Biden's 2022 National Security Strategy views the world at an inflection point and characterizes the contemporary period as a decisive decade during

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which the terms of geopolitical competition between the major powers will be set.¹ According to this strategy, the world will either continue to develop as free, open, secure, and prosperous or will succumb to increasing degrees of repression and authoritarianism.² This struggle has real consequences. Since the end of World War II, the United States has helped foster the development of a world that is far more

peaceful and prosperous than before.³ These positive trends can be linked to the pillars of Western liberalism, which show that an increasingly democratic and economically interdependent world is wealthier and more peaceful. The efforts of the United States and its allies and partners to advance a free and open international system will be significant determinants of the decisive decade's outcome.⁴

Africa represents a more intense interest to the United States than is commonly recognized. The President's national security agenda can be substantially advanced through U.S. engagement with African states. In this decisive decade, America's desire to support and advance the open international order could lose ground to authoritarianism and repression. Assisting the economic and political development of African states represents a significant opportunity to improve the global penetration of free market democracy while frustrating the inroads of America's illiberal competitors. One of America's core strengths and geopolitical advantages is its global network of partners and allies. This network can be expanded more meaningfully in Africa than anywhere else in the world. Alongside its diplomacy and development partners, U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) is an important element in the U.S. foreign policy approach to Africa. Still, more must be done if U.S. strategic objectives are to be met.

The Problem

Despite the positive global trends since the end of World War II, prosperity and peace have landed unevenly and unequally around the world. Where liberalism has failed to take root, so too have many of the conditions commonly measured to judge the quality of a person's life. From this standpoint, Africa lags much of the rest of the world. Alongside the Middle East in the 2022 Democracy Index, African states experience the lowest levels of democracy and struggle with some of the highest rates of corruption worldwide.⁵ Africa is the poorest continent in the world, representing approximately 2 percent of global gross domestic product despite hosting 12 percent of the world's population.⁶ Measured across the continent, African states have the lowest life expectancy at birth,⁷ the highest infant mortality rate,⁸ the highest maternal mortality rate,⁹ and the highest rate of AIDS.¹⁰ Recently, there have been more coup d'états,¹¹ and the continent's very high rates of violent extremism¹² unsurprisingly bear

a positive correlation with the incidence and location of these coups.¹³

Authoritarianism, corruption, and violent extremism are analogous to disease vectors enabling the exploitation of African states by predatory and malign actors. Violent extremism remains a significant problem confronted by many African states. For example, in West Africa and the Sahel, so-called Islamic State (IS)- and al-Qaeda-affiliated violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are expanding their areas of operation and conducting more frequent violent attacks.¹⁴ In East Africa, al-Shabaab is aggressively resisting the new Somali government's counterterrorism campaign while continuing to target locations in close proximity to U.S. forces.¹⁵ In Morocco, the Algeria-backed Polisario Front—a self-described Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement originally formed to resist Spanish rule—continues to test Rabat's control of Western Sahara.¹⁶ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a tenuous ceasefire between government forces and the pro-Tutsi March 23 Movement recently broke down after months of fighting that spiked regional and ethnic tensions tied to the 1994 Rwandan genocide.¹⁷ In nearby Ethiopia, forces under the command of Nobel Peace Prize-winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stand accused of widespread human rights violations committed during a 2021–2022 conflict with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, one of several regional militias pressing the country's federal government for greater autonomy.¹⁸ And just this spring, the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces—a paramilitary organization formed from Janjaweed militias that committed atrocities in Darfur—clashed as their leaders jockeyed for power, despite previous collaboration to oust President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in 2021.¹⁹

China's influence in Africa begins with its economic investments. The People's Republic of China (PRC)'s trade with Africa in 2021 was \$254.1 billion (\$148.1 billion in exports and

\$106 billion in imports), nearly four times as large as U.S.-Africa trade, which was just \$64.1 billion (\$26.6 billion in exports and \$37.5 billion in imports).²⁰ China also holds more African debt than any other state, measuring \$73 billion in 2020.²¹ Accusations of debt trap diplomacy appear to be overstated, although Chinese lending practices remain opaque and provide scope for corruption on both sides of the transaction.²² While China is a major producer of infrastructure projects in Africa, concerns over the quality and endurance of these projects are rife, including a \$568 million hydropower plant in Uganda that began to show hundreds of defects after only a few years of service.²³

China continues to court prospective African hosts for military and logistics facilities to augment its first overseas base in Djibouti,²⁴ and Chinese firms are extracting minerals critical to defense and industrial production, often in a manner that damages local environments and economies.²⁵ China is also the foremost actor involved in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in the waters around Africa, often using environmentally destructive practices that contribute to African food insecurity and destabilizing migration.²⁶ The PRC also markets its so-called safe city initiative to African countries, enabling and normalizing the mass surveillance of citizens in a manner consistent with the PRC's domestic efforts to limit political expression.²⁷

Russia intentionally exploits the instability caused by VEOs to advance its own geopolitical aims. For example, Russia uses its proxies to nominally defend African states from pervasive VEOs and associated coups, while exploiting the states' weaknesses and vulnerabilities to engage in large-scale resource extraction and sanctions evasion.²⁸ Kremlin-backed private military company Wagner—bolstered by owner Yevgeny Prigozhin's influence organization and mining firms—is continuously exploring new such partnerships while sustaining deployments in the Central African Republic, Libya, and Mali.²⁹ Wagner's security activities in particular have been exposed for human rights violations and war

crimes, particularly in the Central African Republic and Mali.³⁰ While claiming to provide security and seek stability for countries beset by VEOs, some experts project Wagner’s long-term impact will lead to greater regional instability.³¹ The Russian proxy problem is not isolated to Africa; Wagner’s resource extraction in Africa has been directly linked to funding for Russia’s war in Ukraine.³² Russia also has a more instrumental plan for Africa, as it pursues naval access to the Red Sea while seeking supporters for its war in Ukraine and blaming Western sanctions for conflict-induced grain shortages.³³

As an expression of its values, the United States also mediates its engagement with African states that deviate from those values. The Leahy Laws and Section 7008 restrictions are laws that restrict U.S. assistance from being provided to states that violate human rights or

following a coup d’état. Department of Defense–appropriated funds may not be used for training, equipment, or other assistance for a foreign security force unit if the Secretary of Defense has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.³⁴ Section 7008 of annual foreign aid appropriations legislation restricts certain aid to the governments of countries in which the military has overthrown a “duly elected” leader.³⁵ These laws are meant to apply diplomatic or political pressure on states that experience unconstitutional transfers of power,³⁶ or whose military forces engage in a gross human rights violation.³⁷ Section 7008 is currently in effect for Burkina Faso (since a coup in 2022), Guinea (2021), Mali (2020), and Sudan (1989).³⁸ An unintended consequence of limiting U.S. support for these states is that both behaviors often arise in the

broader context of desperate, even existential struggles with VEOs. Increasingly, states in this position have been left with no alternative to offers of support from Russian proxies. Consequently, U.S. influence weakens while Russian influence expands, with African states falling victim to predatory behaviors of the proxy without significantly diminishing the threat posed by VEOs. In some instances, this scenario seems to be an unavoidable trap for African states unable to work with the United States due to values-based conditions for aid and assistance.

There is no other region on earth in which the free and open international system is more needed or could improve the overall quality of peoples’ lives more dramatically than in Africa. Undertaking an effort to help to improve the conditions expressed is not a question of selflessness. Africa is not a charity case.



U.S. Army Soldiers from U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa, and Royal Moroccan Army soldiers watch as paratroopers from both countries perform joint operations jump from U.S. Air Force and Royal Moroccan Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft during African Lion 2023, at Ben Guerir Air Base, Morocco, June 10, 2023 (U.S. Air Force/Nicholas Swift)



Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Senegalese counterpart Macky Sall attend handover ceremony of National Wrestling Arena built with Chinese aid in Dakar, Senegal, July 22, 2018 (Imago/Alamy)

Rather, it represents a profound and singular opportunity to advance universal values and global prosperity. As such, U.S. interests are compellingly attached to the future of the African continent. For example, Africa’s population is growing, while most of the rest of the world’s is shrinking.³⁹ The United Nations (UN) predicts the population of Sub-Saharan Africa will nearly double by 2050.⁴⁰ If African states can improve their economic efficiency, African consumers could significantly grow the global economy; conversely, if those states fail to develop economically, Africans will undoubtedly be forced to migrate globally in pursuit of opportunity. Despite the limited degree of democratic spread across Africa, two-thirds of Africans prefer democracy as a form of government.⁴¹ A democratic

Africa would serve as a powerful counterweight to authoritarian regimes such as the PRC and the Russian Federation. In contrast, an illiberal Africa will better serve the authoritarian motives of China and Russia, already evident in states such as the Central African Republic, which is exploited by malign actors and advances the geopolitical aims of America’s adversaries.⁴² Independent and capable African states will more effectively manage the social factors that give rise to violent extremism and can better protect themselves from exploitative predators.

President Biden’s emphasis on the determinacy of this decisive decade is nowhere more compelling than in Africa. The choices the United States and its like-minded partners make over the coming years could be decisive in helping to enable

the persistence of U.S. influence globally, while improving the lives of billions of Africans. The U.S. approach to its engagement with Africa, namely the “3Ds” of development, led by the U.S. Agency for International Development; diplomacy, led by the Department of State; and defense, led by the Department of Defense, is well-suited to assist African states to confront the challenges enumerated herein, but insufficiently resourced to achieve the President’s goals. The scale of the problem is simply too large in relation to the level of U.S. investment in Africa. Moreover, the United States self-limits its engagement with African states, often in their times of greatest need. This choice is driven by an understandable emphasis on American values, although at times this comes at the expense of its interests.



Woman waits for medical treatment in Yendi, Ghana, June 3, 2023, during medical civic action program as part of exercise African Lion 2023 (U.S. Army/Nathan Baker)

In contrast, other global actors including the PRC and Russia are engaging in an aggressive and exploitative campaign to extract as much wealth as possible from Africa to fill their own coffers and fuel their wars while fostering the expansion of authoritarianism and repression. An expanded 3D strategy is needed, wherein U.S. engagement with African states reflects a more comprehensive use of America's instruments of national power alongside a clearer appreciation for the present opportunities and consequences of inaction.

The Current Approach: The 3Ds

USAFRICOM's efforts are informed by its 3D partnerships, internal and external to the command. Defense is intended to support and enable other U.S. efforts in the diplomacy and development space. In this vein, a primary focus area for USAFRICOM is to

build partner capacity. This effort is a central contribution to partners' defense and an essential building block of the broader security cooperation programs USAFRICOM and its partners provide. Through various engagement channels, the command assists African security forces and defense ministries to establish and strengthen key processes for military logistics, financial and human resource management, cyber defense and communications, as well as multidomain rule of law. These capacity-building efforts help U.S. partners in Africa secure their borders, coastlines, and vulnerable populations. Ideally, U.S. efforts and persistent engagement will enable some partners to assume increased responsibility as regional security anchors, providing security assistance to other partners and contributing to peacekeeping operations on the continent.

USAFRICOM invests in a growing number of states that leverage

U.S. military training to train African partners in an effort that multiplies the command's efforts. In addition to its institutional capacity-building programs, USAFRICOM engages its partners in multilateral exercises, which are also targeted to develop core defense and security capabilities. The command has also developed the Africa Distribution Network Forum, in which African and external partners pool airlift logistics capabilities to create efficiencies that enable entire regions to coordinate resupply missions for peacekeeping forces across the continent. Notably, USAFRICOM is not alone. International partners, including Brazil, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and the UN, bolster African partners' maritime domain awareness and law enforcement capabilities.

The command also engages in several other developmental initiatives in the security space, including symposia

on military justice and ethics, an annual military intelligence conference, and efforts to advance a broader awareness of the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and children. Each of these initiatives aims to improve the professionalism, effectiveness, and legitimacy of African security and military forces. For instance, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) program is an integral component of USAFRICOM's efforts to enhance partner capability by enabling security cooperation efforts to better leverage the contributions of both women and men. The command implements WPS by supporting defense institutions' inclusion of women in African partner defense forces; ensuring security cooperation activities include requirements to protect civilians, specifically women and girls; and helping to develop training and accountability mechanisms within partner defense forces that establish professional standards of conduct and prevent sexual and gender-based violence. Each of these programs differentiates the United States from its competitors and are key contributors to promoting stability when implemented.

An Enhanced Approach: 3D+

Because of USAFRICOM's effectiveness, many states are enthusiastic to cooperate with the United States, particularly in the security sector, essentially giving the command more "work" than it can perform. If that demand could be met, it would expand U.S. influence. This dynamic exposes two principal problems with the American approach to Africa while also highlighting important opportunities for advancing U.S. interests. First, engagement with African states manifests too episodically, which suggests the United States lacks a well-developed understanding of its national interests in Africa. Second, U.S. engagement with African states manifests too narrowly, with an overemphasis on defense while underemphasizing diplomatic, informational, and economic tools. Unless and until these shortfalls are addressed, the United States is unlikely to increase its influence with African states or help meaningfully rein-

force the rules-based international order on the African continent.

The lack of a more robust and widespread understanding of U.S. interests in Africa leads to its underinvestment on the continent, which is why the United States prioritizes defense over other instruments of national power. This likely arises because of the long-term nature of the challenges African states confront, while the United States deals with more urgent and near-term concerns. It may also be coupled to a limited understanding of the degree to which the United States benefits from the contemporary global order and a perception of how that order could be advanced in Africa.⁴³ Accordingly, Africa may be perceived more as a problem to be solved rather than an opportunity to be pursued. Moreover, while U.S. defense and security cooperation investments in Africa are helpful, they may also have limited outcomes since they have little to connect to in the economic and governance spheres. In other words, if the broader logic of U.S. security cooperation is to help build partner capacity in the security domain, then improved conditions of security should be connected to more robust economic activity and additional efforts to foster the maturation of democratic political institutions. For example, there is no doubt that real impediments to U.S. private sector investment in Africa exist. Yet if sufficient inducements are not offered to mitigate the challenges U.S. companies perceive, then U.S. companies will never do business in Africa.

The treatment of Africa as a problem rather than an opportunity is the case across the spectrum of the U.S. 3D approach. USAFRICOM is primarily focused on countering the most dangerous VEOs in Africa, while, for example, the U.S. Agency for International Development is primarily focused on addressing health crises, food security, and impacts of climate change. These are important efforts with real and positive effects where they are undertaken, yet they are also largely preventive rather than developmental. They address the most desperate conditions in Africa, and while they may even create fruitful

conditions for economic development, they are not sufficiently built upon with additional, targeted efforts aimed at fostering enduring institutional development and economic expansion. Consequently, the problematic conditions described above tend to persist where they already exist. It is no surprise that more than 30 years after its initial intervention in Somalia, the United States remains primarily focused on counter-VEO operations there.

If the United States viewed Africa as an opportunity, then the pursuit of its interests would come into sharp focus. It may still wish to fight extremists in Somalia and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, but it would also want to concentrate on fostering liberalism. Arguably, the best opportunity to advance democracy and the free market is to focus on those places in which it has already begun to take root. These are the states whose values are most likely to align with those of the United States, and where a consistent and constructive bilateral partnership could produce tangible outcomes. In turn, the positive results we have come to expect from such efforts should be an attractive incentive for neighboring states to reevaluate their own political and economic systems.

To advance such an approach, the United States needs to engage all its instruments of national power. It has many of the right tools in place, though not all and not enough. The tools that are engaged are simply underresourced. Because of a lack of resources, both the PRC and Russia are expanding influence and gaining access to the resources they need to advance their global aims, while VEOs continue to foster unacceptable levels of violence and political instability. Breaking this cycle requires a meaningful U.S. commitment to resource more fully its diplomatic, development, and defense capabilities while leveraging economic and information tools for multiplied effects. This is the 3D+ approach, with the "+" representing harnessing other governmental agencies, such as the Departments of Commerce and Treasury, and the Office of the United States Trade Representative.

U.S. industry must also be incentivized to invest in the continent. Tools such as the African Continental Free Trade Area could expand U.S. market access to and trade with Africa, diversify U.S. supply chains, and increase reciprocal opportunities for U.S.-African trade and investment expansion.⁴⁴ To address the robust information environment, the United States needs a dedicated information arm with more effective authorities to overcome malicious information dominance tactics currently enjoyed by the PRC and Russia. This combination of activities has the potential to improve political stability and democratic penetration, enhance economic performance, reduce violence, and increase U.S. influence. In short, it will help to advance the open, international order.

Still, the United States can do more to improve the consistency of its approach to its African partners, one that is more reflective of the intensity of its interests. Congress has already set conditions for this in one important domain, coup-related restrictions. As of fiscal year 2023, a waiver process has been added to Section 7008-related partnering restrictions.⁴⁵ The waiver process empowers the Secretary of State, “following consultation with the heads of relevant Federal agencies,” to waive these restrictions “on a program-by-program basis if the Secretary certifies and reports to the Committees on Appropriations that such waiver is in the national security interest of the United States.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, military training and equipment authorized to be provided by the Department of Defense under 10 U.S. Code § 333 can also potentially be waived from 7008 restrictions.⁴⁷ Appropriately, the waiver process has a high bar, but it permits senior decisionmakers to balance the tension between America’s values and its interests. It allows for some flexibility to manage important partnerships and maintain crucial influence, while frustrating the exploitative and coercive efforts of U.S. competitors. Ideally, this constancy gives the United States a greater role in rapidly helping coup-impacted countries to return to a fair democratic system.

Throughout the world, but especially in Africa, U.S. foreign policy relies on the strategic integration of the 3Ds. This approach is designed to enable the United States to contribute meaningfully to addressing the range of challenges experienced by African states. These challenges include limited democracy, underperforming economies, high levels of corruption, and the expansion of violent extremist organizations. Collectively, these challenges can be exploited by competitors such as the PRC and Russia, one consequence of which is that the negative environmental conditions tend to persist or worsen. While the United States is an effective security partner for many African states, it has underresourced its approach to Africa, thus limiting its effectiveness. To break this cycle and truly advance the open international order, the United States needs to implement a 3D+ approach, leveraging the full range of tools to foster the improvement of economic and political conditions in Africa. In turn, this approach will help strengthen African states economically and politically, rendering them far less vulnerable to coercive and exploitative practices. **JFQ**

Notes

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⁴⁴ Nicolas Cook and Liana Wong, *African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): Overview and Issues for Congress*, R47197 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 3, 2023), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47197>.

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⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.