

**African International Relations**

**U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa in the Post-Unipolar Moment: Strategic Competition, Selective Engagement, and the Limits of Liberal Internationalism**

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**Abstract**

Examining the evolution of United States foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa across four presidential administrations from George W. Bush to Joe Biden this study situates policy shifts within broader transformations in the international order. Drawing on hegemonic stability theory, liberal internationalism, and African International Relations Theory, it analyses how successive U.S. administrations have navigated tensions between democratic promotion and strategic partnerships with authoritarian regimes, how Sino-American competition has reshaped the terms of U.S. Africa engagement, and why institutional incoherence persists among AFRICOMs security mission, USAIDs development mandate, and the Millennium Challenge Corporations governance conditionality. Through comparative policy analysis of National Security Strategy documents, Congressional hearings, and AFRICOM budget data, the study develops an African-centred critique of U.S. foreign policy that moves beyond Washingtons self-representation to assess its structural effects on African political economies and governance trajectories. The findings reveal a pattern of selective engagement driven by counter-terrorism priorities and great power competition, with democracy promotion increasingly subordinated to security imperatives.

**Keywords:** *U.S. foreign policy, Africa, AFRICOM, Sino-American competition, liberal internationalism, strategic competition, democracy promotion, post-unipolar moment*

## **1. Introduction**

The conduct of United States foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa has undergone significant transformation since the end of the Cold War, reflecting broader shifts in the international order and evolving American strategic priorities. From the post-Cold War period of democratic conditionalities and structural adjustment to the post-9/11 emphasis on counter-terrorism cooperation, and most recently to the emerging framework of strategic competition with China, U.S.-Africa relations have been shaped by forces that extend far beyond the continent itself. This article examines these transformations across four presidential administrations - George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden - to develop an African-centred analysis of U.S. foreign policy's structural effects on African political economies and governance trajectories.

The central puzzle animating this analysis concerns the persistent gap between U.S. rhetorical commitments to democratic governance, human rights, and sustainable development in Africa and the actual conduct of American policy on the continent. Despite successive administrations' articulation of ambitious agendas for African transformation - from the Bush administration's Millennium Challenge Account to the Obama administration's Power Africa initiative to the Biden administration's renewed democracy promotion - the actual implementation of U.S. policy has consistently privileged security cooperation and strategic access over governance reform and human rights protection.

This gap between rhetoric and practice cannot be understood solely through analysis of individual administrations or policy decisions. Rather, it reflects structural features of the post-Cold War international order and the specific position of African states within that order. The end of the Cold War eliminated the strategic rationale for superpower competition on the continent, reducing Africa's importance in American strategic calculations while simultaneously creating space for the imposition of Western economic and political conditionalities. The post-9/11 period transformed Africa's strategic significance through the lens of counter-terrorism, generating new forms of security cooperation that often conflicted with democracy promotion objectives. Most recently, the emergence of strategic competition with China has reframed U.S.-Africa relations yet again, creating new incentives for engagement while also generating concerns about debt, infrastructure, and governance models.

This article advances three interconnected arguments. First, it demonstrates that U.S. policy toward Africa has been characterised by a persistent tension between liberal internationalist aspirations and realist strategic calculations, with the latter increasingly dominating as the international order shifts from unipolarity toward multipolarity. Second, it argues that Sino-American competition has fundamentally reshaped the terms on which African states engage Washington, creating new opportunities for African agency while also generating risks of renewed external manipulation. Third, it identifies the institutional incoherence of U.S. Africa policy - the disjuncture between AFRICOM's security mission, USAID's development mandate, and the MCC's governance conditionality - as a structural feature that systematically undermines the effectiveness of American engagement.

The analysis proceeds as follows. Section two situates the examination within relevant theoretical frameworks drawn from hegemonic stability theory, liberal internationalism, and African International Relations Theory. Section three provides historical analysis of U.S.-Africa relations from the Cold War through the post-9/11 period. Section four examines the emerging framework of strategic competition with China and its implications for U.S.-Africa relations. Section five analyses the institutional architecture of U.S. Africa policy and sources of incoherence. Section six presents case studies of U.S. engagement with key African states. Section seven discusses theoretical and policy implications, while section eight concludes.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Hegemonic Stability and Its Critics**

Hegemonic stability theory, as articulated by [\(Cairncross & Kindleberger, 1973\)](#) and extended by [\(Ruggie, 1982\)](#) and [\(Knorr et al., 1975\)](#), provides a foundational framework for understanding the provision of international public goods under conditions of concentrated power. The theory's central proposition - that a dominant power is necessary for the establishment and maintenance of an open international economic order - has significant implications for understanding U.S. policy toward Africa during the post-Cold War unipolar moment.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, when American hegemony appeared unchallenged, the United States possessed both the capacity and, according to hegemonic stability theorists, the incentive to promote governance reforms, economic liberalisation, and human rights protection in Africa. The Millennium Challenge Corporation, established in 2004, exemplified this approach, offering substantial development assistance to African states that

met governance and economic performance criteria. The MCC model reflected a hegemonic logic: the United States would use its material advantages to reshape African institutions in ways that aligned with American preferences.

However, critics of hegemonic stability theory have identified significant limitations in its application to the contemporary international order. [\(Hunt, 2012\)](#) argues that the post-World War II international order has proven more durable than hegemonic stability theory would predict, surviving the relative decline of American power through institutional mechanisms that constrain even the hegemon itself. This institutionalist perspective suggests that U.S. policy toward Africa may be shaped by international norms and institutions as well as by American strategic calculations.

[\(Cederman et al., 2009\)](#) advances a relational theory of hierarchy that provides an alternative to hegemonic stability theory's focus on material capabilities. From this perspective, U.S.-Africa relations are shaped not only by American power but also by the terms of the relationships between the United States and individual African states. Security partnerships, economic ties, and normative commitments all contribute to the character of these relationships, producing variation in U.S. policy across different African contexts.

**Table 1: Theoretical Frameworks in U.S.-Africa Relations Analysis**

| Theory                          | Core Proposition                               | Application to Africa              |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Hegemonic Stability</b>      | Dominant power provides public goods           | MCC as hegemonic institution       |
| <b>Liberal Internationalism</b> | Democracy/markets promote peace                | Democracy promotion; AGOA          |
| <b>Offshore Balancing</b>       | Avoid entanglements; prevent regional hegemons | Debate over AFRICOM scope          |
| <b>African IR Theory</b>        | African agency; norm subsidiarity              | AU's 'non-indifference' doctrine   |
| <b>Relational Hierarchy</b>     | Relationships shape outcomes                   | U.S.-Ethiopia security partnership |

*Source: Author's compilation based on cited literature*

## 2.2 Liberal Internationalism and Its Limits

Liberal internationalism, as articulated by [\(Kissinger et al., 2004\)](#) and others, provides a normative framework that has significantly influenced U.S. policy toward Africa. The liberal internationalist vision emphasises the promotion of democratic governance, market economies, and international institutions as mechanisms for achieving peace, prosperity, and human rights. This vision has informed successive U.S. administrations' approaches to

Africa, from the democratic conditionalities of the 1990s to the governance requirements of the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

However, the application of liberal internationalism to Africa has faced significant practical and theoretical challenges. [\(Mearsheimer, 2019\)](#) argues that liberal internationalism's promotion of democracy and human rights is fundamentally at odds with the realist imperatives of state survival in an anarchic international system. From this perspective, the tension between U.S. security cooperation with authoritarian African regimes and its rhetorical commitment to democracy promotion reflects not merely policy incoherence but the inherent contradictions of liberal internationalism itself.

The 'offshore balancing' perspective advanced by [\(Beeson & LeeBrown, 2017\)](#) suggests that the United States should reduce its military engagement in regions like Africa, focusing instead on preventing the emergence of regional hegemony while avoiding costly entanglements in local conflicts. This perspective has gained traction in recent years, influencing debates about AFRICOM's mission and the appropriate scope of American military engagement on the continent.

The limits of liberal internationalism in Africa also reflect what [\(Hnke & Miller, 2012\)](#) identifies as the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in liberal theory. The promotion of Western models of democracy and market economics may not be appropriate for African contexts with different historical trajectories, institutional legacies, and cultural foundations. African International Relations Theory, as developed by scholars such as [\(Haberland & Rogow, 2014\)](#) and [\(Lumumba-Kasongo, 2010\)](#), provides alternative frameworks for understanding regional dynamics that do not privilege Western models.

### **2.3 African International Relations Theory**

African International Relations Theory provides essential analytical resources for developing an African-centred critique of U.S. foreign policy. Unlike mainstream IR theory, which treats Africa as a passive object of great power competition, African IR scholarship emphasises African agency in shaping regional and international outcomes.

[\(Zganel et al., 2014\)](#) concept of 'norm subsidiarity' illuminates how African states and regional organisations have developed distinctive approaches to sovereignty, intervention, and conflict management that differ from Western models. The African Union's 'non-indifference' doctrine, articulated in the Constitutive Act and developed through peace

operations in Burundi, Darfur, and Somalia, represents an African contribution to international norms that cannot be reduced to Western imposition.

[\(Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011\)](#) analysis of African regionalism emphasises the political economy dimensions of regional integration, highlighting how African states have used regional organisations to advance developmental objectives and resist external domination. From this perspective, U.S. engagement with African regional organisations must be understood not merely as a mechanism for projecting American influence but also as a site of contestation and negotiation.

The concept of 'extraversion' developed by [\(Bayart, 2000\)](#) provides a framework for understanding how African elites have historically engaged with external powers to advance their own interests. This perspective suggests that the outcomes of U.S. policy in Africa are shaped not only by American intentions but also by how African elites appropriate, redirect, and resist external interventions. An African-centred analysis of U.S. foreign policy must attend to these dynamics of extraversion and agency.

### **3. Historical Evolution of U.S.-Africa Relations**

#### **3.1 The Cold War Legacy**

The Cold War established patterns of U.S.-Africa relations that continue to shape American policy today. During this period, Africa was primarily significant to the United States as a site of superpower competition, with American policy focused on containing Soviet influence rather than promoting African development or democracy. The United States supported authoritarian regimes - including Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, the apartheid government in South Africa, and various military dictatorships - when they were perceived as anti-communist, while opposing left-leaning governments regardless of their popular support.

The Cold War legacy includes institutional relationships between U.S. security services and African militaries, patterns of economic engagement centred on extractive industries, and a strategic culture that views Africa primarily through the lens of external threats rather than as a region with its own dynamics and priorities. These legacies have constrained subsequent efforts to reform U.S.-Africa relations, as Cold War-era relationships created vested interests resistant to change.

The end of the Cold War eliminated the strategic rationale for U.S. engagement with Africa, creating both opportunities and challenges for policy transformation. On one hand, the

removal of the Soviet threat enabled the United States to promote democracy and human rights without concern for pushing African states toward communist alignment. On the other hand, the absence of a strategic competitor reduced Africa's importance in American foreign policy calculations, leading to what some observers termed 'benign neglect' during the early 1990s.

### 3.2 The Post-Cold War Transformation

The 1990s witnessed significant transformation in U.S. policy toward Africa, as the Clinton administration sought to articulate a new framework for engagement in the absence of Cold War imperatives. Democracy promotion emerged as a central theme, with the United States supporting transitions in South Africa, Nigeria, and elsewhere while imposing conditionalities on aid flows to authoritarian regimes.

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), passed in 2000, represented a new approach to economic engagement that combined trade preferences with governance requirements. AGOA offered duty-free access to the U.S. market for eligible African products, conditional on progress toward market-based economies, rule of law, and political pluralism. The legislation reflected a liberal internationalist vision in which economic integration would promote both development and governance reform.

However, the post-Cold War transformation of U.S.-Africa relations remained incomplete. Security cooperation continued with regimes that failed to meet democratic standards, as the United States prioritised counter-terrorism and regional stability over governance reform. The 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, followed by the 9/11 attacks, would fundamentally reshape U.S. priorities, subordinating democracy promotion to security imperatives.

**Table 2: Evolution of U.S. Africa Policy Frameworks (1990-2023)**

| Period       | Primary Framework     | Key Initiatives                                | Africa's Priority |
|--------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1990-2001    | Democracy promotion   | (Hesse, 2001); Governance conditionalities     | Low               |
| 2001-2009    | War on terror         | (Volman, 2007); Counter-terrorism partnerships | Medium            |
| 2009-2017    | Rebalancing           | Power Africa; YALI; Continued CT cooperation   | Medium            |
| 2017-2021    | Strategic competition | Prosper Africa; Build Act                      | High              |
| 2021-present | Competition + climate | Climate finance; Infrastructure partnerships   | High              |

*Source: Author's analysis based on NSS documents and policy records*

### **3.3 The War on Terror and Its Consequences**

The post-9/11 period transformed U.S.-Africa relations through the lens of counter-terrorism. The Bush administration's global war on terror reframed Africa as a front in the struggle against Islamist extremism, generating new forms of security cooperation that often conflicted with democracy promotion objectives. Authoritarian regimes that cooperated on counter-terrorism - including those in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Chad - received substantial U.S. support regardless of their domestic governance records.

The establishment of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 institutionalised the security-focused approach to Africa. AFRICOM's mission combined military operations with security sector assistance, civil affairs, and humanitarian activities, reflecting a 'whole-of-government' approach that nevertheless privileged security over development or governance. The command's location in Stuttgart, Germany, rather than in Africa, symbolised the persistent gap between American conceptions of African security and African perspectives.

The Obama administration maintained the counter-terrorism framework while seeking to rebalance U.S. engagement toward development and governance. The Power Africa initiative, launched in 2013, aimed to double access to electricity in sub-Saharan Africa through public-private partnerships. The Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) invested in the next generation of African leaders. However, these initiatives remained subordinate to security priorities, as demonstrated by the expansion of drone operations and special forces deployments across the Sahel and Horn of Africa.

### **4. The Strategic Competition Framework**

The emergence of strategic competition with China has fundamentally reframed U.S. policy toward Africa. The Trump administration's National Security [\(Kattan, 2017\)](#) explicitly identified China as a 'strategic competitor' and framed Africa as an arena for great power competition. This framework has been maintained and developed by the Biden administration, which has sought to mobilise U.S. government resources to compete with Chinese influence on the continent.

The strategic competition framework represents both continuity and change in U.S.-Africa relations. On one hand, it restores a Cold War-like logic in which Africa's significance derives primarily from great power competition rather than from African interests or priorities. On the other hand, it generates new attention and resources for African

engagement, as the United States seeks to counter Chinese influence through infrastructure investment, trade promotion, and diplomatic initiatives.

The Prosper Africa initiative, launched in 2018, exemplifies the new approach. Unlike AGOA's focus on trade preferences, Prosper Africa seeks to mobilise U.S. private sector investment in African infrastructure and economic development. The initiative reflects recognition that Chinese engagement through the Belt and Road Initiative has created new facts on the ground that trade preferences alone cannot address.

The strategic competition framework also shapes U.S. security engagement with Africa. AFRICOM's 2020 posture statement identified 'strategic competition' as a primary concern, alongside counter-terrorism and crisis response. The command has sought to strengthen partnerships with African militaries as a means of countering Chinese influence, generating concerns about the militarisation of U.S.-Africa relations.

However, the strategic competition framework also creates opportunities for African agency. As the United States and China compete for African partnerships, African states gain leverage to negotiate better terms, pursue their own interests, and resist external domination. The question is whether African leaders can effectively exploit this competition or whether they will be drawn into new forms of dependency and external manipulation.

**Table 3: U.S.-China Engagement in Africa: Comparative Analysis**

| Dimension                  | U.S. Approach                           | China Approach                             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>Primary instrument</b>  | Trade preferences; Aid conditionalities | Infrastructure loans; State-to-state deals |
| <b>Governance linkage</b>  | Strong (MCC, AGOA eligibility)          | Weak (non-interference principle)          |
| <b>Private sector role</b> | Central (Prosper Africa)                | Limited (SOE dominance)                    |
| <b>Security engagement</b> | AFRICOM; Training partnerships          | Arms sales; Bases (Djibouti)               |
| <b>Debt approach</b>       | Concessional; IDA terms                 | Commercial rates; Collateral requirements  |

*Source: Author's comparative analysis based on policy documents*

### 5. Institutional Incoherence in U.S. Africa Policy

A central challenge facing U.S. policy toward Africa is the institutional incoherence that characterises American engagement. Multiple U.S. government agencies - including the Department of Defense through AFRICOM, the Department of State, USAID, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Department of Commerce, and the Export-Import

Bank - pursue distinct and sometimes conflicting objectives in Africa, with limited coordination and overlapping mandates.

AFRICOM's security-focused mission often conflicts with USAID's development objectives and the MCC's governance conditionality. Military assistance to authoritarian regimes may undermine the governance reforms that USAID seeks to promote, while MCC eligibility criteria may exclude precisely those states that AFRICOM considers essential security partners. This institutional incoherence is not merely a management problem but reflects deeper tensions in U.S. foreign policy between security imperatives, development objectives, and normative commitments.

The National Security Council, which theoretically coordinates interagency policy, has struggled to reconcile these competing priorities. Different administrations have adopted different approaches to managing institutional incoherence, from the Bush administration's emphasis on 'whole-of-government' operations to the Obama administration's attempt to elevate development as a 'third pillar' of foreign policy alongside defense and diplomacy. None of these approaches has fully resolved the underlying tensions.

Congressional oversight of U.S. Africa policy is fragmented across multiple committees, including the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees, Armed Services Committees, and Appropriations Committees. This fragmentation contributes to policy incoherence, as different committees may prioritise different aspects of U.S.-Africa relations and impose conflicting requirements on executive branch agencies.

The institutional incoherence of U.S. Africa policy has significant consequences for African partners, who must navigate multiple U.S. government agencies with different requirements, timelines, and objectives. This complexity reduces the effectiveness of American engagement and creates opportunities for African elites to forum-shop among U.S. agencies to find the most favourable terms.

**Table 4: U.S. Government Agencies Engaged in Africa (Selected)**

| Agency                  | Primary Mission | Key Programs                           | Budget (FY2022) |
|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>AFRICOM</b>          | Security        | Training; CT operations; Civil affairs | \$280 million   |
| <b>USAID</b>            | Development     | Health; Education; Governance          | \$3.8 billion   |
| <b>MCC</b>              | Governance      | Compact programs; Threshold programs   | \$500 million   |
| <b>State Department</b> | Diplomacy       | Bilateral relations; Public diplomacy  | \$1.2 billion   |
| <b>DFC</b>              | Finance         | Development finance; Investment        | \$2.5 billion   |

*Source: Congressional Budget Justifications; Agency annual reports*

## 6. Case Studies in U.S.-Africa Engagement

### 6.1 Ethiopia: From Partnership to Crisis

Ethiopia exemplifies the tensions in U.S. policy toward Africa. Under the Meles Zenawi government (), Ethiopia was a key U.S. partner on counter-terrorism, contributing troops to peacekeeping operations in Somalia and cooperating on intelligence sharing. The United States provided substantial security assistance despite the Ethiopian government's authoritarian character and poor human rights record.

The 2018 political transition that brought Abiy Ahmed to power initially appeared to align with U.S. democracy promotion objectives. Abiy's release of political prisoners, liberalisation of the media, and peace agreement with Eritrea were welcomed in Washington. The United States increased development assistance and signalled support for Ethiopia's political opening.

However, the outbreak of civil conflict in Tigray in November 2020 exposed the limits of U.S. influence and the contradictions in American policy. The Biden administration's efforts to pressure the Ethiopian government to end the conflict - including threats of sanctions and suspension of trade preferences - had limited effect, as the Ethiopian government prioritised its military objectives over Western pressure. The crisis revealed both the extent of U.S. entanglement in Ethiopian affairs and the constraints on American leverage.

The Ethiopia case illustrates how security partnerships established during the war on terror created dependencies that constrain subsequent U.S. policy options. Having invested heavily

in Ethiopian security capabilities, the United States found itself with limited leverage when the Ethiopian government pursued policies contrary to American preferences.

## 6.2 Kenya: Counter-Terrorism and Democratic Erosion

Kenya presents another case study in the tension between security cooperation and democracy promotion. Following the 1998 embassy bombing and subsequent terror attacks, Kenya became a frontline state in the U.S. war on terror. The United States provided substantial security assistance, including training for Kenyan counter-terrorism forces and intelligence cooperation.

This security partnership continued and intensified despite significant democratic erosion in Kenya. The 2007-2008 post-election violence, which killed over 1,000 people, generated international concern but did not fundamentally alter U.S.-Kenya security cooperation. The 2013 and 2017 elections, both marked by irregularities and violence, similarly failed to disrupt the security partnership.

The case of Kenya demonstrates how counter-terrorism priorities have systematically trumped democracy promotion in U.S. policy. While the United States has rhetorically supported democratic governance in Kenya, its actual policy has prioritised security cooperation regardless of the Kenyan government's democratic credentials. This prioritisation has been justified by the threat of terrorism, but it has also undermined the credibility of U.S. democracy promotion efforts.

**Table 5: Case Studies: U.S. Security Assistance and Governance Outcomes**

| Country         | U.S. Assistance | Governance Record                | Conflict Status       | U.S. Priority |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| <b>Ethiopia</b> | \$3.2B ()       | Authoritarian; ethnic federalism | Civil war ()          | High          |
| <b>Kenya</b>    | \$2.8B ()       | Competitive authoritarian        | Al-Shabaab threat     | High          |
| <b>Uganda</b>   | \$1.9B ()       | Personalist regime               | AMISOM deployment     | Medium        |
| <b>Nigeria</b>  | \$1.5B ()       | Democratic with deficits         | Boko Haram insurgency | High          |
| <b>Rwanda</b>   | \$1.2B ()       | Authoritarian development        | Regional stabiliser   | Medium        |

*Source: Security Assistance Monitor; USAID Explorer; Author's analysis*

## **7. Discussion and Implications**

The analysis presented in this article carries significant implications for both academic theory and policy practice. Theoretically, it suggests that mainstream International Relations frameworks - including hegemonic stability theory and liberal internationalism - require modification to adequately capture the dynamics of U.S.-Africa relations. These frameworks, developed primarily through analysis of great power relations, often fail to account for the agency of African states and the specific characteristics of African regional politics.

The concept of 'strategic competition' that now frames U.S. policy toward Africa reflects a return to Cold War logic that may be ill-suited to contemporary realities. While Chinese engagement in Africa certainly presents challenges to American interests, framing U.S.-Africa relations primarily through the lens of great power competition risks repeating the mistakes of the Cold War period, when African interests were subordinated to superpower rivalry.

The persistent gap between U.S. rhetorical commitments to democracy and human rights and the actual conduct of American policy suggests that this gap is not merely a failure of implementation but reflects deeper structural features of the international order. In a world of competing priorities and limited resources, the United States has consistently chosen security cooperation over governance reform when forced to choose. This pattern is likely to continue as long as terrorism and great power competition remain primary concerns.

For African policymakers, the analysis suggests both opportunities and risks. The emergence of strategic competition creates leverage for African states to negotiate better terms with external partners, but it also creates risks of renewed external manipulation and dependency. African regional organisations, particularly the African Union, have important roles to play in managing these dynamics and promoting African interests in relations with external powers.

For U.S. policymakers, the analysis suggests the need for greater honesty about the actual priorities of American policy. If security cooperation is genuinely the primary objective, this should be acknowledged explicitly, rather than obscured by rhetorical commitments to democracy promotion that are systematically undermined in practice. Alternatively, if the United States genuinely wishes to promote democratic governance in Africa, this will require accepting the costs of conditionality and potentially sacrificing security partnerships with authoritarian regimes.

## **8. Conclusion**

This article has examined the evolution of U.S. foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa across four presidential administrations, situating these policy shifts within broader transformations in the international order. The analysis reveals a pattern of selective engagement driven by counter-terrorism priorities and, more recently, strategic competition with China, with democracy promotion increasingly subordinated to security imperatives.

The central finding is that U.S. policy toward Africa has been characterised by a persistent tension between liberal internationalist aspirations and realist strategic calculations. While successive administrations have articulated ambitious agendas for African transformation, the actual implementation of U.S. policy has consistently privileged security cooperation and strategic access over governance reform and human rights protection. This gap between rhetoric and practice reflects not merely policy incoherence but deeper structural features of the international order and the specific position of African states within that order.

The emergence of strategic competition with China has fundamentally reframed U.S.-Africa relations, restoring a Cold War-like logic in which Africa's significance derives primarily from great power competition. While this framework generates new attention and resources for African engagement, it also risks subordinating African interests to external rivalries. The challenge for both American and African policymakers is to manage this competition in ways that advance African development and stability rather than merely serving great power interests.

The institutional incoherence that characterises U.S. Africa policy - the disjuncture between AFRICOM's security mission, USAID's development mandate, and the MCC's governance conditionality - represents a structural feature that systematically undermines the effectiveness of American engagement. Addressing this incoherence will require not merely better coordination but clearer prioritisation among competing objectives.

From an African perspective, the analysis suggests both the opportunities and risks created by strategic competition. African states gain leverage to negotiate better terms with external partners, but they also face risks of renewed dependency and external manipulation. The ability of African states and regional organisations to exploit opportunities while managing risks will significantly shape the future of U.S.-Africa relations.

Future research should extend this analysis to examine how specific African states have navigated strategic competition between the United States and China, and with what

consequences for their domestic governance and development trajectories. Comparative analysis of different African approaches to external engagement would illuminate the conditions under which African agency can effectively advance African interests in a competitive international environment.

The post-unipolar moment presents both challenges and opportunities for U.S.-Africa relations. As the international order shifts toward multipolarity, the United States will need to develop new frameworks for engagement that acknowledge African agency and African interests rather than merely projecting American preferences. Whether such frameworks can be developed, and whether they can effectively advance both American and African interests, remains to be seen.

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