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Op-ed

Navigating Africa's future in the face of shapeshifting global forces

By Daryl Swanepoel

The United States and Africa have a lopsided partnership, where Africa is often treated as a recipient of aid and influence that the global superpowers are exerting to gain African support, rather than as a strategic actor with agency and voice. This imbalance, rooted in colonial legacies and exacerbated by Cold War geopolitics, continues to shape both the form and content of American engagement on the continent.

In fact, recent years have seen a real mix of engagement strategies. Under the Biden administration, there was a renewed emphasis on multilateralism, democracy promotion and climate finance. Now, the absence of key US officials at G20 meetings hosted by South Africa is seen by many Africans as a sign of waning American commitment to multilateral dialogue. African states seek to engage with a variety of global actors – China, Russia, India, the EU – based on national interests. US' pressure to "choose sides" undermines Africa's preference for non-alignment and strategic autonomy.

African countries are also calling for structural changes in the UN Security Council (UNSC), IMF and World Bank to better reflect contemporary power dynamics. Despite comprising more than 50 countries and 1.4 billion people, Africa has no permanent representation on the UNSC. This lack of representation undermines Africa's ability to influence international peace and security policies that directly impact on its own stability. But the US has shown limited support for these reforms, preferring to retain its dominant position.

Although both parties support democratic governance, African actors are wary of what they perceive as moralistic or inconsistent US advocacy – particularly when American strategic interests override democratic principles. Both sides also recognise the need for urgent climate action, and there is agreement on the importance of increased climate finance. African leaders, however, stress that such finance must come in the form of grants, not loans that exacerbate debt burdens.

Another key point of engagement, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), has been a cornerstone of US economic policy toward Africa, offering duty-free access to US markets. But its uneven implementation, selective eligibility criteria, and limited support for value-added exports have diminished its impact. Unilateral mechanisms like AGOA do not always align with continental initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Worse, the threat of AGOA's potential termination by the Trump administration looms as a key concern for countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa.

Security engagement is another area of concern. While US military aid and counterterrorism support may yield short-term stability, they often fail to address root causes such as poverty, youth unemployment and poor governance. Moreover, US military presence on African soil – especially in the Sahel – has led to governance vacuums and unintended civilian harm, raising questions about long-

term effectiveness. There is mutual interest in stabilising regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, however, there is disagreement over the methods – Africans favour holistic, locally led peacebuilding, while the US often favours militarised responses.

Investment and trade remain robust in certain sectors – US firms have a significant footprint in mining, manufacturing and services in South Africa and Nigeria, among others. However, much of this investment is concentrated in resource extraction rather than industrial transformation or skills development. And, of course, there is the other looming threat from the Trump administration of exorbitant trade tariffs. Africa seeks more inclusive trade frameworks and diversification, whereas US trade policy remains fragmented and protectionist in certain sectors. American stakeholders do acknowledge that a shift is needed – from short-term interests to long-term partnerships that contribute to Africa's structural transformation.

Soft power remains a key asset in the US' approach. Programmes in education, health and cultural exchange – along with historic anti-apartheid solidarity and ongoing collaboration among think tanks and civil society – offer a foundation of goodwill. The challenge is to translate these people-to-people ties into a more coherent and strategic policy framework. Africa's young population and growing tech sector also represent opportunities for collaboration. Programmes that support digital infrastructure, STEM education and startup ecosystems are potential win-win areas for partnership.

Africa represents both a challenge and an opportunity to America. It's demographic dynamism, natural resource wealth, and emerging consumer markets make it an area of strategic interest. However, US policy remains heavily influenced by security imperatives, geopolitical rivalries and concerns about governance.

US - Africa cooperation is at a pivotal juncture. The partnership is evolving, but still constrained by historical baggage, policy inconsistencies and structural inequalities. For the partnership to be sustainable and mutually beneficial, several principles must guide future engagement. A good starting point would be to reframe engagement through the lens of "cooperation", which denotes equality and shared purpose, rather than "relations", which implies a hierarchical connection with limited mutuality.

Then, African nations must advocate for themselves, to be the agents of their future. They must set their own priorities, drive their own development strategies, and assert their voices in multilateral forums. Institutional mechanisms such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA offer blueprints for such autonomy, but realising their potential requires external partners, including the US, to support – not supplant – Africa-led initiatives.

The US must recognise Africa as a co-equal actor in international affairs – which will require a shift from paternalism to partnership, from aid dependency to co-investment. African nations must lead in defining the terms of engagement, and US policy must align with continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA, not circumvent them. The United States should support Africa's call for reform of global institutions to ensure fair representation and voice. This includes backing permanent African seats on the UN Security Council. Engagement must go beyond government-to-government interaction – civil society, academia, youth, and the diaspora are critical to deepening ties and countering misinformation. Both sides must move beyond transactionalism and embrace a long-term vision grounded in shared prosperity, global justice and sustainable development.

Africa's time is now. With strategic foresight, united leadership and supportive international partnerships, the continent can rise as a global force. The US has a vital role to play – but only if it is willing to listen, learn and evolve alongside a continent that is increasingly shaping its own future.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws from the Africa Think-Tank Dialogue's Africa Consultative Meeting which was recently held in Cape Town. The Inclusive Society Institute acts as the Dialogue's secretariat.