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Op-ed

Rebuilding US-Africa relations under the Biden administration and its nexus with China By Daryl Swanepoel

When President Joe Biden assumed office in January 2021, analysts attempted to predict how the relationship between the United States of America (US) and Africa would unfold under his administration. The relationship needed some healing given the decline in rapport between the two sides under the previous Trump administration, where the US's "relations with the continent flitted between perfunctory and hostile".

In Biden's address to the 34th Summit of the African Union in February 2021 he made it clear that the United States stands ready to be a partner of Africa in solidarity, support and mutual respect. Further evidence of its efforts to repair relations can be found in President Biden's virtual address to the African Union (AU) Summit, positive decisions on US's re-joining of the World Health Organisation and COVAX. An important recent indication has been its support to help South Africa strengthen its capacity for the local manufacturing of vaccines.

But the US foreign relations decline under the previous administration, was not restricted to Africa. Across the globe this held true. It was, however, especially severe between the US and China, where it turned into a direct trade-war confrontation between them.

Analyses directly after the Biden administration's assumption of office was that, broadly speaking, there would be a normalisation of diplomatic relations between the US, China and Africa. In this regard, general consensus was that the Biden administration would build on and deepen the pre-Trump initiatives as they relate to Africa and take a keener interest. Similarly, the contestation with China would remain, especially as it relates to trade and human rights; but the narrative will be more civil and competitive as opposed to the combative approach taken by the previous administration.

On the one hand, predictions pertaining to how US-Africa foreign policy is shaping up seem to be, mostly, playing out as expected. There is a definite sense that the US's policy toward Africa is normalising. Indeed, continuity of Bush and Obama administration policies, and even an expansion of US development agencies activity in Africa, could comfortably be anticipated.

In the interim national security strategy, for example, the Trump administration's paradigms have been replaced with previous bi-partisan themes. It says that the US will continue to build partnerships in Africa, invest in civil society and strengthen long-standing political, economic, and cultural connections.

This is given further impetus with the appointment by Biden of a range of experienced pro-African officials who could serve as strong advocates for a more strategic relationship with Africa. An alignment is already developing pertaining to trade and investment, the fight against climate change and corruption, and public health. The Biden administration inherits important modes to support this:

the President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR), Prosper Africa, and AGOA, the African Growth and Opportunity Act.

Truth be told, however, is that the Biden administration is battling to figure out its trade policy with Africa on a few key issues. For instance, how to take advantage of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the undertaking to extend AGOA beyond 2025, and the proposed convening of a US-Africa Summit.

Then, on the other hand, to date there have been mixed signals regarding how the US's approach to China is being moulded. Whilst the Biden administration has "reaffirmed the desire for collaboration and cooperation with China in areas that serve American interests, in sharp contrast to the 'all-encompassing decoupling' policy toward China in the final year of the Trump administration", US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, as late as May 2021, accused China of acting more aggressively. Some analysts are now suggesting that the US is even opening up new fronts in the trade war with China and in opposition to China's alleged disregard for the US-led rules-based democratic and human rights order.

Their commitment, China argues, is to multilateralism and not to the US-led rules-based order that represents a minority. The US's approach, China senses, is motivated by a sort of Cold War mentality, exacerbated by the Senate's churning out of sanctions against China, leading to a tit-for-tat combat.

But, in their view, this is not the case. President Biden laments the stiff competition with China, inferring that its ambition is to be the leading, wealthiest and most powerful country in the world.

China objects to this 'China threat' narrative. The sense in China is that the US should realize that they do not represent the world and are no longer the undisputed global leader. That said, they have repeatedly stated that they are ready to engage the US on the basis of mutual respect and good faith.

All the while, the US has suggested that China's growing influence in Africa poses a growing threat, leaving African leaders with the quandary: How to respond to the US-China nexus as it plays out on the African continent?

While Africa does not share their perspective on doing business with China, it does want to continue building its relationship with the US. The Biden administration has, to their credit, made it clear that they do not expect African leaders to take sides.

During the last four to five years, China leapfrogged the US in Africa in terms of infrastructure, technology, and financing. China has also surpassed the US as the largest trading partner of Africa. Although they seem to be focussing on different priorities, areas of competition between the two global giants will be renewable energy, trade and financing, with development financing being the key issue.

To navigate the relationship, Africa will have to contemplate a more considered and coherent framework, and pursue its own homegrown solutions, ideally developed in concert with both China and the US. Moreover, Africa should seek a mechanism for triangular engagement between themselves, the US and China. Enticing former African leaders that excelled in multilateralism to help facilitate this notion may be advisable. Who knows, such a continental solution may even serve to alter the global discourse for the good.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of the report on dialogue between a range of academics and policy analysts, from both the United States and Africa, which the institute recently hosted.